

# Agenda – Children, Young People, and Education Committee

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Meeting Venue:

Hybrid – Committee room 3 Senedd  
and video conference via Zoom

Meeting date: 4 March 2026

Meeting time: 09.30

For further information contact:

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Committee Clerk

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## Hybrid

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### Private pre-meeting

09.15 – 09.30

### Public meeting

09.30 – 11.00

### 1 Introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

09.30

### 2 General scrutiny of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care

09.30 – 11.00

(Pages 1 – 31)

Jeremy Miles MS, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care

Dawn Bowden MS, Minister for Children and Social Care

Sarah Murphy MS, Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing

Abigail Phillips, Deputy Director, Quality & Nursing

Alex Slade, Director of Primary Care, Mental Health & Early Years

Albert Heaney, Chief Social Care Officer for Wales

Attached Documents:

Research brief

Welsh Government Evidence Paper



### **3 Papers to note**

11.00

#### **3.1 Information from Stakeholders**

(Pages 32 – 33)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee from Keith Towler

#### **3.2 School improvement and learner attainment**

(Pages 34 – 47)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education from the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee

#### **3.3 Legislative Consent: Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill**

(Pages 48 – 49)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education from the Chair of the Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee

#### **3.4 Information from Stakeholders**

(Pages 50 – 51)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee from the Director for Wales of the Learning and Work Institute

#### **3.5 Care Inspectorate Wales: Annual Scrutiny**

(Pages 52 – 55)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chief Inspector of Care Inspectorate Wales from the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee

### **3.6 SL(6)763 – The Child Minding and Day Care Exceptions (Revocation and Transitional Provision) (Wales) Order 2026**

(Pages 56 – 57)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee and the Chair of the Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee from the Minister for Children and Social Care

### **3.7 Implementation of education reforms**

(Pages 58 – 67)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education from the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee

### **3.8 Legislative Consent: Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill**

(Pages 68 – 70)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chair of the Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee from the Cabinet Secretary for Education

### **3.9 General scrutiny of the Cabinet Secretary for Education**

(Pages 71 – 73)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chief Executive of the Welsh Local Government Association from the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee

### **3.10 Scrutiny of the Children's Commissioner for Wales Annual Report**

(Pages 74 – 86)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee from the Children’s Commissioner for Wales

### **3.11 Annual Scrutiny of Medr**

(Pages 87 – 89)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee from Medr

**3.12 General scrutiny of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Minister for Further and Higher Education**

(Pages 90 – 93)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Minister for Further and Higher Education

**3.13 Information from Stakeholders**

(Pages 94 – 95)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee

**3.14 Forward work programme**

(Pages 96 – 112)

Attached Documents:

Letter to the Chair of the Finance Committee and Chair of the Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee from the Auditor General Wales

**4 Motion under Standing Order 17.42(ix) and (vi) to resolve to exclude the public from the remainder of this meeting**

11.00

**Private meeting**

11.00 – 12.30

**5 General scrutiny of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care – consideration of the evidence**

11.00 – 11.15

## **Break**

11.15 – 11.30

## **6 School improvement and learner attainment – briefing from CAL:ON Cymru**

11.30 – 12.30

(Pages 113 – 119)

Attached Documents:

Research brief: CAL:ON project

Document is Restricted



# Children, Young People & Education Committee

## Evidence Paper on General Scrutiny - Health and Social Care

04/03/2026

### Summary

This document is a response to the Children, Young People & Education Committee's request for information to inform scrutiny of the Health and Social Services portfolio.

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## Workforce Plan

The Welsh Government continues to prioritise investment in the NHS Wales workforce to ensure high-quality care for children, young people and families.

Workforce planning for the NHS is led nationally by Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW), aligned to the *10-Year Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care*. This provides a long-term framework for training, development and future workforce supply across all professions, including those involved in paediatric and child health services.

While there is no single workforce plan dedicated solely to paediatrics, several existing strategic plans include workforce actions directly relevant to child health, including:

- Perinatal Workforce Plan
- Nursing Workforce Plan
- Allied Health Professional Workforce Development Plan.

The Welsh Government has committed £294 million annually to support health professional education and training. This investment sustains commissioning numbers for healthcare professional education and training and supports multi-professional workforce growth across NHS Wales, despite significant financial pressures.

This continued commitment ensures Wales is developing a sustainable and resilient workforce capable of meeting current and future population needs, including child health.

## Paediatric Continence Care

We recognise that continence conditions affect many children in Wales, and we are strengthening guidance across health and education services to ensure care is consistent, rights-based and centred on individual clinical need.

### Introduction and issue statement

Continence conditions are among the most common health issues affecting children and young people. Their impact can be profound, yet they remain poorly understood and supported. Stigma and embarrassment are common; children may avoid school trips and sleepovers, withdraw socially, and experience reduced wellbeing and educational progress. In this context, strengthened guidance and consistent practice across health and education are essential, underpinned by UNCRC rights.

