Workshop Insight Note

Increasing access to early childhood education and care among Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic families in Wales

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October 2024

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Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

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It has been funded over a four-year period from 2020-2024 by the ESRC and is a collaboration between UCL, Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) at Cardiff University, University of Glasgow, Queen's University Belfast, the Evidence for Policy & Practice Information Centre (EPPI), the International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA), and academic news publisher The Conversation.

Established at the height of the global pandemic, the observatory was quick to produce reviews of evidence on topics such as the impact of school closures on children and young people in education for the UK Department of Education.

The team later widened its scope to explore the challenges posed by Net Zero, Covid Recovery, Place and Spatial Inequality and Socio-Economic Inequalities, and works with governments at the local, national and devolved level to help bring evidence into their policy development.

Contents

Summary

- This Workshop Insight Note presents the findings, priorities, and proposed actions from a July 2024 workshop with Welsh Government officials and relevant Welsh stakeholders. This output is part of a broader set of outputs on increasing Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic access to early years childcare in the UK.

- To develop a long-term, comprehensive approach to closing the access gap to early childhood play, learning and care (ECPLC) in Wales, four clear priority areas for the Welsh Government emerged. Each priority area is linked to evidence-based recommendations, actions proposed by stakeholders, and international case studies:

1) **Integrate community into ECPLC:**

   - Adopt a relational approach to outreach and delivery through home visits, community engagement, and home-based support (where appropriate for specific groups).
   - Take an integrated approach that involves connecting with employers, community institutions, and other government services to better reach and support families.
   - Develop a community-oriented strategy to centre community partnerships, engagement, and voice in the development and implementation of policy and provision.
   - National and local governments should work with providers to actively recognise, resource, and support cultural brokers across the ECPLC sector.

2) **Embed cultural sensitivity and inclusivity:**

   - Develop a cultural sensitivity and inclusivity programme for settings.
   - Ensure a minimal burden of proof for free or subsidised services.

3) **Increase ECPLC workforce diversity and professionalisation:**

   - Develop a workforce strategy to increase staff diversity and improve retention, quality, and professionalisation in the sector.

4) **Tackle data inadequacy:**

   - Allocate resource for long-term evaluation of ECPLC-related interventions as part of policy design and experimentation.
   - Embed long-term evaluation and routine ethnicity data collection that is reliable and available. Take a holistic approach to evidence on barriers and experiences.

- The workshop also identified key outcomes, barriers, and broader challenges the Welsh Government needs to consider to comprehensively address the multiple, inter-related factors affecting ethnic minority access. While more stakeholder engagement is needed, these priority areas provide a clearer pathway toward achieving anti-racist early years provision in Wales.

Introduction

This Workshop Insight Note is **part of a broader project** co-led by the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) and the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) on increasing access to childcare for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic children and families. The project stems from discussions with the Welsh Government about their **Early Childcare, Play, Learning and Care** (ECPLC) policy goals and their commitment to an anti-racist Wales. In this document, we use ECPLC when referring to the Welsh approach to early childhood education and care (ECEC). ECEC is a global term for supports or services that provide care, education, or developmental support to children from birth to school age (ages 0-5).

Preliminary evidence in Wales highlighted **low uptake and poorer experiences** of early years childcare among Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic children and families as critical issues. In consultation with the Welsh Government, we developed a multifaceted approach to the evidence that combines international academic evidence and policy case studies with insights from Wales-based policy makers, practitioners, and community mentors (people with relevant professional and lived experience). Our guiding research questions were:

- What evidence exists about the nature and scale of the challenge in participation in ECEC among ethnic minority children and families?

- What are the barriers and enablers to participating in ECEC among ethnic minority children and families?

- What interventions have been tried to encourage participation in early years education and care among ethnic minority children and families? How far are these interventions effective?

- How have other countries approached equitable participation in early years childcare and education for ethnic minority families, as well as other minoritised or disadvantaged groups?

This Workshop Insight Note examines the key implications from a July 2024 workshop that tested draft research findings and recommendations with relevant Welsh stakeholders to identify key priorities and actions for the Welsh Government.

Note on project terminology

Ethnic minority - while we recognise there is no universally accepted term to describe the diversity of groups that may experience racism in society, this Insight Note (and associated outputs) follow the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan in using Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic as well as 'ethnic minority' as shorthand.

Disadvantaged families - the evidence reviewed for this project also refers to 'families who experience disadvantage' or 'disadvantaged communities'. Due the state of the evidence base, we widened our search to include evidence on disadvantaged communities to locate a broader range of potentially transferable evidence and approaches. We broadly defined 'disadvantaged' as populations or communities that experience social, economic, or health disparities compared to the wider population.

Global context

Increasing access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a global priority. Experts and **policymakers agree** that investing in high-quality, accessible, affordable, and inclusive ECEC provides a solid foundation for children promoting positive outcomes later in life such as academic achievement and employment opportunities. High-quality ECEC is also linked to broader social and economic benefits, including economic participation, social integration, and community involvement. ECEC's global priority status is further supported by its recognition as a target for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goal on **Quality Education** and as a right named in the **European Pillar of Social Rights**.

