



JANUARY 2024

Ceredigion

Evaluation of the Early Years integration
Transformation Programme in Ceredigion



Lafan would like to acknowledge and thank all the partners, stakeholders and service users who willingly provided their time to contribute to this evaluation.

Diolch yn fawr.

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Executive Summary

The Ceredigion County Council Maternity and Early Years Integration Transformation Programme is aiming to develop a seamless and efficient system to meet the needs of families in Ceredigion. The programme is part of a regional programme, and includes Hywel Dda Health Board, third sector and Local Authorities in Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire.

Lafan was commissioned by Ceredigion County Council to carry out an evaluation of the Early Years Integration Pilot within Ceredigion, and the associated strategic work that has been completed with professionals from across the Maternity and Early Years services. From October 2023 to January 2024 information was collated via desk research, and primary research was conducted with partners, stakeholders and users to establish if the aims of the programme were achieved or not.

The Early Years Integration Transformation regional steering group includes members on behalf of Ceredigion County Council, Carmarthenshire County Council, Pembrokeshire County Council and Hywel Dda University Health Board. These bodies have collaborated with third sector partners to formulate a Maternity and Early Years Strategy for West Wales for 2022-2026.

<https://earlyyearsstrategywest.wales/>

The strategy is clear and concise and aligns with the Welsh Government's agenda for providing better integrated public services as iterated in the Wellbeing and Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015.

Representatives from a wide range of services attend county level Pathfinders meetings, focusing on supporting families with children aged 0-7 in Lampeter, Tregaron, Borth, Aberaeron and New Quay. There is generally a good level of commitment to these meetings from senior managers and operational staff.

The first phase of the programme began in April 2019, with further funding secured for period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2024. No further funding will be made available under the Early Years Integration Transformation Programme beyond 31 March 2024.

47.1% of households in Ceredigion are not deprived (Census 2021). The team are currently working with 218 children aged 0-7. During the 2022-23 financial year, the team have seen 127 children during home visits. Support was provided to 175 children by the 'Cynllun Cyfeirio' referral scheme during 2022-2023. The 'Cynllun Cyfeirio' programme supports children aged 2-4 with disability and/or additional needs to take part in educational play and learning opportunities during term time in a pre-school registered setting.

Extracting data to evidence the work as part of this evaluation from the Ceredigion database was challenging, due to the limitations of current IT systems and cross over in registration details between other programmes. As a result, there is limited quantitative data from the database in this report.

The programme has made significant strides in developing collaboration between support services both at pre-birth and Early Years stages. There is a clear vision for integration present within Ceredigion. Most operational staff have full awareness of these visions. A minority have limited knowledge of the overall programme.

There is a good understanding of the aims and objectives of the programme. It is mainly seen as a mechanism to test new integrated working approaches to early years systems, based on localised contexts. A clear programme theory did not emerge through interviews.

Progress has been made towards the aims and objectives with practical steps taken to join up services. Effective multi-agency approaches are well developed, and efficiencies are clear, with reduced levels of duplication across services. There is a good understanding in the pilot areas of the needs and demands of Ceredigion families. Staff turnover has been high, and the temporary nature of funding periods has been detrimental to attracting experienced staff to the programme.

Overall, clear evidence was obtained multiple times from various sources to validate the value provided by the Programme.

1. Introduction

This research, commissioned by Ceredigion County Council, explores effective and innovative models of service integration to meet the needs of families from pre-birth to age 7 in Ceredigion. The research identifies what is working well both on a strategic and operational level across the Pathfinder areas of Ceredigion, which include Lampeter, Borth, Tregaron and Aberaeron/New Quay.

As well as exploring innovative models for integrating healthcare, childcare and education services, this report brings together staff and parental insight into what is getting in the way, or changes required for improvement.

The research draws on the existing evidence base on early years' service integration, and develops new insights gathered through interviews, surveys and focus group with early years leaders and professionals across the county, as well as conversations with Ceredigion parents.

The 'Recommendation for seamless support for families in Ceredigion' suggests how Ceredigion local authority and their partners might further promote early years integration beyond the Pathfinder pilot, paving the way for efficient and effective support system, empowering families across Ceredigion to thrive.

Early years integration and Ceredigion priority

The principle of integrated services for babies, children, and families in the early years is not new. It has been a cornerstone of national policy for over two decades (Childcare Act 2006). Even before this, system leaders and professionals from across the early years workforce have recognised the need for health, local authorities and the private, voluntary and community sectors to join up and collaborate, putting children at the centre.

No single service or agency can deliver or provide the comprehensive support families need. The complexities of family life, through pregnancy, birth and the first seven years, especially for the most vulnerable, highlights the importance of services working in an aligned and integrated way. Without integration, families at this critical life stage are at risk of not being able to access the right support at the right time. Such missed opportunities can lead to the emergence of inequalities and long-term consequences for children's life chances and for society.

Only through coordinated efforts can Ceredigion families receive the seamless support they require. Aligning and integrating networks of support can empower families to thrive, break the cycle of inequality, and ensure every child starts with an equal opportunity to reach their full potential.