### Scale and prevalence (Wales estimate; UK evidence)

There is no national Welsh dataset quantifying paediatric continence prevalence or the number of children receiving products/services. UK sources used for planning estimate ~900,000 affected children; pooled prevalence for functional constipation ~9.5% (with up to 32.2% reported); daytime wetting ~2.8% (6–14 yrs); bedwetting ~15.5% at 7½ yrs; with elevated prevalence in children with

Welsh Government evidence paper on the General Scrutiny of Health and Social Care.

additional needs. Applying these to Wales' ≈630,000 under-18s yields ~50,000 children likely to have a bladder/bowel difficulty, ~60,000 with constipation and ~17,500 with daytime wetting (6–14). These are estimates, not official statistics.

Broader UK assessments indicate ~1.5 million children (≈1 in 9) have bladder/bowel problems, reinforcing the scale of likely need in Wales and the case for improved data and commissioning consistency.

## Education alignment and new school guidance

The Welsh Government expects all maintained schools to have an intimate care policy, as referenced in the *Supporting Learners with Healthcare Needs Guidance (2017)*. The guidance also offers advice and information regarding the development of Healthcare Plans and meeting these needs within the school day.

In addition, the *School Toilets: Good practice guidance for schools in Wales* provides further guidance for governing bodies and headteachers on issues relating to the standards for learner toilets and related facilities required in schools in Wales. Through our approach to Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care, we encourage settings and schools to collaborate to strengthen the planning for transitions, particularly for the most vulnerable children.

Education settings play a critical role: hydration policies, open toilet access, privacy and individualised care planning directly influence health, dignity and learning. The updated *Managing Bladder and Bowel Issues in Schools* guidance (2022) provides practical measures for schools and clarifies the role of school nursing, health visiting and specialist continence services in co-producing care plans. Welsh Government is signposting these materials to schools and partners.

## Policy background (Wales health)

WHC/2022/004 adopted Bladder and Bowel UK's 2021 consensus and aimed for consistency across Health Boards. It clarified that products should only be provided following assessment and that "four pads per 24 hours" is an indicative guide based on assessed need, and that age five is used as a general threshold to consider access to products. There is no statutory duty to provide products; the Circular sought to minimise variation by setting a national steer.

## Why further change is needed

A charity organisation, through its detailed 2025 report, challenged aspects of UK and Wales guidance as potentially risking indirect discrimination and fettering of discretion where minimum age indicators and indicative product quantities were being interpreted rigidly. In response, a UK-wide stakeholder process revised the consensus guidance to Version 16 (December 2025), strengthening disclaimers and repeatedly emphasising that decisions must be based on individual clinical need; however, V16 still retains residual age references, which the charity argues may remain ambiguous or contradictory without further clarification and editing.

## Current position and intent

- Ministers have previously written to CYPE confirming a rights-based, UK-wide approach, reinforcing that “four pads” is a benchmark, not a cap, and committing to clearer, user-friendly guidance.
- Officials have engaged with BBUK, Welsh clinical leads and stakeholders to develop V16 and prepare a replacement Circular in 2026 for Wales, subject to Legal Services advice.
- Clarity in wording: Consolidate all age/quantity statements into a single “Practice Principles” section: *individual clinical assessment first; age and number references are illustrative, not limits; clinicians must depart where assessed need requires, recording rationale*
- Strengthening the education interface: Promote current schools’ guidance and care planning approached to ensure access to drinks and toilets, privacy and dignity, and consistent liaison with health professionals.

## Childhood Obesity and Overweight

The new 2-year Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales (HWHW) Delivery plan was published in September 2025 with cross Cabinet agreement. The plan targets action and resources towards children and young people and reducing health inequalities.

The plan has 6 sections, focusing on priority themes. The themes are:

- embedding a whole system approach
- supporting families and the foundations for lifelong health
- schools and settings that support good health
- creating healthier food environments
- active lives
- treatment pathways

Actions and commitments across each theme within the Delivery Plan focus on providing the support for babies, children, and young people to get the best start in life.

Welsh Government has committed to provide over £4 million funding in 2026-2027 towards the continued delivery and implementation of the following Healthy Weight: Healthy Wales Strategy programmes:

- All Wales Diabetes Prevention Programme
- Healthy Weight Healthy You
- Whole System Approach to a Healthy Weight
- PIPYN (children and family weight management pilots)
- 60 plus Active Leisure Scheme
- Fit Fans

## Young Carers

While the role of young carers should be recognised and valued, collectively we must ensure this is not to the detriment of their education or other aspects of their young lives.

### Young carers in education

We are committed to equality of opportunity and equity of provision in education and supporting young carers is integral to our priorities of raising standards and improving attendance and attainment for all learners.

While some schools have well-developed systems of support for young carers, data collection on young carers in Wales is currently inconsistent, making it difficult to provide targeted support where it is needed most. We have initiated a three phased approach to improving data collection which will be taken forward over a two-year period.