However, in high-income countries, **demand for ECEC often exceeds supply** with **many families unable to locate or afford childcare arrangements** that suit their needs. Research also finds that **engagement with ECEC can vary** across demographic groups and factors in **England**, Europe, and more widely. Alongside increasing the overall availability and affordability of ECEC, decision-makers are concerned about uptake and equality of access to ECEC **given research** indicating that **the most disadvantaged children are often those who benefit most from early care** and ECEC's **positive effects on poverty and social exclusion reduction.**

For ECEC to be effective, **tackling inequities in access and quality are key**. Identifying barriers and enablers that contribute to unequal access to ECEC is particularly important for preventing **early school leaving** and **the formation of early skills gaps**. Understanding the broader determinants of participation **can play a critical role** in supporting national policy initiatives aimed at achieving equitable ECEC provision, reducing educational and social inequalities among children, and promoting positive outcomes later in life.

Welsh policy context

The Welsh Government aims to give every child in Wales the best start in life and to support their families and communities to thrive. The Welsh model for ECEC, **Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care** (ECPLC), focuses on providing high-quality play-based childcare and education opportunities for all babies and young children aged 0-5.

In Wales, as across the UK, increasing the number of free childcare hours available to parents of young children has been the main policy intervention to enhance access to ECEC. **All children aged 3-4** in Wales are entitled to **nursery education**; although services can vary, local authorities provide a minimum of 10 hours per-week. Wales is also committed to a **phased expansion** of its early years provision. Two key ECEC policies in Wales are:

- **Flying Start**: Welsh Government's early years programme to support families with children aged 0-4 living in disadvantaged areas of Wales. Wales is also committed to a phased expansion of the childcare element of Flying Start for all 2-year-olds in Wales.

- **Childcare Offer**: Up to 30 hours of government-funded nursery education and childcare weekly for up to 48 weeks per year, for eligible parents of children aged 3-4. This includes up to 20 hours of childcare and at least 10 hours of nursery education (previously mentioned and available to all children aged 3-4).

To build a more equitable nation for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic people, the Welsh Government is actively examining and addressing **how racism is embedded in policies and practices.** In 2022, the Welsh Government launched its **Anti-racist Wales Action Plan** (ArWAP) naming Childcare and Play as a key policy area due to its importance for child development, lifelong learning, social integration, and addressing under-representation in the workforce. The Welsh Government's approach to creating an anti-racist ECPLC system includes: improving the workplace experience, offering more culturally appropriate provision, and improving the experience of children. Taking a step in this direction, the Welsh Government **recently launched** a toolkit for people working in childcare, play, and early years in Wales which was developed by **Diversity and Anti-Racism Professional Learning** (DARPL) in partnership with **Cwlwm**.

The Welsh Government is also committed to promoting the Welsh language. In 2017 the Welsh Government launched **Cymraeg 2050**, a Welsh Language strategy for achieving one million Welsh speakers and increasing the use of Welsh in Wales by 2050. Cymraeg 2050 builds on the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 objective to create **A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language**. ECPLC in Wales already has an established infrastructure for delivering bilingual integrated services and Welsh-medium early years provision through **Mudiad Meithrin**.

High-quality, accessible ECEC can be transformational for children and families. This project to more clearly identify potential barriers and facilitators to inform the ongoing phased expansion of a **Welsh approach** to early years provision, contribute to an anti-racist Wales, strengthen bilingualism and multilingualism in Wales, and support intersecting policy ambitions such as those outlined in the 2024 **Child Poverty Strategy**.

Theory of change workshop overview

In July 2024, WCPP and IPPO co-hosted a workshop to test draft research findings and recommendations with stakeholders in Wales. The workshop aimed to explore relevance and transferability of evidence, and to prioritise actions for the Welsh Government. The workshop explored evidence presented in our **Overarching Policy Summary** drawn from three strands of the wider project: a rapid evidence review (RER), an international policy scan, and **a systems map**. The systems map was developed through two workshops involving Welsh Government policy makers and community mentors using the **SEPPA method**.

The workshop brought together a diverse range of 21 stakeholders virtually including: Welsh Government policy, research, and equalities-focused officials; Welsh Government community mentors (people with relevant lived and professional experience); and representative bodies related to ECPLC and anti-racism. It took a 'theory of change' approach to collectively identify desired outcomes and create an action plan to achieve them. The workshop also prioritised barriers, research gaps, and recommendations for action in Wales.

To facilitate evidence-based and action-oriented discussion, we developed two resources:

- An **evidence synthesis map** to summarise key learnings from the global evidence base (the RER and international policy scan) and local evidence sources (systems mapping workshops).

- A workbook to enable structured reflection on a working draft of the **Policy Summary** and to construct a proposed theory of change ahead of small group discussions.

The actions and recommendations proposed in this Insight Note are informed by, complement, and add to those outlined in the Policy Summary. Participants were invited to build on this work by considering it within the Welsh context and identifying which actions are most likely to be effective and impactful in Wales. It is important to note that our approach was limited by time constraints, its virtual workshop format, and some of the methods used. The findings and priorities presented should undergo further testing and refinement with relevant ECPLC and anti-racism stakeholders.

