# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Launch of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) approach** |
| **DATE** | **24 October 2019** |
| **BY** | **Mark Drakeford, First Minister of Wales** |

Wales will today embark on an exciting journey to create a single, high-quality, child-centred approach to early childhood education and care. We will reform the provision of early years care to ensure children get the best possible start in life.

Childhood experiences play a significant role in shaping our futures and are critical to the chances of leading a healthy, prosperous and fulfilling life. Sadly, by the age of three, children from disadvantaged backgrounds can be as much as a year behind their peers. This attainment gap widens by the time children enter school – it increases steadily over time and the impacts will last a lifetime.

We will redress this imbalance and close the gap. Ensuing that every child has access to the same, high quality support in the early childhood education and care they receive is key to this.

In Wales, we have excellent childcare provision across the early years and a long-established and well-regarded early education offer for three and four-year-olds, in the Foundation Phase.

The new approach to early childhood education and care will be built on these foundations and at its core is the aim that all children will have a high-quality stimulating learning and care experience in any education and care setting they attend – in Welsh, English or bilingually. The type of setting they attend is irrelevant if they are being supported and nurtured as they need.

Putting child development at the heart of early childhood education and care means we must ensure the principle of quality is clear to all who work with children and underpins provision in every setting in Wales.

We know that currently, finding appropriate childcare can be difficult for some families, particularly in certain areas or for those who work irregular hours. Wales needs a system that is accessibleand flexible. The new system of support will be responsive to individual circumstances with a focus on settings best placed to deliver quality outcomes for children.

We will continue to work with local authorities to open up the delivery of early education to a wider range of settings. We are investing in innovative solutions that enable more parents and children to have better access to early education and childcare that meets their individual needs and circumstances.

This is particularly important in the context of provision for children with additional learning needs or physical disabilities, where the need for specialist support can further restrict the availability of care. We want to make it easier for parents and providers to access the support the need to ensure children with additional needs can access early childhood education and care without any inequalities.

We also want to make sure families can access early education in Welsh, English, or bilingually, according to their needs. In the context of *Cymraeg 2050* we need to increase the number of Welsh language and bilingual providers in the early years, to ensure parents can access early childhood education and care in the language of their choice.

This is not about lowering the compulsory school age or putting children into school from birth. Nor will we expect childcare providers to take on the role of teachers. We will focus on recognising the value, skills and experiences of both, drawing them together.

This will be significant and ambitious change – this is not small-scale change but a transformation, which will take place over the coming decade.

In the immediate term, we will develop a quality framework to enshrine the principles, which will support early childhood education and care and set out the requirements for quality across the sector. It will be used by practitioners to guide provision, by parents to understand provision and by inspectors to assess provision and will be the golden thread that links all elements of the new system together.

As we move forward with our early childhood education and careapproach, we will build on our success and strengths, ensuring all settings providing care for children under five work to the same founding principles, the same focus on child development and the same ambition of high quality.