The first phase will be completed in the first half of 2026 and will collate data from the School Health Research Network (SHRN), providing a snapshot of a young carers' experience in school and their wellbeing. Phase two will link this information with Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) data and enable comparison of educational attainment of young carers compared to their peers. We are also exploring a further long-term reliable method of data collection, including consideration of making legislative changes to the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) to include young carers.

We have worked with Carers Trust Wales to develop revised materials for education staff to understand more about young carers and engage with pupils. This information is available now via the carers trust Wales website and is due to be uploaded onto the relevant education platform.

Our Targeted Employability Support Scheme enables Higher Education providers to support the employability of students from under-represented groups, including young carers and young adult carers. Young carers and young adult carers from low-income households can access the Education Maintenance Allowance, the Welsh Government Learning Grant and the Financial Contingency Fund where they meet eligibility criteria.

Medr funds and regulates tertiary education in Wales and expects colleges and universities to remove barriers to participation, retention, success and progression. We ensure Welsh universities include young adult carers in their programmes to provide financial and pastoral support.

### Young carer identification cards

We worked with Carers Trust Wales in 2022 to develop the Young Carer identification card and local authorities have operated card schemes independently from 2023. The identification cards are a key tool to help young carers identify in schools, colleges and pharmacies.

We sent out new materials in December 2024 to enable all local authorities to promote their card scheme and have engaged with local authorities about further action to maximise uptake, which are currently being explored.

## Other forms of support

Young carers can access our Short Breaks scheme and Carers Support Fund. Up to a quarter of recipients of short breaks and 18% of those accessing the Carers Support Fund are young carers.

We continue to support the annual Wales Young Carers Festival and have agreed funding of £54,000 to support the next event in August 2026. The festival provides a three-day break for over 300 young carers, with important opportunities for them to receive information and support.

## Representation of young carers

Our Young Carers Advisory Board is hosted by Carers Trust Wales and is made up entirely of young carers. This valuable resource scrutinises and informs our work. Young carers are also active members of the Ministerial Advisory Group.

We have established a young carers sub-group of the Ministerial Advisory Group to support policy development and promote dissemination of best practice.

We engage Carers Trust Wales to facilitate the All-Wales Young Carers Professional Network of local authority and third sector young carer officers.

Welsh Government became a signatory to the Young Carers Covenant in November 2025. The Covenant sets out ten key outcomes that young carers have said are key to improving their lives. We want local authorities, schools and other organisations to become individual signatories, which will promote a shared vision for young carers across Wales.

## Removing Profit from the care of looked after children

The Health and Social Care (Wales) Act 2025 makes Wales the first UK nation to legislate to remove profit from children's residential and foster care, laying the foundation for the broader transformation of children's services.

Implementation of the commitment is progressing at pace. From 1 April 2026 new for-profit providers will be unable to register with Care Inspectorate Wales and existing for-profit providers will be unable to add new services or places. Further restrictions are planned to come into effect in 2027 and 2030, continuing the phased approach to implementation to reduce any risk of placement disruption

Development of the secondary legislation to support implementation continues. We recently launched a consultation on the requirement for local authorities to produce annual sufficiency plans. These will strengthen strategic planning and promote a more coherent, transparent and sustainable approach to meeting the needs of children and young people as local authorities move forward with implementation. Officials worked closely with local authorities in developing proposals and we are grateful for their positive engagement.

We have and will continue to provide significant financial support to support delivery of this agenda. We committed £68m revenue to local authorities and regions over the three years to 2024-25 and a

Welsh Government evidence paper on the General Scrutiny of Health and Social Care.

further £75m up to 2027-28. Separate capital funding is also available through the Integration and Rebalancing Capital Fund and the Housing with Care fund. Collectively this supports local authorities in developing the services needed to implement this commitment.

Alongside the support to individual authorities and regions we have also provided grant funding to the Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru to support local authority planning and implementation at a national level.

# Agenda Item 3.1

2<sup>nd</sup> February 2026

Buffy Williams MS  
Chair, Children, Young People, and Education Committee

Dear Buffy,

## Youth Work in Wales

Thank you for your active consideration of my previous letter to you in November last year about youth work in Wales. I understand that you have a general scrutiny session with the Cabinet Secretary for Education in the Welsh Government on 4<sup>th</sup> February. I thought I would follow up with some further thoughts.

The Interim Youth Work Board, which I chaired, published a clear set of recommendations in *Time to Deliver (September 2021)* and since then the Youth Work Implementation Board has taken that work further. It could prove instructive to ask to what extent Lynne intends to now implement the recommendations in *Time to Deliver*.

The three pressing issues remain:

Firstly, the so called 'definition' of youth work is neither a definition nor a statement that reflects the aspirations of a sustainable model of youth work delivery as set out in *Time to Deliver*.

Secondly, the proposal to establish a national body for youth work in Wales is welcomed by the sector but the rather top-down bureaucratic controlling body that seems to be envisaged is at odds with the offer of CWYVS and the WLGA to work with Welsh Government officials to develop a partnership model.