Key findings for ECPLC in Wales

The workshop revealed insights that further inform the principles underpinning the Welsh approach to ECPLC, highlight sector challenges that can exacerbate inequities in access, and identify key outcomes and barriers for ethnic minority children and families in Wales to achieve more equitable, anti-racist ECPLC provision. For this report, 'challenges' are understood as overarching issues drawn from the evidence and discussions, while 'barriers' refer to the more specific issues participants prioritised for action.

Informing ECPLC in Wales

Participants consistently emphasised the unique nature of the Welsh approach to ECPLC. There was a strong consensus that the approach in Wales should remain focused on the child and their developmental outcomes, with supporting parents into work or further education as secondary policy goals.

There was also a sense that developing a Welsh approach requires a balance between **surfacing and challenging underlying concepts and assumptions**, whilst understanding and **respecting family and community level preferences that shape decision-making**. Groups discussed how:

- There are varied ideas about and concepts of child development;

- Even if ECPLC is free, well-communicated, available, and approachable, families may still have preferences (such as cultural) that need to be respected not problematised.

One participant emphasised **the need for 'dynamism'** between the Welsh Government and ethnic minority communities in approach, understanding, and awareness-raising. **Many participants stressed avoiding universal, one-size-fits-all approaches,** suggesting a place-based approach that tests and learns. Additionally, participants expressed that ECPLC in Wales should:

- **Focus on broader benefits and outcomes**: For example, participants referenced how ECPLC can be key in fostering a sense of belonging and community cohesion.

- **Use inclusive language and terminology:** Several participants said that language matters when speaking about 'barriers' and for communicating the range of provision. Some felt that using 'barriers' for certain ECPLC issues, such as language, should be approached sensitively to avoid problematising the child or parent.

- **Emphasise and respect diversity:** Participants want diversity of people, groups, and places to be respected. Some were encouraged by how community mentors were included at various stages of this project and by the identification of global initiatives respecting cultural diversity.

Key ECPLC sector challenges in Wales

Our **Policy Summary** identified two UK-wide sector challenges based on the evidence:

- **Accessibility gaps**: In the UK, there are gaps in awareness, reach, and participation for ethnic minority children and families. Childcare availability and accessibility remain significant challenges for many.

- **Inadequate data:** The existing evidence and data on the uptake, perspectives, and experiences of ethnic minority families in relation to ECEC in the UK is inadequate. To monitor gaps and evaluate policy effectiveness, better data collection is required.

Participants confirmed the relevance of these challenges in Wales and added further challenges related to workforce and communication summarised in Table 1 below. Ideas for how to address these challenges are included in the 'priorities and actions for Wales' section.

Table 1: Key early years sector challenges in Wales

Inadequate data	Quality data is crucial for decision-making, improvement, and evidencing impact. Participants want data gaps addressed, data quality enhanced, and mechanisms established for raising complaints, such as reporting racist incidents. Engagement with Welsh stakeholders revealed that ethnicity data collection at the local authority level is inconsistent; ethnicity data for the childcare workforce is unavailable; and, where data is collected, it is not always reliable. For example, some ethnic minority individuals may choose not to provide ethnicity data.
Workforce	High-quality, diverse, and approachable ECPLC practitioners are crucial for increasing ethnic minority access to childcare. Key areas of concern were: (1) **recognition**: what is meant by 'ECPLC workforce' and ensuring that terms reflect the diversity of provision; (2) **qualifications, development, and training**: a qualifications and training review might be necessary to better support ECPLC practitioners with development opportunities, peer-learning, and training in areas such as unconscious bias; (3) **diversity**: embedding inclusion and diversity into practice to achieve a more diverse and anti-racist ECPLC workforce; (4) **stability**: improve recruitment and retention to enhance ECPLC availability and choice for families.
Communication	Clear, simple, and continuous communication can increase uptake and maintain participation. Multiple groups identified communication gaps: 'sometimes ethnic minority people are left out and don't receive the information or find the right place'. Key issues were raised with (1) **policy reach:** awareness about services and entitlements and how to access them; (2) **value communication**: understanding what matters to ethnic minority children and families to better communicate the developmental benefits of childcare, play, and why it's important.

Key outcomes and barriers for increasing access

To formulate a clear theory of change, critical questions to answer are:

- **Outcomes**: What's the change we'd like to see?

- **Barriers**: What might get in the way of us achieving that change?

Prioritised outcomes and barriers provide direction for policy development, evaluation, and improvement. Outcomes and barriers for increasing access to ECPLC in Wales were identified through our systems mapping workshops and discussed and prioritised during the theory of change workshop to focus the Welsh Government's efforts on evidence and actions that matter to Welsh stakeholders. Out of twelve outcomes and fifteen barriers, eight outcomes and barriers were identified as the most significant:

Table 2: Outcomes and barriers prioritised by workshop participants

Outcomes	Barriers
- Improved wellbeing for parents, families, and children - Smaller ethnicity gap in other long-term life outcomes - Effective anti-racist behaviour in ECPLC settings - Community cohesion and involvement	- Cultural sensitivity and representation among staff - Lack of ethnicity data collected/available - Cultural norms, attitudes, and ideas about childcare - Cost and affordability

Outcomes and barriers are listed in order of importance, determined through a rapid prioritisation activity during the theory of change workshop. The full tables of outcomes and barriers, along with their associated rankings, are in Appendix A. Outcomes were defined as the key changes that participants wanted ECPLC to track and achieve over time in Wales. Barriers were defined as the key issues the Welsh Government needs to prioritise to increase access for ethnic minority children and families. Further engagement is needed to better understand and define these categories.