The 'Healthier Wales: our Plan for Health and Social Care' report highlights the importance of collaboration:

"To make our services work as a single system, we need everyone to work together and pull in the same direction. We think we can do this in a small country like Wales, especially if we as a government provide stronger national leadership, and make sure we keep talking – and listening – to the people who deliver and use our health and social care services." (Welsh Government, 2021)

2. Meanings and methodology

What is “early years integration”?

‘Early years’ is one of the *Five Cross Cutting Priorities* named in the Welsh Government’s national strategy *Prosperity for All*. The strategy sets out the ambition to create a more equitable and just society by focusing on tackling inequality, promoting well-being, investing in early years, prevention and tackling problems early:

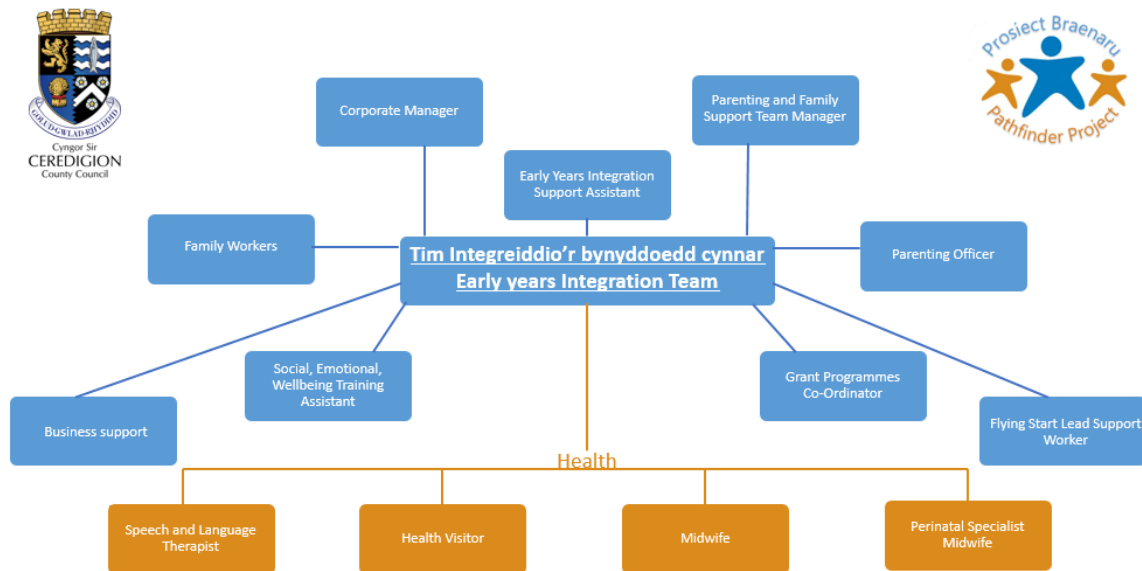
“Our long-term aim is to build a Wales that is prosperous and secure, healthy and active, ambitious and learning, and united and connected.” (Welsh Government, 2017)

[This requires] *“more joined-up, responsive system that puts the unique needs of each child at its heart” (Welsh Government, 2017)*

‘Early years integration’ goes beyond mere collaboration. It is a transformative approach, aiming to dismantle service silos and build a unified system that prioritises family needs and optimal outcomes for children.

In this report we are concerned with the coming together of a full range of services that support children and their families on their journey from pre-birth to age 7, including council-led and health-led services. (See Figure 1 for an illustrative diagram of the Integration and Health Team).

Figure 1: Ceredigion early years support network



Key aspects of early years integration include:

1. Breaking down silos: creating a collaborative network, where services work together seamlessly.
2. Family-centred support: putting families at the heart of the process.
3. Improving outcomes: improving children’s physical and mental health, ensuring better attainment, and stronger family bonds.
4. Unifying system of support: aligning policies, funding streams and delivery models to create a unified system of support.

5. Empowering families: constant collaboration to build a seamless and effective system that empowers families and gives every child the best possible start in life.

The model of delivery within the early years' services adopted by Ceredigion is based on the *Signs of Safety* approach. This innovative, strengths-based, solution-focused approach encourages partners to work collaboratively with families. It encourages parents and carers to take an active role, providing them with the tools to shape their own solutions and the flexibility to adapt to changing situations. The model is focused on:

- *What parents were concerned or worried about?*
- *What services parents felt were working well?*
- *What parents felt needed to be improved?*

Methodology for evaluation

A combination of research methods was used between October 2023 and January 2024 to explore questions posed by this commission. Feedback was obtained from a range of stakeholders, including professionals and families, using a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative methods. This consisted of:

- A rapid review of the literature
- Desk-based research and online search
- Semi-structured interviews with professionals (practitioners and managers)
- Semi-structured interviews with parents
- Bilingual focus groups with professionals held in a hybrid manner
- Focus group with family workers
- Bilingual online questionnaire for families
- Bilingual online questionnaire for professionals and practitioners
- Emails from stakeholders and partners
- Interviews with IT team and users

Quotes from interviews, focus group and surveys have been threaded through this report. Individuals have not been named. Job roles have occasionally been included, or the clarifying information, e.g. "interviewee" or "focus group participant."