And, if there is to be a new framework for youth work with 'Draft Directions' and 'Draft Statutory Guidance' as outlined in last year's consultation paper, with little or no amendment, I fear that would be a mistake as the proposals are unrealistic and unworkable.

I wonder if it would be useful to see if the Welsh Government will maintain the well-established approach to the values of youth work services as set *Youth Work in Wales: Principles and Purposes* rather than the rather narrower ideas set out in the 2024 consultation. I attach a link to the *Principles and Purposes* below.

<https://educators.wales/sites/default/files/2023-02/YOUTH%20WORK%20IN%20WALES%20PRINCIPLES%20AND%20PURPOSES%202022.pdf>

To my knowledge the responses to the 2024 consultation have still not been published and I have not seen a Child Rights Impact Assessment in relation to what the Welsh Government propose.

I would be grateful if you would also share my letter with the membership of the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keith Towler". The signature is written in a cursive style. Below the signature is a horizontal line that starts under the first letter and extends to the right, ending with a small arrowhead.

**Keith Towler**

# Agenda Item 3.2

## Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

### Children, Young People and Education Committee

Lynne Neagle MS  
Cabinet Secretary for Education

30 January 2026

### School Improvement and Learner Attainment

Dear Lynne,

Thank you for appearing before Committee on 6 November 2025 as part of our focused work looking at school improvement and learner attainment. As you may know, alongside your written and oral evidence, we sought written evidence from a range of stakeholders<sup>1</sup> across specific areas of interest:

- The future of school improvement arrangements and how the Welsh Government, local authorities and relevant partners work together to deliver the highest possible standards of education.
- Educational outcomes of learners and gaps in attainment between groups of pupils.
- Factors impacting on educational progress such as pupil absence, deprivation, funding and workforce capacity.

In addition, we held a private round table event<sup>2</sup> with representatives from local authorities, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), the Association for Directors for Education in Wales (ADEW), head teachers and regional consortia.

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<sup>1</sup> Welsh Parliament, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment', April/May 2025

<sup>2</sup> Welsh Parliament, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment: Stakeholder Roundtable Event note', September 2025

You may also be aware that the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister held a session with the First Minister on 12 December 2025 on “Education, Young People and Future Generations”, which I thought I should draw your attention to for additional context.

## Summary

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The evidence gathered highlights some progress in transitioning to a collaborative, school-led improvement model. However, stakeholders are clear that success now depends on achieving clarity, building capacity and ensuring consistency across the system. Persistent systemic pressures – such as attendance, behaviour, socio-economic disadvantage and funding – are constraining the system’s ability to raise standards and narrow attainment gaps, particularly for learners eligible for free school meals. These challenges require urgent and co-ordinated action. Across the evidence received, there was a strong emphasis on the need for a clear national definition of effective school improvement, coherent guidance in one place, and consistent professional learning. Respondents also warned that reform fatigue and uneven local capacity risk inconsistency and inequity.

This letter sets out our collective view as a Committee, summarising the evidence and highlighting cross-cutting themes. It identifies where we welcome measures and improvements already underway, where concerns persist or have been raised by stakeholders, and makes recommendations or requests to the Welsh Government (set out in grey boxes).

## Future school improvement arrangements and partnership working

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We acknowledge the clear intent behind the School Improvement Partnership Programme (SIPP), which seeks to embed purposeful collaboration at the heart of school improvement. However, evidence suggests that the current understanding of school improvement lacks clarity, leading to confusion and inconsistent practice. Stakeholders told us 'there needs to be a clearer articulation of what school improvement is and for... This gives rise to confusion and misinterpretation.'<sup>3</sup> There was also a call for creating a national definition of 'what good looks like' and concise guidance aligned to Estyn's framework<sup>4</sup>.

We recognise that School Improvement Partnerships remain in a transitional phase, with responsibilities evolving and previous structures being phased out. We are pleased that the evidence received already indicates these measures have begun to strengthen relationships between schools and local authorities<sup>5</sup>, however there remains a lot of confusion about roles and responsibilities.

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<sup>3</sup> Written Evidence, 'University of Wales, Trinity St David', April 2025

<sup>4</sup> Welsh Parliament, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment: Stakeholder Roundtable Event note', September 2025

<sup>5</sup> Welsh Parliament, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment: Stakeholder Roundtable Event note', September 2025

While the establishment of the Education Improvement Team within the Welsh Government and the creation of Dysgu as a national professional learning and leadership body are considered positive steps, WLGA/ADEW warn that details remain under development and “without the central team in place yet .... schools, school leaders and local authorities must mitigate some of the gaps in the short and medium term”.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, one local authority “remains unconvinced on how a new national body will add value because it is in incredibly initial stages of development”.<sup>7</sup>

It should not be forgotten that school improvement changes are occurring during a period of significant system-wide reform. WLGA/ADEW report that the pace of reform is proving overwhelming for schools and local authorities, contributing to system-wide reform fatigue. They also highlighted that regulators must be cognisant of this context [for schools] and need to be integrated into the reform journey to ensure accountability frameworks reflects the system’s transitional pressures.<sup>8</sup>