Priorities and actions for Wales

With a clear understanding of the outcomes and barriers, the final step in developing our theory of change was to identify the key actions needed to move from 'where ECPLC in Wales is now' to 'where it should go'. A well-defined theory of change should function like a hypothesis that can be tested, tracked, and monitored over time. Four priority areas for action by the Welsh Government emerged from the workshop to address sector challenges, overcome barriers, and work towards achieving desired outcomes:

1. Integrate community into ECPLC in Wales

2. Embed cultural sensitivity and inclusivity

3. Increase ECPLC workforce diversity and professionalisation

4. Tackle data inadequacy in Wales

These priority areas for ECPLC in Wales are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Before expanding on each, it is important to note that every priority area is linked to IPPO recommendations and actions proposed by workshop participants. The priority areas themselves aim to enable the Welsh Government to 'develop a long-term, comprehensive approach to closing the access gap'—a recommendation outlined in our **Overarching Policy Summary**; each area helps to focus action against the three themes highlighted by IPPO:

- **The need for a bespoke and integrated strategy** to adequately address the multiple, inter-related factors affecting ethnic minority access. Our review of the evidence repeatedly highlighted that reducing cost is necessary but not sufficient to maintain increased ECEC attendance.

- **Addressing social, cultural and practical barriers.** There is a need to better understand and respond to the needs of specific communities and develop more culturally sensitive practices, particularly by involving ethnic minority voices in the design of provision. Increasing ECEC sector diversity is seen as a key step.

- **Community outreach and engagement is key to increasing participation in ECEC.** Targeted outreach is an effective strategy for increasing participation among specific ethnic minority communities.

Participant engagement confirmed the relevance of these themes in Wales highlighting:

- Significant support for going beyond engagement and participation into **continuous involvement and integration of community and ethnic minority community assets into the everyday of ECPLC in Wales**. Additionally, workshop participants were interested in exploring how community could bring ECPLC closer to ethnic minority households, either through home visits or by experimenting with home-based provision. Community involvement and increased representation were viewed as key to addressing social, cultural, and practical barriers.

- **The importance of longer-term thinking**. A bespoke and integrated strategy to addressing inequities needed to take a longer view. Key to some participants was **decreasing the fragmentation in the ECPLC system** with 22 different approaches across 22 Welsh local authorities. Establishing **better multi-agency working** between settings, schools, providers, and wider services, such as health, was suggested to create more cohesive support and ease transitions.

- The desire to **develop policy and practice by trying, testing, and learning** (henceforth experimentation) to generate approaches that better address the unique challenges of different groups and places. Many actions proposed by participants suggested starting small with pilots to generate insights and scalable learnings.

Priority 1: Integrate community into ECPLC in Wales

Relevant IPPO recommendations:

- Adopt a relational approach to ECEC outreach and delivery through home visits, community engagement, and home-based support (where appropriate for specific groups).

- Take an integrated approach that includes connecting with employers, community institutions, and other government services to better reach and support families.

- Develop a community-oriented strategy to centre community partnerships, engagement, and voice in the ongoing development and implementation of ECEC policy and provision. This should explore using community leaders, mentors, infrastructure, and advisory groups.

- National and local government should work with providers to actively recognise, resource, and support cultural brokers across the ECEC sector.

Community 'brokers' and 'liaisons' are not universal terms and were used differently (and sometimes interchangeably) across the literature reviewed. For this section, 'brokers' refers to individuals employed as ECPLC staff or practitioners (for example, bi-cultural workers), while 'liaisons' support the ECPLC sector in specific ways (such as outreach, mentorship, or hosting workshops).

This priority area received the highest overall ranking and was consistently highly ranked by participants. Participants viewed embedding community into ECPLC through community and cultural brokerage and liaison roles as integral to the Welsh approach. Collaborating with communities and people from ethnic minority backgrounds was considered essential for building trust; conducting outreach and signposting; raising awareness about services and benefits; and bridging cultural and racial sensitivity gaps in non-stigmatising ways. There was interest in exploring how communities could be integrated into 'everyday practice' in ECPLC, reinforcing the overarching theme highlighted earlier.

Both participants and the evidence highlighted the importance of building trusted, supportive, and ongoing relationships. One participant suggested that this work should 'give back to the community and not just take' by creating professional opportunities that allow ethnic minority people to lead and run ECPLC centres or join at higher levels. Other key points included:

- The need for appropriate resourcing of community engagement efforts

- Creating genuine and sustainable offers for communities

- Adequate recognition and support for their contribution and role

- Linking to professional pathways, qualifications, and/or employment

- Formalising brokerage roles in ECPLC to align with fair work

Many participants were also interested in exploring the feasibility of bringing ECPLC closer to ethnic minority households, either through home visits or by experimenting with home-based provision for certain groups. They were particularly drawn to examples from the **International Policy Scan** where ethnic minority people were employed to deliver targeted outreach or more skilled support to ethnic minority households (see table below). This area requires further research to examine the differences between and potential impact of home visits, home-based ECEC support (such as Omamas – further details below), family-oriented ECEC, and community-based support in Wales.