The Family Questionnaire asked respondents to share which aspects of the early years' service worked well for them/their family and provided opportunity to share examples of activities, support and interventions that made a difference to them as families.

The Early Years Integration Team questionnaire asked respondents to identify what is working well for families and what has changed for families in Ceredigion because of the programme.

During the Focus Group, participants were encouraged to share examples of good practice developed and adopted during the project, as well as identifying challenges and sharing recommendation for future actions.

Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders focused on project aims and how well these were achieved. Opinions on project impact and legacy were also explored.

3. Why good early years integration matters

From pregnancy to early years, families traverse a landscape of support services - maternity care, health visits, early education, childcare providers, schools, and more. Some families require additional support, which may include mental health support, family and parenting support, speech and language services, financial advice, social services or other.

Integrating these services to holistically understand and address each child's needs seems logical. The following shares reflections from Ceredigion parents about the difference it can make to their lives.

What Ceredigion parents say

Interview and surveys with parents in Ceredigion consistently highlighted the benefits of connected services and open communication. Support provided within family centres received high praise, with nearly all parents referring to aspects of work within a family centre. These welcoming hubs provided holistic and meaningful support from professionals and peers, creating a safe space for families.

"The family centre provides a really valuable range of activities, brilliantly offered... enhancing the developmental skills of my daughter." – Ceredigion parent

"The in-person classes and different activities they offer... all of it is perfect." – Ceredigion parent

Several parents emphasised the importance of open access support in family centres and gave examples of how centres had provided a safe and easy-to-access local place with holistic and meaningful support from professionals and peers.

"All aspects of the work are great. It's a lovely, large, and safe space to come to." - Ceredigion parent

Parents consistently praise how well-connected services were, with open communication channels, which helped them access crucial support and advice for their children. They felt empowered to quickly find specialist help when needed, making transitions smoother and allowing mainstream services to better understand and respond to their children's unique needs.

"Through the Pathfinder contact we were able to access early language support." – Ceredigion parent

The benefits of integrated working were noted by parents in a variety of circumstances, including by those from families facing specific challenges.

"The early years' service allowed me to have access to information, and a better understanding of what's to come, including how to deal with certain situations." – Ceredigion parent

Several parents emphasised the family centres' role in providing an opportunity to integrate with others, both for children and families. The presence of a third sector led family centre with strong links to its local community and local services is valued by families. This was also evident in the 'Ceredigion Parents Voice Questionnaires' where 100% of responses noted they valued and enjoyed attending the centre.

"The family centre has allowed us to make new friends. Playing together with other children improves sharing and activities are good." – Ceredigion parent

"The centre gives the children something different... a new place to explore." - Ceredigion parent

"Attending baby groups, such as baby massage... was nice to just get out of the house, meet other mums and have support from staff." – Ceredigion parent

"Activities such as messy play, free play, 0-12 group made a difference to me... it was great to meet mothers that have babies the same age." – Ceredigion parent

New parents found the family centres and early years services an important place to meet and talk with others – allowing an opportunity to have an open discussion on what works for them and what did not. Parents who were new to the area, also highlighted the benefits of the support:

"Having just relocated to the area, it has been really helpful to find such a group within the local community. Staff are always so positive, friendly and have a real passion for the development of children." - Ceredigion parent.

Courses and activities provided at the family centres are contributing positively to the lives of both children and parents.

Through surveys, the centres have sought the opinion of parents on the desired resources and workshops that they would like to see at the centres. The group activities held in the Family Centres that parents noted that made a positive difference to them, included:

- Baby massage
- Weaning
- Breast Feeding Support Group
- Chat and Play/Stay and play
- Messy play
- Free play
- Little Stars group
- Language and Play

Access to courses/programmes were also considered important aspects of the centres. Courses offered by the family centres include:

- Family Links Nurturing Programmes
- Family Links for Parents of a child with a disability or an additional need
- Autism Parents Programme
- OnePlusOne
- Welcome to the World
- Supporting Parents and Children Emotionally (SPACE)
- GroBrain Baby
- GroBrain Toddler
- Incredible Years Baby
- Incredible Years Toddler

"Community activities, Baby Massage, Gro brain, WellComm, all provided the skills to improve my child's early development." – Ceredigion parent

"The Baby massage group was very useful. I used the techniques share to support my child on a number of occasions, when he had wind or colic." – Ceredigion parent

"The Sêr Bach group provided useful tips on baby-led weaning." – Ceredigion parent

What could have been better for children and families

More than half respondents to the family questionnaire felt that there were no areas they could suggest for improvement. Of the few suggestions that were highlighted, these were mainly concerned with:

- Having a premise for every family centre, to allow for longer opening hours and drop-in sessions.
- Promoting groups/sessions available more effectively to raise awareness and to increase attendance.
- Having more health visitors and better consistency in staff across agencies.

Impact on children and families' outcomes

Demonstrating the impact of integrated early years systems through robust evidence can be challenging, owing to several interconnected factors. Studies grapple with methodological complexities when evaluating the causal link between integrated systems and child/family outcomes. The long-term nature of early childhood interventions can also mean that outcomes often take years to emerge.