Further concerns relate to the variation in local capacity and the risk of inconsistency across Wales as regional consortia dissolve and new local models emerge. Estyn told us that if Wales “end[s] up with 22 different approaches to evaluation ... numeracy ... literacy, it would be a disaster” and that “what we absolutely must avoid is going back to a model where we have 22 groups delivering the same thing”.<sup>9</sup>

We note that school improvement structures have to an extent gone full circle. Regional consortia were established in light of concerns about the ability of local authorities to meet their statutory responsibility to drive school improvement. You have said that ‘we are not in the same place’ as over a decade ago when a number of local authorities’ education services themselves were under special measures, and that the new arrangements are not simply a return to a position where local authorities each operate in isolation.

Regional consortia were very much seen by the Welsh Government as the solution to the long-standing imperative of raising standards and these latest developments indicate that policy has not fully succeeded. However, it is important that where there has been good practice, that this is retained, adopted and taken forward to avoid the proverbial ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’.

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<sup>6</sup> Written Evidence, [‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’](#), May 2025

<sup>7</sup> Written Evidence, [‘Swansea Council’](#), April 2025

<sup>8</sup> Written Evidence, [‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’](#), May 2025

<sup>9</sup> [CYPE Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 129](#)



Stakeholders have also highlighted the potential loss of subject-specialist expertise and uneven access to support, particularly for Welsh-medium and specialist provision, with one stakeholder citing that “no school, teacher or learner, should be disadvantaged by geography”<sup>10</sup>.

**Recommendation 1:** We recommend the Welsh Government closely monitors the ability and capacity of local authorities to lead the necessary school improvement and raising of standards, continually reviewing the impact of these latest changes to the way school improvement functions and services are structured and delivered. We also recommend that elements of good practice that have emerged and being built up through regional working over the past decade are incorporated into the new arrangements.

**Recommendation 2:** We urge the Welsh Government to ensure that new school improvement guidance can support the raising of standards and promote a common, consistent understanding of what is meant by effective school improvement. This consolidated guidance should be available in one accessible location and be aligned with Estyn’s inspection framework.

**Request 1:** We also ask for a clear plan setting out Dysgu’s professional learning offer and confirm mechanisms to prevent inconsistent local models including how specialist capacity will be safeguarded. Noting what has already been provided in the Cabinet Secretary’s letter dated 26 November, we request further detail on how exactly Dysgu is operating during its transitional year, the role of the Welsh Government during this period and the process for Dysgu fully taking up its functions in September 2026.

## Learner outcomes

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The evidence presents a complex picture of learner attainment in Wales. Whilst some indicators suggest recovery from the pandemic, systemic challenges remain.

### Key Stage 4

Key Stage 4 performance in core subjects has largely returned to pre-pandemic levels, with the Capped 9 score at 354.3 in 2024/25 compared to 254.4 in 2018/19. However, the Skills Challenge Certificate has seen a notable decline, from 36.4 in 2018/19 to 29.0 in 2024/25. Grade patterns reinforce this mixed picture: A\*-A grades remain stable at around 20 per cent, but A\*-C grades have fallen from 71.9 per cent in 2015/16 to 63.9 per cent in 2024/25, suggesting ongoing challenges in raising overall attainment.

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<sup>10</sup> Written Evidence, ‘University of Wales, Trinity St David’, April 2025

In contrast, A level performance shows encouraging improvement. A\*-A grades rose from 21.2 per cent in 2015/16 to 29.9 per cent in 2024/25, while A\*-C grades reached 78.6 per cent, with Wales now outperforming England overall at A level, and particularly when compared with state funded education in England.

## **International Benchmarking**

The latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 results indicate that Wales continues to face significant challenges in educational attainment. Performance in reading, mathematics and science was below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average and ranked lowest amongst UK nations. These findings reinforce the importance of robust international benchmarking to inform policy decisions and drive improvement. As Swansea Council observed “it may help to have better national expectations on reading and writing. We know that outcomes for reading in Wales, by international comparison, show Wales in decline”.<sup>11</sup>

Whilst PISA provides invaluable insights into the performance of 15 year olds, it does not capture the earlier stages of learners where foundational skills are developed. For this reason, we welcome the Welsh Government’s commitment to participating in PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) in 2026 and TIMSS (Trends in Mathematics and Science Study) in 2027 as part of an evidence based approach to improving numeracy and literacy, ensuring Wales remains aligned with global best practice across all phases of education.

## **Personalised Assessments**

Personalised assessment data reveals a mixed picture, with attainment falling sharply during the pandemic and only partially recovering. For English reading, levels were at their lowest in 2022/23, but Year 3 pupils in 2023/24 now outperform previous cohorts, suggesting strongest recovery is in early years. In contrast, Years 6 and 9 remain below 2020/21 levels, indicating that older cohorts have not regained lost ground.<sup>12</sup> Welsh reading follows a similar trajectory, with Year 9 performance of more concern than other age groups..