Next steps proposed by participants for the Welsh Government to consider are:

- Developing a community brokerage pilot

- Building community through play with local groups offering training courses and improving wellbeing for parents (including volunteering)

Priority 1: International policy scan examples of integrating community

- **Outreach workers or bi-cultural workers:** In Victoria, Australia, outreach workers are employed by local councils to address barriers to participation for culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. Additional funding is provided for bi-cultural workers doing targeted outreach in public housing.

- **Fieldworkers with deep links:** According to evaluations of the Promoting ECEC Participation Project in New Zealand (PPP) receiving home visits from PPP fieldworkers that built relationships and trust in the community were key.

- **Home-visits:** Slovakia's Omama early child development programme supports children aged 0-4 living in poverty, with Omamas (Roma women from local communities) trained by psychologists, special educators, and doctors to provide stimulating home visits and support Roma mothers. The 'Your Story' programme, implemented in 16 localities across Hungary, North Macedonia, Romania, and Slovakia, supported Romani mothers and children to read and discuss storybooks daily in groups moderated by a facilitator.

- **Resourcing place-based solutions:** Australia's Inclusion Development Fund established Innovative Solutions Support for ECEC services to tackle inclusion barriers. This has supported initiatives such as cultural advice, mentoring by Indigenous community elders, bi-cultural support workers, bilingual service support, and more. New Zealand has also trialled Targeted Assistance for Participation (TAP) grants to establish or expand services in areas of need.
- **In strategy and policy development**: Both the Australian Federal Government and Canadian Government have included community voices and collaborated with ethnic minority groups to develop policy and strategy through methods like roundtables, consultations, and even a National Summit.

Priority 2: Embed cultural sensitivity and inclusivity

Relevant IPPO Recommendations:

- Develop a cultural sensitivity and inclusivity programme for ECEC settings.
- Ensure a minimal burden of proof for free or subsidised ECEC services.

Workshop participants elaborated on how developing an effective programme to achieve a more culturally sensitive, inclusive, and anti-racist ECPLC sector involves taking steps to review practices and embed anti-racist approaches.

Examining provider policy and sector practice: This includes reviewing operating hours and the need for support outside of standard operating hours (8am-6pm) to develop and test more accessible provision for people working irregular shift patterns.

Embedding practice: This requires strategic frameworks that take a longer-term approach with training programmes (rather than short-term trainings). Resourcing is key for disseminating and implementing existing assets like **DARPL's anti-racist training and toolkit** so that anti-racism embeds into sector policy and practice.

Next steps proposed by participants for the Welsh Government to consider are:

- Rolling out training on cultural competence and unconscious bias
- Implementing a cultural inclusion/immersion tool for the sector
- Supporting racist incident reporting

- **Specialist Equipment Libraries**: Australia's Inclusion Development Fund established these libraries to loan various items, including books in non-English languages, to enable full and inclusive participation of children from diverse backgrounds.

- **Multicultural Family Learning Playgroups and culturally inclusive practice support:** This is funded by the Australian Government through the Family Learning Support Programme and delivered by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, a social justice charity.

- **Cultural immersion and identify affirmation**: Studies evaluating kōhanga reo (total Māori immersion ECE services for children aged 0-6) in New Zealand show that the opportunity to develop a strong sense of pride and identity, learn language and customs in a safe environment, and flexible practices (such as opening hours) were key enablers. The case demonstrates the need for openness to developing culturally appropriate ECEC curricula that may differ from mainstream services and to create culturally affirming environments.

- **Embedding a culture of culturally safe and responsive services in ECEC**: The governments of Canada and Australia are embedding these principles (and more) across national policy, plans/strategies, and implementation tools and frameworks. For example, Canada's Early Learning and Childcare Framework focuses on providing programmes that incorporate the languages, cultures, traditions, customs and values of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. At the state level, the Victorian Government has implemented a wide range of services, supports, and policy measures to improve the inclusion of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse children and families that merit closer examination.

Priority 3: Increase ECPLC workforce diversity and professionalisation

Relevant IPPO Recommendations:

- Develop a workforce strategy to increase the diversity of ECEC staff and improve sector retention, quality, and professionalisation.

Workshop participants recognised and prioritised the importance of a high-quality early years workforce to increase access to ECPLC in Wales for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic

children and families and to achieve the outcomes prioritised during the workshop. Crucially, workforce plans and developments need to focus on anti-racism and increasing the diversity of ECPLC practitioners and leaders in Wales. Participants want actions to lead to:

- Increased attendance by children from global majority backgrounds

- Enable ethnic minority community members to join the workforce at higher-level jobs

- More representative settings with diverse workers

Developing a workforce plan to improve diversity and inclusion in Wales should address the challenges previously outlined in this Insight Note:

- **Recognition**: Exploring how to think more widely about the 'childcare workforce', what meant by 'ECPLC workforce' and how can terms reflect the diversity of provision? For example, one participant said 'recognition and inclusion of the whole workforce, not just staff. Child minders create work, careers, and childcare places'.