The 'Leading and delivering early childhood services: 10 insights from 20 places across England and Wales' (Lewing et al, 2022) report is based on the learning from areas that engaged with the Early Intervention Foundation in using the maternity and early years maturity matrix planning tool. The report shares examples of innovation and good practice, as well as the conditions and support required to enable further progress. (These are highlighted in Figure 2)

Figure 2: EIF report – 10 insights for leading maternity and early years services:

Insight 1	Drive the quality of local strategic planning
Insight 2	Plan with the whole local resource in mind
Insight 3	Get the leadership right
Insight 4	Support communities to drive change
Insight 5	Get the most out of evidence-based interventions
Insight 6	Make multi-agency working work
Insight 7	Face the challenge of sharing personal data
Insight 8	Information for families: a right not a gift
Insight 9	Step up on measuring outcomes and experience
Insight 10	Build a research practice partnership.

Across our surveys and interviews, early year professionals and leaders shared numerous examples of perceived tangible improvements in services and support to families in Ceredigion, achieved through more integrated ways of working. Several professionals felt that they were better able to identify the needs of families and children and could therefore provide appropriate support earlier and more effectively.

“Since the role began, we have integrated into the wider parenting and family support team, we are supporting families more generally rather than working just within our Pathfinder areas.” – Ceredigion Family Support Worker

Family Case Studies

The following case studies highlights the experience of 5 families from Ceredigion who made use of the Programme’s provision. They all give a useful insight to the impact and outcomes from the Programme.

Family 1

Twins were born to the mother of Family 1, and she decided to take a year off work to raise them. She met Pathfinder's Family Support Worker several times during the early weeks, and through her signposting and social media she saw that several suitable groups were meeting within her area.

Having the groups so close to home was very advantageous for her, as starting out with two small babies was a lot of work. She attended several groups and knowing that the support worker was present in the groups was a great comfort to her.

By now the twins are two years old, the mother is back at work, and the father has taken a break from his career to raise the children.

Unfortunately, there are no groups or activities for this age. The mother suggested that a group on potty training would be useful, and a group for monitoring the children's milestones - so it would be a way for parents to share any concerns they may have about development of their child.

The mother was extremely happy with the attention and support she received during the initial stages of raising the twins.

Family 2

The first-time mother of Family 2 had a baby boy. She considered the support she received through sessions at the Family Centre fantastic. She attended several groups, of which, the 'Baby Massage' and 'Baby-led-weaning' groups were particularly useful.

As well as an opportunity for the babies to meet other children it was also a valuable time for parents to chat and socialise. The baby boy was not sleeping well and during the sessions she received guidance on different methods of getting him to settle, which was a great support.

The mother of Family 2 sometimes found it difficult to time the groups with the baby's sleeping patterns, but apart from this the experience was 'really good'.

Family 3

When the first baby of the mother of Family 3 was born, she was eager to meet other mothers, as this initial period can be a challenging time. She attended several groups and found support from family workers valuable.

As the family spent time abroad, this meant that the mother missed several groups, but knowing that the door was open upon her return was of great support, allowing her to integrate and feel part of a community upon her return.

Family 4

Parents of Family 4 believed that the services from maternity to early years with their son now aged 3 had worked very well overall for them as a family. They believed the early referral to the Speech and Language Team and the Pathfinder programme opened more opportunities for them and had allowed their son to make substantial progress with his listening and speaking skills. Courses held at the family centre had given them better insight into their son's needs.

They felt that communication between the nursery education provider and the family could have been improved. At times, transportation costs to the nursery proved challenging for the family.

Family 5

The mother of Family 5 felt well supported during pregnancy. She saw several different health visitors during the first weeks of her son's life, and believed having consistency would have been better.

One aspect that the mother believed had impacted positively on the family was the introduction of an Individual Development Plan for her son. This led to improved outcomes for her son and included early language support provision. Opportunities to attend courses had proved useful for the mother as well as support from the family workers at the family centre.

These case studies highlight the importance of the open access support in family centres and the meaningful support provided by family workers. Parents valued the opportunity to meet staff and other parents, and found the groups and courses offered at the family centre to be especially useful.