Numeracy shows a comparable pattern. Procedural numeracy has improved since its lowest point in 2021/22, but remains below 2018/19 benchmarks. Recovery is most evident in Year 3 and Year 6, while Year 9 continues to lag behind. More concerning is numeracy reasoning, introduced in 2021/22, where Year 9 attainment in 2023/24 is at its lower point since inception although attainment in Years 3 and 6 is at its highest.

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<sup>11</sup> Written Evidence, ‘[Swansea Council](#)’, April 2025

<sup>12</sup> Welsh Government, ‘[School Improvement and Learner Attainment Evidence Paper](#)’, November 2025

These trends raise critical questions about progression and curriculum implementation. Estyn's early insights into its 2024/25 annual report reinforce this concern, noting that "planning for the progressive development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills remains underdeveloped in the majority of secondary schools"<sup>13</sup> and while primary schools are mostly positive, with few requiring follow-up secondary schools face significant challenges. Estyn further reports that "two-thirds of schools show shortcomings in aspects of teaching" and that "leadership is not effective enough in ensuring consistent good quality teaching" with 13 per cent of secondary schools in one of the two statutory categories<sup>14</sup>.

This suggests that while younger learners are benefiting from targeted interventions, older cohorts may require more intensive support to bridge gaps exacerbated by the pandemic. It is important to note that the Year 9 cohort of 2023/24 would have been in Year 5 during 2019/20 and Year 6 during 2020/21 - the pandemic years when learning disruption was particularly significant, and may explain why recovery patterns are differing across age groups.

## Data

Evidence from local authorities and national bodies highlights significant concerns about the current data landscape for educational outcome in Wales. Under the Curriculum for Wales, schools devise their own tracking systems leaving local authorities "challenged to have an accurate overview of all pupils' achievements due to the lack of standardised information available. This can impact on improvement planning and the effective prioritisation of resources".<sup>15</sup> Additionally, flexibility within the Curriculum for Wales may lead to variation in learning experiences and outcomes<sup>16</sup>, something our predecessor Committee warned about in 2020.

Stakeholders agree that indicators rely "too heavily on Key Stage 4 measures and do not adequately capture progression across the school career of a child", calling for "clear, staged progression measures aligned to the Curriculum for Wales"<sup>17</sup>. Swansea Council echoes this, noting that "a true picture of end of compulsory schooling attainment has not been available during the last five academic years ... it has been difficult to make useful comparisons between years, over time and between similarly benchmarked schools".<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Estyn, Early insights from the Chief Inspector's Annual Report 2024–25, Secondary Schools, October 2025

<sup>14</sup> Information provided on request by Estyn to Senedd Research, December 2025

<sup>15</sup> Written Evidence, 'Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council', April 2025

<sup>16</sup> Written Evidence, 'University of Wales, Trinity St David', April 2025

<sup>17</sup> Welsh Parliament, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment: Stakeholder Roundtable Event note', September 2025

<sup>18</sup> Written Evidence, 'Swansea Council', April 2025

We note the consultation carried out early last year on a 14 to 16 Learner Entitlement Framework to support reporting against that entitlement as set out in the statutory guidance on the curriculum for 14 to 16 year olds. We welcome the Welsh Government's proposals to move away from high-stakes indicators, as this shift enables schools to concentrate on the progress and outcomes of individual learners rather than performance-driven metrics. This approach aligns with the principles of the Curriculum for Wales and supports a culture of continuous improvement rather than compliance.

However, evidence from local authorities and stakeholders highlights the risk of fragmentation and inconsistency in the absence of clear national expectations. The development of new performance measures, due to be introduced in summer 2027 to coincide with the first cohort completing Year 11 under the Curriculum for Wales, will be an important milestone.

**Recommendation 3:** We recommend that the Welsh Government set out a staged progression approach aligned to the Curriculum for Wales, with clear age-related expectations to enable earlier identification of learners requiring intervention, alongside national standards for literacy and numeracy and a concise nationally agreed data minimum for the 3-16 journey.

**Recommendation 4:** We further recommend that our successor committee monitors the Welsh Government's commitment to participate in PIRLS (2026) and TIMSS (2027) and ensures that findings from these studies inform targeted interventions in literacy and numeracy from early years onwards.

**Request 2:** Additionally, the Welsh Government should remain vigilant in monitoring trends in learner outcomes, such as those evident from personalised assessment data, and our successor committee should prioritise scrutiny to ensure continued recovery and improvement across all domains.

**Request 3:** Finally, the Welsh Government should develop user-friendly, interactive data tools aligned with the Curriculum for Wales and integrate with existing local authority systems, to support effective school improvement planning, early identification of risk, and targeted interventions.

## Use of phonics and cueing

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Recent changes to Curriculum for Wales guidance clarified that systematic and consistent teaching of phonics must be a key part of schools' approach to reading, and that pictures/cues support comprehension of sentences, not decoding of individual words.