- **Stability**, **recruitment, and retention**: Attracting more diverse workers, but also addressing wider workforce issues including and beyond pay such as opportunities for career improvement and development. Learn from other sector(s) efforts in this area. When examining how to attract a more diverse workforce, Wales also needs to consider what barriers might be unnecessarily getting in the way such as requiring the ability to write in English or Welsh to be registered as a childminder in Wales.

- **Qualifications, development, and training:** These are key enablers that need to reinforce and link with Priority 2 actions. For example, workforce plans that lead to wider uptake of the DARPL professional learning offer in settings or actions that further embed existing ECPLC resources including the **ECPLC Quality Framework** and **ECPLC Reflective Practice Toolkit**. Training needs to enhance the quality of the workforce and also lead to ECPLC workers feeling better skilled and supported.

Further work in this priority area should build on prior WCPP evidence reviews on **Improving Race Equality in Wales**. The series of reports highlight a number of key actions the Welsh Government can take to improve race equality in employment and in leadership and representation within the early years sector. Reports on Improving Race Equality in **Employment and Income** and **Leadership and Representation** identify actions related to:

- **Increasing representation and progression** such as by de-biasing recruitment and progression processes; setting mandated targets and positive actions; implementing mentoring or reverse mentoring schemes, and leadership programmes.

- **Diversifying leadership** by creating structured, accessible, and well communicated progression pathways in ECPLC, and offering targeted support to Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic early years teachers for professional advancement.

Next steps proposed by participants for the Welsh Government to consider are:

- Develop a workforce register like in health and social care

- Examine if/how diversity and anti-racism feature in the Self-Assessment Service Framework for registered providers

- Build on **Mapping the Childcare and Play workforce Phase 2**

- Conduct further research or experimentation to gain sufficient insight to inform a pilot programme aimed at encouraging Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic candidates to join the ECPLC workforce

- Start with Flying Start, Level 1 Playworks to support play in community and professionalisation

Priority 3: International policy scan examples of increasing diversity and professionalisation

- **Investment into workforce development:** Evidence from Canada identified the low pay and status of ECEC staff from minority groups as 'a key obstacle to expanding access' and allocated funding from its multi-billion dollar investment in ECEC to provide more consistent support and training for staff to address the unique needs of Indigenous communities. Among other goals, it aims to recruit and retain a qualified and well-supported ECEC workforce.

- **Provider diversity and language abilities:** Māori and Pacific Island providers in New Zealand noted that having providers of the same ethnicity as the target families and speaking the language were key determinants of success for increasing participation among non-participating families targeted by outreach support.

Cases relevant to this priority area overlap heavily with those mentioned in Priority 1. Building on those previously mentioned, the Welsh Government can explore:

- **Teaching assistants:** The Roma case study presented evidence on the different positive impacts of hiring Roma teaching assistants in early education and in primary schools across numerous European countries.

Priority 4: Tackle data inadequacy in Wales

> **Relevant IPPO Recommendations:**
>
> - Allocate resource for long-term evaluation of ECEC-related interventions as part of policy design and experimentation.
>
> - Embed long-term evaluation and routine ethnicity data collection that is reliable and available. Take a holistic approach to evidence on barriers and experiences to effectively develop and improve policy and practice.

This priority area did not emerge directly from the prioritisation exercise with participants but was a key topic of discussion, identified as a sector-wide challenge, and linked to several actions proposed in the workshop's closing survey.

Many participants saw addressing data inadequacies in Wales as a crucial first step to improving access and creating an anti-racist ECPLC approach in Wales. For example, one participant said, 'to make settings more representative and anti-racist, start with data collection'. This resonates with previous WCPP findings on **Improving Race Equality in Wales** where data collection, reporting and disaggregation was a key theme across six evidence reviews. The report identified data quality and availability as limiting factors in understanding the nature of the challenge and in designing and delivering effective policy. This highlights how tackling data inadequacy is a priority that extends beyond childcare and must be integrated with broader efforts to achieve an anti-racist Wales.

Workshop participants viewed data collection as essential for developing a clearer understanding at the population, sector, and local levels. They advocated for qualitative data to improve understanding about the experiences of ethnic minority families complemented with quantitative data to identify and track trends overtime around areas such as gaps in access and who is in the ECPLC workforce. Through better understanding, targeted support can be directed to 'promote positive actions' and recruit staff from more diverse backgrounds.

The workshop highlighted data quality and reliability as challenges in Wales. One participant noted that even in areas where ethnicity data is collected, ethnic minority people do not always provide information on race and ethnicity. They proposed an approach that first identifies what prevents people from providing ethnicity and race data, which could then inform a pilot project for better data collection in ECPLC settings.

WCPP's **Improving Race Equality** policy briefing outlines some of the key challenges the Welsh Government needs to consider, such as oversampling to ensure reliable

disaggregated data, building trust to improve survey response rates, and developing consistent data standards across public service organisations for cross-comparability.