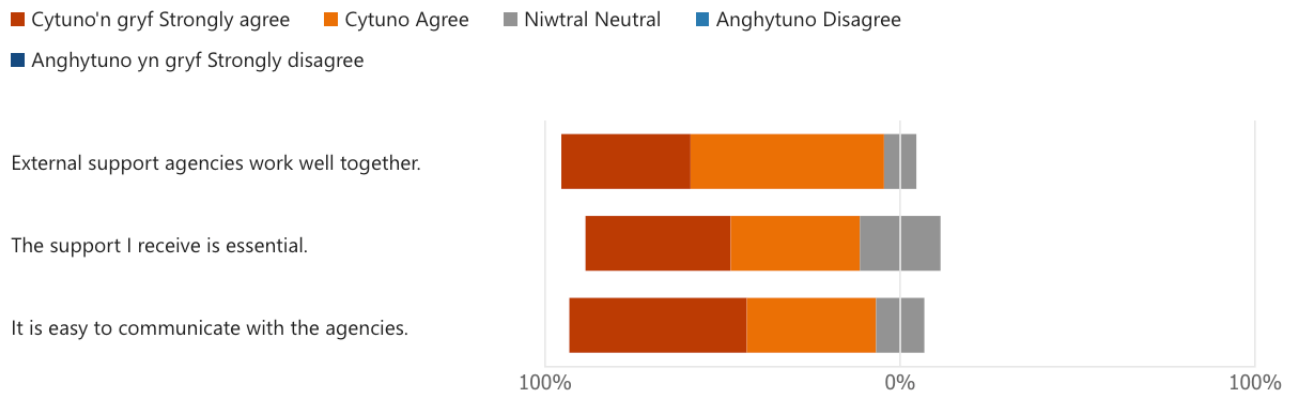
Families have felt supported when accessing early support for children with additional needs. Personalised Individual Development Plans were useful for parents to understand their child's learning needs and to monitor progress.

Having different health visitors can lead to a sense of disrupted continuity of care, due to lack of familiarity and inconsistent advice.

4. How integrated are we in Ceredigion?

Nearly all families believed that external support agencies worked well together and felt that navigating and communicating with the agencies was easy. (See Figure 3)

Figure 3: Ceredigion Family Early Years Survey Response



Here, we bring together findings and comments from the Early Years Integration Team questionnaire, focus group and semi-structured interviews with professionals.

Key words describing the outcomes of the project, shared during interviews with professionals include:



The most prominent responses were 'support,' 'collaboration' and 'partnership.' The experience of professionals working together in an integrated, multi-agency way has provided opportunity for strengthened support networks, improved collaboration and better partnerships.

The Early Years Integration Team Survey responses identified the most important aspects of the Integration Transformation Programme as:

- Ensuring families are receiving consistent and effective support, that meets their needs
- Better collaboration and integration between all services and agencies (multi-agency approach). Reducing the need for families to have to repeat their story.
- Sharing information between professionals, as well as informing parents of the opportunities and support available

“Having more people that work together and share information can only be positive, it has increased my number of relevant contacts which means I feel much more supported in my role.” – Survey participant

“Multi agency working is the most important aspect of the programme, such as Family Workers working alongside Health Visitors to support families on a 1:1 basis or through groups. Also, the Speech and Language support for the childcare settings to provide universal support to children with S&L delay.” – Survey participant

“Bringing services together, planning together, sharing information for the benefit of families they are working with.” - Survey participant

How well groups of professionals work together

The Early Years Integration Team Questionnaire highlighted examples of effective integrated working, thus making best use of resources available through strong collaboration.

“...it has given myself and others the opportunity to network, share ideas and develop as a team which is a really positive step.” – Integration Team survey participant

“More childcare settings have adopted Flying Start childcare good practice since the launch of the Pathfinder project. As a result, we have supported and monitored more childcare settings. We also collaborate with more Health Visitors and Family Workers ensuring holistic support for families. Our relationship with Family Centres has also developed. We ensure that they are aware of the Outreach available to families who live outside Flying Start areas and as a result receive occasional referrals from them.” – Advisory Teacher

“More families have benefited from the help of professionals across Ceredigion as a result of the Pathfinder Project. As a Speech and Language service, we have tried to upskill the Family Workers who were appointed, to be more aware of the development of language, speech and communication, and to have ideas/strategies to give families when needed. The family workers have been following a specific program with some families, especially if the child was not attending a childcare setting, or if some parents needed specific support.” – Speech and Language Therapist

However, a minority of survey respondents felt that effective integration was already in place, through involvement with the local authority meetings and the Flying Start Programme.

Very few noted that some teams did not regularly attend meetings, which led to frustration. This was believed to be due to changing roles within teams and staff turnover.

Examples identified within the Pathfinder programme as working well, and making a positive difference to families include:

1. **Pathfinder Team meetings:** Meetings provide effective opportunity to collaborate with other professionals to share ideas and information, ensuring consistency in approach and service. The Covid 19 pandemic was an impetus for virtual meetings, which have allowed stakeholders with heavy workloads to attend meeting. Virtual meetings have enabled county-wide meetings, which has allowed family centre staff to benefit from the experience of others and led to improved consistency across the county. However, it is important to acknowledge that few respondents noted they prefer face-to-face meetings.
2. **Improved communication:** A transparent and holistic approach between services and with families has removed silo working and led to better integration and team working. Good examples include family workers contacting families after children are born to invite to nearest family centre to access early support.
3. **Access to early support:** Screening/early identification of needs has led to interventions being put in place earlier for children, e.g., child-care settings using a language screen assessment to measure and monitor children's language, which has allowed early support to be put in place where necessary.
4. **Shared skills:** Sharing courses, groups and training has led to improved relationships and sharing of information. Securing funds to assist maternity and early years training and offering it to third sector partners has also resulted in increased skills. Ensuring training opportunities are made available across all sectors from the beginning of the programme would have improved the integration of services according to a few respondents.
5. **Additional staff capacity:** Having additional staff, e.g., to attend Family Centres has been beneficial, with more support and courses available to parents.
6. **Dedicated Family Workers:** Family workers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between families and the integration team. They act as liaisons, ensuring that families feel supported and connected to the resources they need.