We have followed the debate over the best approach to teaching children to read. We note that you told us on 6 November that systematic synthetic phonics is an "absolutely key part" of teaching children how to read but "should be used with a range of additional approaches to developing wider literacy skills, including fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, especially for learners who have ALN".

We also note the changes made to the guidance on the Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning and Experience in late 2024/early 2025.

You will be aware of recent correspondence between the Committee and Elizabeth Nonweiler, former member of the Welsh Government Expert Literacy Panel. We remain concerned about the continuing lack of clarity regarding the Welsh Government's approach to improving the teaching of literacy in Wales. In particular, the Cabinet Secretary has stated that CAL:ON Cymru draws on the work of the Expert Literacy Panel and will ensure expectations for literacy reflect the latest evidence on how children learn to read; however this assurance appears at odds with the issues raised in the correspondence we have received. This inconsistency raises concerns about the rationale for, and direction of, the decision to allocate funding for the establishment of CAL:ON Cymru.

We intend to revisit this issue as part of our general scrutiny session with you on 4 February 2026, and we look forward to hearing further about the advice you have received from the Expert Literacy Panel.

## Attainment Gap

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Despite significant policy reforms and investment, socio-economic disadvantage remains the most significant factor driving the attainment gap between groups of learners in Wales. Although overall attainment in Wales has slightly improved in 2024/25 when compared to 2023/24; attainment gaps have widened over the same period, while equity gaps, particularly those linked with poverty and additional needs, remain larger than before the pandemic and as far back as 2015/16.

Those eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM) consistently perform below their peers across almost every measure. Analysis of GCSE outcomes shows that the gap between eFSM pupils and their peers at A\*-C grades widened to 29.3 percentage points in 2024/25, compared to 24.9 in 2015/16 and 28.1 in 2018/19. At A\*-A grades, the gap persists at around 15 percentage points.<sup>19</sup> This is despite significant investment through the Pupil Development Grant, which allocates £128m annually to support disadvantaged learners.

Whilst eFSM eligibility has long been used as the primary measure of socio-economic disadvantage, stakeholders have raised concerns about its reliability. WLGA/ADEW notes that "one of the unintended consequences of the successful roll out of Universal [Primary] Free School Meals provision is the distortion of deprivation data and eFSM as a reliable proxy for measuring child poverty"<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Welsh Government, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment Evidence Paper', November 2025

<sup>20</sup> Written Evidence, 'Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales', May 2025

Not all families in need are registering for grants or benefits, making it harder to accurately target support. This means that some vulnerable learners may be overlooked in data-driven interventions, and funding allocations may not fully reflect local realities. As one local authority put it, “Families living in poverty not applying for free school meal eligibility has an adverse impact on families and school funding”.<sup>21</sup>

We therefore welcome the Welsh Government’s review of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) announced in [December 2025](#) as a timely opportunity to consider its future role and design, ensuring that funding for this purpose continues to reduce educational inequalities and meet the evolving needs of learners. We note that you said you were “really frustrated” at the level of progress there has been over many years in narrowing the attainment gap.

We also welcome the work being undertaken to consider how social-economic disadvantage is measured and the [‘Beyond e-FSM’ research project](#), on which you provided information in your letter of 26 November 2025 and a [report](#) was published on 10 December 2025.

We are also mindful that there are attainment gaps affecting other specific groups, for example those with ALN, some minority ethnic groups, and Looked After Children. We have not been able to consider these specifically in this short piece of work.

**Recommendation 5:** We share the Cabinet Secretary’s frustration at the lack of progress and urge that addressing the negative correlation between deprivation and attainment remains a high priority for the Welsh Government.

**Recommendation 6:** We also recommend that the review of the Pupil Development Grant prioritises demonstrable impact on reducing attainment gaps, not merely improving access to funding, and ensures that resources are targeted where they can make the greatest difference.

## Attendance and behaviour

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Attendance is a fundamental prerequisite for achievement. Poor attendance and high exclusion rates have a detrimental effect on learner progress.

We undertook an [inquiry into pupil absence in 2022](#), following concerns raised during the annual scrutiny of Estyn in December 2021 about the impact of absence on children and young people’s learning and overall well-being. It was highlighted through this inquiry, that [everybody has a role to](#)

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<sup>21</sup> Written Evidence, [‘Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council’](#), April 2025



play in promoting and supporting sustained attendance, which is why we recommended that: *The Welsh Government runs a national campaign to emphasise the positive impacts of regular school attendance.*

Whilst the Government has not launched a national campaign, we note that its response to the recommendation reflects learner feedback and wider evidence showing that generic national messages are less effective than tailored, local communication. This engagement has also highlighted the crucial role of schools, particularly pastoral and family-engagement staff, in re-engaging learners and supporting families, which chimes with evidence we have gathered as part of this current inquiry.

Nonetheless, stakeholders told us that national-level messaging, aligned with local and school-based work, could strengthen understanding of the importance of attendance and support efforts to reduce persistence absence.

