

Wales Case Study: How Swansea Council approached the Expansion of Flying Start.

Flying Start was originally a programme of support for vulnerable families in specific areas of deprivation that offered four streams of support including childcare, health visitors, parenting advice and speech and language support. In 2022 the Flying Start programme began the first phase of an expansion that Welsh Government intend will eventually provide universal funded childcare for all two year olds across Wales.

In Swansea the original Flying Start programme had been successfully run through its Flying Start Centres. However, further phases of the expansion programme made this impossible and it was necessary to recruit local childcare providers to meet the needs of the expansion, and the Council developed a strategy for recruiting the high quality settings it would require. Although initial phases of the expansion covered specific areas of deprivation, Welsh Government intend that this will be a universal programme for all 2 year olds and the team at the Council wanted to make sure their plans were future proof and would meet the needs of all stakeholders as further phases of the expansion are introduced. They realised that they would be unable to do this alone and invited the umbrella organisations that make up Cwlwm to form a working group with them to look at all aspects of the expansion.

By involving Cwlwm partners right at the beginning of the expansion they were able to ensure that all voices in the sector were heard and included in the process. There was early discussion of the issues and difficulties involved for both providers and the Council. Matters discussed included fitting the requirements of the expansion and Welsh Government guidance to the business models of sessional care, nurseries and childminders, the costs involved for providers and the needs of the families accessing the service. As this was the first time the Council had worked with private providers in this way they felt it was important that all childcare providers were treated equitably with the same access to support and training. All providers across Swansea were kept informed and invited to tender for Flying Start, ensuring the programme is ready to be rolled out in further areas in future phases.

A significant hurdle to overcome was the commissioning process. It was important that this was a thorough tendering process that met the Council's obligation for due diligence. By involving Cwlwm partners early the council was aware of some of the difficulties childcare providers have in accessing this process and how time consuming and discouraging it can be. The umbrella organisations were able to prepare and support the sector with this part of the process and the Council organised a number of events to assist those who wished to tender for Flying Start. However, these events created some frustration amongst providers as the Council were not always able to answer their questions fully because of the nature of the tendering process. The Council felt that this may have put off some providers engaging with the expansion.

One of the key themes of the expansion is that the childcare is of the highest quality with skilled and qualified staff, stimulating environments and plenty of enriching experiences. While the tendering process can ensure basic standards of quality are reached the Council has looked at ways of improving and maintaining the high quality that is required. A draft monitoring form was shared with Cwlwm partners which is planned to ensure all Flying Start settings are monitored annually allowing for any issues to be addressed. The Flying Start support team have also adopted a collaborative approach based on the geographical areas, bringing settings together into 5 Early Help Hubs, each with a support officer, where settings can network, mentor and share good practice. Bringing all Flying Start providers and the Council together to meet regularly, share information and support each other forms an important part of the programme moving forward.

Access to Welsh medium childcare is also an important part of the Flying start expansion. By working closely with Cwlwm partners the Council were able to see how the various Welsh Language programmes such as Camau training, the Welsh Promise and Croes' r bont that are offered through Cwlwm organisations could be used to support and increase the use of the Welsh language in all parts of the sector. Cwlwm partners were able to ensure that this information was shared with the right people in the childcare teams .

Swansea's Flying Start Expansion has now been operating for some months and eligible families have been able to access high quality childcare using a Portal system. The working group of Council and Cwlwm partners still meets regularly to look at how the expansion will develop in the future. Recent issues discussed have included transition arrangements and cross border issues.

Swansea Council recognised the need to develop a new and different model to meet the needs of the Flying Start Expansion to all 2 year olds. By working closely with all Cwlwm organisations from the beginning they had a good understanding of how the different parts of the sector were able to offer choice for parents and families while maintaining the high quality required. The umbrella organisations were clear how the expansion was being developed in Swansea and were able to prepare and support the sector so they were ready to engage with the council and the tendering process.

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Further support

- <https://ndna.org.uk/ndna-cymru/flying-start/>
- <https://www.gov.wales/search?globalkeywords=flying+start+guidance>