“Working towards a universal service will provide equity for all and reduce health and wellbeing disparities.” – Integration Team Survey participant

“Family Support given to families makes a huge difference. Children and parents get opportunities to socialise and learn good parenting skills at the same time. This is also a good support for Health Visitors especially at a time when there is such a lack of Health Visitors within the county.” – Integration Team Survey participant

“We are like a big family... talking regularly and discussing issues, everyone is comfortable in communicating on issues and ways to improve the service. I have got to highlight the Family Centres, they are the foundation, we go there regularly, and they are always welcoming. We run courses there, we meet the families there, we get to know the children before they turn two years old and before they go to childcare. The relationship is brilliant.” – Interviewee

Responses to the Early Years Integration Team survey provide an insight into how well separate groups of professionals engaged in supporting children and families in the early years work together. Several respondents highlighted the effective integration between speech and language support and other early years services.

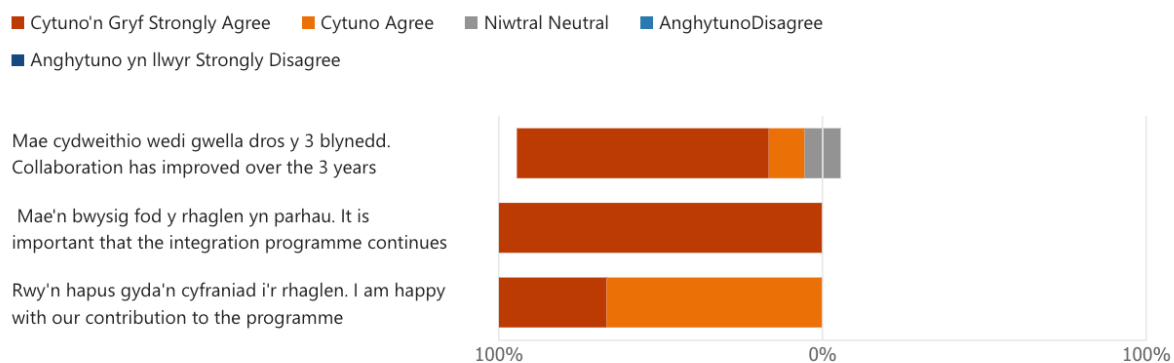
“Partnership working and the information sharing across services has had very positive outcomes for families involved with this project. One family have been able to access Speech and Language therapists, support with transport costs and attend the Family Centre regularly, which have facilitated parenting groups to support.” – Focus Group participant

Discussions with professionals highlight the improvement in collaboration over the last 3 years. (See Figure 4)

“We have seen families getting far better levels of support than previously prior to the project.” - Interviewee

All interviewee responses strongly agreed that it was important for the programme to continue (see Figure 4). During the writing of this report, Ceredigion received information that the programme had not received further funding.

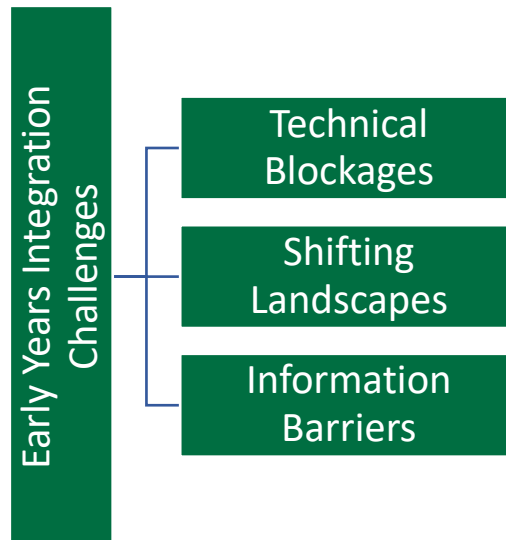
Figure 4 – Integration Team Interview responses



5. What is getting in the way?

Across the research, challenges to progressing the effective integration of early years services and systems have emerged. These can be summarised as three key types of challenges (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 – Early Years Integration Challenges identified by stakeholders



Although local system leaders can tackle some of the challenges, many lie outside their control. The temporary nature of the programme has impeded the implementation. This points to the need for a national focus on building an environment that supports and encourages integrated working across the early years.

Technical blockages

Lacking a unified and integrated data system creates significant hurdles. There are issues and barriers to recording data, with varying systems being used across services and differing ways of collecting, storing and sharing information.

Families often have to repeat their story when referred to different services, which can lead to frustration and a breakdown in communication. This highlights the need for an integrated system that streamlines data sharing and ensures seamless communication between services.