Next steps proposed by participants for the Welsh Government to consider are:

- Creating a working group on data, potentially using this write-up as a starting point.

- Pilots suggested were: (1) how to tackle data moving forward by listening in at least one area in Wales to develop a Theory of Change and explore what worked; (2) A data collection project with sector partners to enhance data collection quality.

- Enhancing data quality by using native speakers to ensure more accurate data is recorded and/or by partnering with umbrella organisations collect data from members.

- Developing an understanding of how initial ethnicity data on the government-funded childcare offer is collected and used.

- Reviewing the complaint system process from the perspective of someone accessing it to provide a better experience. This review should consider involving lived experience in the design and delivery.

Priority 4: International policy scan examples to tackle data inadequacy

In addition to quantitative and qualitative data gaps, both reviews identified that there is limited evidence on what works to tackle inequalities in ECEC for ethnic minority children and families. Many initiatives evaluate language skills, but few focus on a child's heritage language, academic attainment, staff qualifications, intercultural competence, parental or family involvement, and other key factors necessary for achieving an anti-racist ECPLC in Wales.

For tackling data inadequacy in Wales, initiatives to explore further are:

- **Australia's Early Development Census,** which tracks participation rates across groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) children. The data revealed clear differences in ECEC participation between CALD and non-CALD children. It is important to note that CALD is a term specific to Australia that lacks a precise definition and is sometimes used interchangeably with 'ethnic communities'.

- The New Zealand Ministry of Education **engaged an independent Māori education group** to develop a regulatory framework to guide the expansion of Māori medium education. This involved research to identify key issues.

- **Peer interviews** were used to study the impact of the $10-per-day childcare programme in British Columbia, Canada on low-income, lone parents.

Conclusion

The key findings presented in this report are captured in a final theory of change for increasing Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic access to ECPLC in Wales. **Click here to access the theory of change.**

Overall, stakeholders appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the policy project and see how their input was shaping the findings and outputs. Regarding the trialled theory of change approach, participants felt well supported, found the discussions meaningful,

Figure 1: Preliminary theory of change produced by July 2024 workshop

and believed the workshop made good use of their time and expertise. Several participants expressed interest in further opportunities to contribute. One community mentor noted how they recognised their earlier input in the evidence synthesis map and felt both heard and optimistic about Wales' approach to engaging ethnic minority communities.

The workshop concluded with a survey that identified research gaps and ideas for the Welsh Government to consider for further research:

- Primary research into ethnic minority ECPLC experiences and small-scale qualitative studies with particular communities

- Routine data collection that is linked to and disaggregated by ethnicity

- Improve the quality and process of data collection

- Research focused on the ECPLC workforce

- Action research into alternative approaches to reach and delivery

- The impact of ECPLC on community cohesion

Appendix B provides the full list of research gaps identified by participants.

The workshop also highlighted areas that fell beyond the project scope. The reviews focused on children aged 0-5 and sought evidence associated with ECEC or related early years policy. Some participants felt that older age groups should have been included since 'this work [in Wales] is expanding'. This feedback was provided during the workshop, so
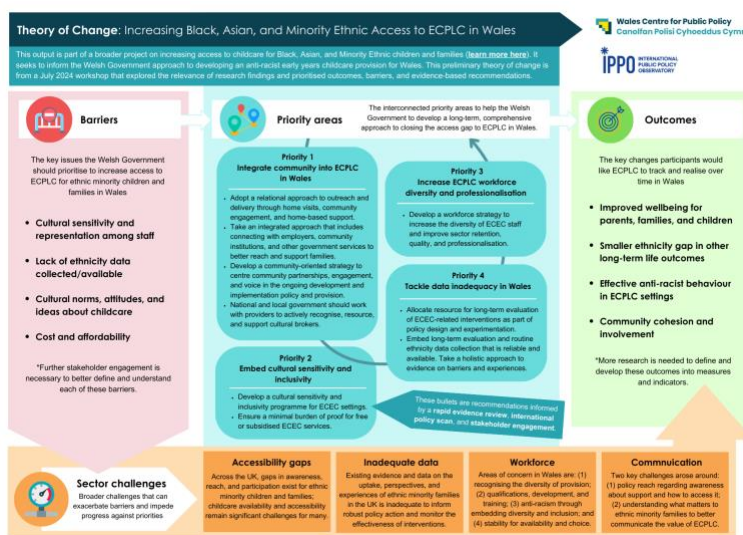
additional context is lacking. Other participants questioned whether the review had overlooked play and its benefits, given its importance to the Welsh approach.

Moreover, since this project aimed to identify barriers to access and possible approaches to address them to inform policymaking across devolved administrations in the UK, the research questions guiding the reviews did not seek to provide insight around multilingualism or immersive approaches involving language, community, or culture. Instead, ECEC examples in these areas emerged incidentally from the policy scan and require further exploration to establish substantive links to inform policy and practice in Wales.

We propose this as a potential area for further research and have summarised relevant examples from the **Policy Scan** that could inform this research, given the Welsh Government's commitments outlined in Cymraeg 2050, such as expanding Welsh-medium early years provision by 150 Welsh-medium nursery groups within 10 years of publication.