“The data system is slow to access and very difficult to extract the information.” – Focus group participant

“One area for improvement is an IT system that could be accessed by health/local authority/third sector, so the families’ journey is known about by all sectors, so whoever is working with that family can provide the best support available, without causing duplication, missed opportunities and can celebrate the successes together.” – Focus group participant

Interviews and discussions with IT team and users highlight that records for individual children are comprehensive and is positively received by those who use the system. Family workers find the system allows them to track an individual child with relative ease.



Recommendation: Establish a method to extract batch data limited by variables based on what the users need.

Information is relatively accessible, but not practical due to capacity, so practically, some teams (i.e., health visitors) tend to make their own records.

Course registers are hard to access and input. It is not possible to add a course register retroactively, so users must delete all existing courses up to the date needed and re-enter all the data. As such, sometimes course data may not be up to date at the point of access.



Recommendation: Assess and identify ways of integrating adding course registers retroactively, and a way to pull out large volumes of data efficiently to allow staff to create spreadsheets for reporting.

Standards and procedures for data collection are clear, with nearly all staff proficient in adding notes and updating records. Sharing information across regional boundaries is available, but the findings show that further training is needed to access these.



Recommendation: Investigate expanding the capacity of the system to make it more centralised.

The current system does not embed the voice of the service users effectively when gathering feedback, as it is not saved on the database.



Recommendation: Establish a system to input internal feedback directly in the database to make it easier for those working to improve the system.

Other IT barriers shared included:

- Need to have the ability to send batch emails to parents/carers. For example, messages that tell families what support available, inform them of new courses, or share information on how to get child support when a child turns two.
- No way to extract large volumes of data easily to create a spreadsheet or register.
- No flagging system if another member of staff/case worker adds or amends a record. It would be good to see who adds which data, and when.
- System needs to be overhauled to be suited for current demands.
- System is not user friendly and needs to be more intuitive.

It is obvious that few users have significant difficulty navigating through the system to get the data required, despite them being clearly capable and computer literate.



Recommendation: Adapting current or designing the new system with the user experience in mind and integrate the needs of staff.



Recommendation: Several findings align with the Maternity and Early Years Strategy for West Wales theme - 'Develop technology infrastructure and systems to enable collaboration'. Ensuring alignment and integration of the actions noted in this evaluation alongside this strategy is recommended.

Shifting landscapes

Short term funding – this is believed to have impacted negatively on the recruitment of staff, and increased turnover of staff. Securing longer term funding for key roles within the service would not only improve staff recruitment and retention, but also allow leaders to plan and embed changes effectively.

“Short term funding doesn’t allow for longevity, growth or sustainability. Good work, momentum and partnerships are often lost when funding is removed.”

“Reduction in staffing capacity across all agencies impacted upon the ability to offer a thorough service at times, causing increased workload for the few.” – Focus group participant

The programme has been delivered at a time of significant transformation, with two teams being brought together within Ceredigion County Council. This restructure also meant loss of key professionals that set up the programme.

Integration between health visiting and other local authority services was considered weaker, with services most likely to be considered as working in isolation from council-led early years support.

Several participants believed increased involvement and engagement from Health Visitors would have led to better outcomes. Health visitors were repeatedly mentioned as a workforce in Ceredigion under a great deal of pressure and, as a result were less able in the current climate to engage effectively in activities to support integration.



Recommendation: Seek clarity from Welsh Government to provide a transparent vision, improved communication and clarity on how early years integration in Wales will look to the future.



Recommendation: Several findings align with the Maternity and Early Years Strategy for West Wales theme - 'Develop our Workforce'. Ensuring alignment and integration of the actions noted in this evaluation alongside this strategy is recommended.

Information Barriers

Unlocking Information– a minority of staff were not aware of all the services available through the programme when they initially started their roles and believed that families and practitioners would benefit from an induction or information to capture this.



Recommendation: Update and share the 'Parenting and Family Support' booklet with families and practitioners. Sharing a digital version would enable regular revision and reduced costs.

A minority of responses highlighted challenges with:

- Lack of IT resources/connectivity
- DBS delays
- Covid-19
- Family communication and commitment – ensuring families commit and stay focused on courses is at times challenging, with a minority of families reluctant to engage with outreach workers.
- Assessment infrastructure to ensure data, evidence and best practice is captured effectively.

“Covid had a big impact on the program as everything was so new when it happened. There was a bit of change in terms of staffing at the start which also affected the programme, but I must say that things have now settled, and things are getting stronger all the time.” – Survey respondent

“A more detailed assessment, not just a local assessment but a regional assessment to ensure the data, evidence, sharing of best practice is captured and potentially supported at scale with localised differences that can be supported by local system/infrastructure.”



Recommendation: The findings align with the Maternity and Early Years Strategy for West Wales theme - ‘Provide accessible Information’. Ensuring alignment and integration of the actions noted in this evaluation alongside this strategy is recommended.

Strategic plans and processes for integration

Ceredigion local authority and their partners have put in place the core structures and processes to support integrated working at a local level.

The Ceredigion Parenting and Family Support Operational Group oversee the implementation of the Early years Integration transformation – Pathfinders, and report back to the Welsh Government effectively. They have a clearly articulated vision for how different services and agencies should work together in response to local maternity and early year's needs.

Staffing restructure, and staff turnover have at times proved challenging for the group that consists of the Corporate Manager, Parenting and Family support Manager, Early Years Integration Support Assistant, Childcare strategic manager, Health Visitor leads, Clinical and operational lead midwife, Advisory Teacher with ALN lead, Flying Start advisory teacher, Speech and Language Therapy Lead, Parenting Officer, Plant Dewi Family Centre network Co-Ordinator, Mudiad Meithrin support officer, and Family Centre co-ordinators.

Each area has a multi-agency team that works closely to share information and work towards the needs of each area. These groups contribute positively to integration arrangements. Sub-groups include:

- Tîm Braenaru Aberaeron and New Quay Pathfinder Team
- Tîm Braenaru Borth Pathfinder Team
- Tîm Braenaru Llambled – Lampeter Pathfinder Team
- Tîm Braenaru Tregaron Pathfinder Team
- Grŵp Datblygu Gweithlu ac Angen Poblogaeth – Workforce Development and Population Need Group
- Grŵp Cyfathrebu – Communication Group

“This project is integrated into a much larger system of work; therefore, the structure is to see this as part of the overall delivery of services and sharing knowledge and management within a much wider parenting and family support system. We have been keen not to see this as a standalone programme, but as part of a much wider programme that Welsh Government have promoted around support for children and their families.” - Ceredigion Parenting and Family Support Operational Group Interviewee

The regional steering group across all three authorities (Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire) has led to close collaboration with regional Local authorities and Hywel Dda and third sector organisations. There have been several benefits of working closely with partners at a regional level. An excellent example is the ‘Regional Maternity and Early Years Strategy’ document created by the group. The strategic themes highlighted in this document align with several of our research findings.

The hallmarks of good integration set out in the Early Intervention Foundation’s Maternity and Early Years Maturity Matrix are considered to be in place by Ceredigion. This is supported in documentation and in current practice. Ceredigion has strategic plans and processes in place to support integrated working.

Impact of future developments

Looking forwards, as the Pathfinder programme funding concludes, it will be imperative to continue to work strategically to reduce impact on the extent and quality of integrated working for early years in Ceredigion.

Thinking systematically about how to embed future integrated approaches remains a high priority for the managers. This programme has shown that processes for developing an evidence base in Ceredigion have resulted in positive integration.

6. Recommendation for seamless support for families in Ceredigion

Breaking down barriers and continuing with the ethos of collaboration at a time where funding has been discontinued will pose several challenges for the Early Years in Ceredigion.

Drawing on the feedback throughout this commission, the following were identified as the most valuable outcomes achieved during the pilot and should be prioritised if resources continue to be strained:



1. Continued collaboration between agencies and authorities to optimise training and sharing information among team members.



2. Staffing challenges is a significant concern that needs further in-depth assessment to consider ways of improving. Short-term funding patterns is set to continue and will therefore add to this challenge. However, the repeat loss of "organisational memory" within teams led to poorer delivery and added to the sense of frustration among staff members.



3. Learning from a pilot such as this can be accelerated and improved through incorporating evaluation monitoring from the outset with the whole team. Participatory and continuous evaluation - with a "critical friend" support element embedded from the start - can allow findings and recommendations to be established sooner and implemented faster if required. This would have strengthened learning and improved service level to the users. This evaluation was commissioned at the end of the pilot and was therefore limited in its value.

The team did however regularly review progress and other evaluation contracts were commissioned during other funding phases of the programme. These were carried out by different contractors.



4. The document developed by the Maternity and Early Years Transformation Programme titled 'Our strategy' sets out the priorities of maternity and early years work in Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, and Pembrokeshire.

This is a key document moving forward and has identified areas for improvements aligning with findings from this evaluation. Aware of the strain on resources, there is a convincing argument that the team fully adopts this strategy and looks at ways of strengthening it by developing a clear action plan, which includes accountability for responsibilities and quantifiable targets.



5. Providing clarity across organisations during a time of restructuring, and collectively agreeing on ongoing ways of working will better meet the needs of both service providers and service users. Seek clarity from Welsh Government to provide a transparent vision, improved communication and clarity on how early years integration in Wales will look to the future.



6. Utilising the existing Regional Steering Group and Ceredigion Pathfinder Team meetings for governance and to ensure future collaboration and integration would provide a forum for discussion and debate during challenging periods. The Regional Steering Group could also play a significant role in advocating the needs of the region to government and funding bodies.

Continuing with a hybrid method of delivery could allow stakeholders with limited time availability to attend.



7. Call for clearer guidance on early years funding from Welsh Government, to enable long term planning, improve staff retention, and attract experienced staff to future advertised posts.



8. Continue to seek user voice when designing services and provisions, such as groups and training. This is well-developed and provision is making a positive difference to the experience of service users.



9. Continue to utilise existing assessment to allow early identification of children's needs. Speech and Language interventions are currently considered a strength, with early identification and support mechanisms in place to improve children's outcomes.



10. Review and upgrade current, or embed a new improved and proven IT system, which integrates the needs of staff better. The system should include methods to extract batch data limited by variables based on what the users need.

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