Relevant cases for strengthening multilingualism in Wales

- **Canada**: The Early Learning and Childcare Framework highlights incorporating the cultures, languages, traditions and customs of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities to support a child's cultural identity and sense of worth in early childhood settings.

- **Australia**: In Victoria, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) people are supported with free interpreting services and the translation of resources into 30 languages, including written, audio, and visual materials about kindergarten and its benefits. Services are supported by a portal containing multilingual promotional material, a Community Event Toolkit to facilitate engagement and incorporate cultural diversity into events and programmes, and guidance on participating in external events relevant to CALD families.

- **New Zealand**: In 1981 the Ministry of Māori Development piloted kōhanga reo, total Māori immersion ECE services for children aged 0-6. By 1994, 819 centres were in operation. However, participation has since declined, and government support has fluctuated over the decades, with an estimated 460 centres currently operating. Continuous evaluation of this initiative has identified key barriers and enablers that other language and cultural immersion approaches can draw on and has highlighted tensions that can arise from maintaining a separate immersion ECE system alongside mainstream services. There is also ongoing work to expand the Māori medium education sector from early childhood education to tertiary levels

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all and acknowledge the contributions of the Welsh Government Community Mentors who provided their lived and professional expertise to this project through our systems mapping workshop and/or final theory of change workshop.

Additional project resources

Project outputs are available on the WCPP website publication page:
https://wcpp.org.uk/publication/ecec/

- Overarching Policy Summary
- Evidence Synthesis Map
- Rapid Evidence Review

- International Policy Scan
- Systems Map

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Appendix A: Key barriers and outcomes tables

Theory of change workshop barriers table			
Rank	**Barriers identified or added**	**Total votes**	**Consensus level**
1	Cultural sensitivity and representation among staff	14	High
2	Lack of ethnicity data collected/available	8*	High
3	Cultural norms, attitudes, and ideas about childcare	8	High
4	Cost and affordability	7	High
5	Language barriers (parents/or child) to communication, participation, and/or accessing information	4*	Medium
5	Lack of a qualified childcare workforce	4*	Medium
6	Eligibility thresholds for free childcare	4	Medium
7	Lack of awareness of free childcare hours	3	Medium
8	Proximity/transport to childcare setting	2	Low
8	Availability of places at a suitable provider	2	Low
9	Lack of flexibility in enrollment (e.g. contracts)	1	Low
9	Lack of ethnic diversity among researchers and policy makers	1	Low
9	Lack of trust in researchers	1	Low
9	Lack of awareness of benefits and options available / poor comms	1	Low
10	Lack of government funding	0	Low

Key:

- High priority threshold covers high to very high = 7 to 10 votes
- Medium priority threshold = 4 to 6 votes
- Low priority threshold = fewer than 3 votes
- An '*' denotes a higher weighting since it was prioritised across more groups

Theory of change workshop outcomes table			
Rank	Desired outcome identified or added	Total votes	Consensus level
1	Improved wellbeing for parents/families	10*	High
2	Smaller ethnicity gap in other long-term life outcomes	10	High
3	Effective anti-racist behaviour in ECPLC settings	9	High
4	Community cohesion and involvement	8	High
5	Enhanced friendships and play	5	Medium
6	More parents participate in the workforce	4	Medium
7	Improved readiness for school	3	Medium
8	Bringing culture into the ECPLC offer	1	Low
8	Improved child development outcomes	1	Low
8	Improved social skills	1	Low
9	Improved educational attainment	0	Low
9	Bilingualism and multilingualism – all children speaking two or more languages including Welsh	0	Low

*Caveat: One group did not discuss or prioritise outcomes, so the table results are based on votes from three out of four small group discussions.

Appendix B: Research gaps

Research into ethnic minority ECPLC experience	• Qualitative research into ethnic minority perspectives and experiences of accessing ECEC. • Research engagement with parents/carers who use ECEC to understand motivations.
Routine data collection linked to and disaggregated for ethnicity	• Collection of data on Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic access and experiences. • Routine collection and disaggregation of data on Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic access and experiences. • What is the ethnicity gap in formal childcare use for the various childcare interventions in Wales? • What is the ethnic diversity of the workforce? • When looking at issues of how to collect data, link with other areas within ArWAP and the work of the equalities units.
Improving the quality and process of data collection	• Ensure data is a true representation of ethnicity. • Approaching the various community organisations to have better access to ethnic minorities data collection.
Research on and for the ECPLC workforce	• What is the ethnic diversity of the workforce? • What are the views and perceptions of people from global majority backgrounds regarding working in the [ECPLC] sector, particularly from those who do not currently work in it?
Action research into alternative approaches to reach and delivery	• Research that includes home-based childcare and its potential impact in minority ethnic communities. One group discussed how this is a gap in Wales. • Impact of home visits • How can co-location of services with childcare improve uptake of childcare among global majority communities? Which services could be co-located? • Role of informal networks and community liaisons for increasing awareness and uptake.
Impact of ECPLC on community cohesion	• Qualitative research into the benefits of play opportunities within minority ethnic communities to enhance community cohesion. • Research looking at ways to improve community cohesion from the perspectives of those who do not use childcare settings.

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