Local authorities report that pupils with higher levels of absence are more likely to show lower engagement when in school. They also emphasise that investing in strategies to promote positive behaviours is essential for improving attendance, learner outcomes and attainment.<sup>22</sup>

The scale of the challenge is clear: secondary attendance remains below pre-pandemic levels, and persistent absence (10 per cent or higher), although reduced to 33.0 per cent in 2024/25, is still nearly double the 17.1 per cent recorded in 2018/19.<sup>23</sup>

Local authorities stress that “Attendance is a critical issue, with higher absenteeism rates among disadvantaged pupils”.<sup>24</sup> This concern is reflected in the deprivation gap: In 2024/25, secondary pupils eligible for FSM attended 81.2 per cent of sessions compared to 91.1 per cent among those not eligible for FSM<sup>25</sup>, with persistent absence at 58.0 per cent vs 26.8 per cent respectively.<sup>26</sup>

However, WLGA/ADEW noted that attendance challenges are not solely school-driven; “several societal and cultural changes have had a negative impact on attendance, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic” including parental expectations and transport issues<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Written Evidence, ‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’, May 2025

<sup>23</sup> Welsh Government, ‘School Improvement and Learner Attainment Evidence Paper’, November 2025

<sup>24</sup> Written Evidence, ‘Isle of Anglesey Council’, May 2025

<sup>25</sup> Welsh Government, ‘Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 2 September 2025 to 2 January 2026’, Table 4, 13 January 2026 (latest available at time of writing)

<sup>26</sup> Welsh Government, ‘Absenteeism from secondary schools: September 2024 to August 2025’, Table 11.

<sup>27</sup> Written Evidence, ‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’, May 2025

We have heard that that behaviour is often linked to wider factors such as mental health and wellbeing, additional learning needs, inclusion, poverty, disadvantage and inequality, meaning punitive approaches alone are ineffective. This view is reinforced by the recently published Welsh Youth Parliament's Committee on Crime and Behaviour, which drew on the experiences of over 2,000 young people. We very much welcome that the Cabinet Secretary has accepted all eight of its recommendations, and share her view that this report represents an outstanding example of pupil voice.

We note that exclusion rates have increased over recent years, particularly in secondary schools. For example, fixed-term exclusions of five days or less almost doubled from 75 to 144 per 1,000 secondary school pupils between 2018/19 and 2023/24.

As noted in our recently published Teacher Recruitment and Retention Report, the Welsh Government has placed much emphasis on its National Behaviour Summit held in May 2025, however we remain slightly concerned at the lack of real concrete action arising from this Summit on a significant and urgent issue. We look forward to receiving the Government's response to our report, specifically around the recommendation to issue clear coherent guidance on behaviour management.

**Request 4:** We welcome the Government's commitment to continue promoting attendance nationally and to provide more targeted support for schools and local authorities, and ask that the Government outlines how it plans to assess whether national messaging is supporting awareness, strengthening local interventions, and ultimately whether the approach is working.

**Recommendation 7:** We urge the Welsh Government to investigate what lies behind the near doubling of fixed short-term exclusions of secondary pupils since before the pandemic and consider if this is appropriate and justified.

**Recommendation 8:** Alongside all of this, we urge investment in multi-agency support structures that bring together education, health, and social services to provide coordinated support for mental health, safeguarding, and behavioural challenges.

## Workforce Capacity

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Ensuring sufficient workforce capacity and maintaining high-quality learning experiences in Wales are increasingly challenged by the complex factors shaping teacher recruitment and retention, as outlined in our recently published report. We welcome the Cabinet Secretary's commitment to developing a Strategic Education Workforce Plan, hope that the recommendations relating to this in the teacher recruitment and retention report are accepted and look forward to seeing how this work progresses.

WLGA/ADEW and several local authorities report that rising behavioural challenges and the growing complexity of additional learning needs and mental health needs demand substantial staff time, diverting focus away from teaching and learning. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and Swansea Council highlight that persistent behavioural and wellbeing pressures require significant early intervention work, while Isle of Anglesey Council, noted that trauma-informed practice is becoming essential to support vulnerable learners – yet this too requires time, training and staffing that schools lack.

Stakeholders at the roundtable further emphasised that schools are absorbing wider social issues in the absence of clear multi-agency responsibilities, limiting their ability to prioritise core teaching and learning. At the same time, funding constraints (covered more in the next section) are resulting in reductions to pastoral and attendance roles that are critical to keeping pupils engaged in learning.

Collectively, the evidence shows that when an already limited workforce capacity is increasingly consumed by behaviour management, attendance work and intensive pastoral support, there is less time available for high-quality teaching, targeted support and curriculum development – ultimately hindering pupils' ability to make progress.

**Recommendation 9:** We ask that the Welsh Government provides clear confirmation that the professional learning offer from Dysgu will include trauma informed practice, behaviour management and leadership .

## Funding and prioritisation of education

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Stakeholders speak of a challenging fiscal climate, with schools reducing non-statutory but essential roles and local authorities facing 'multiple cost pressures' . Round-table participants cautioned that funding constraints are forcing difficult decisions, often reducing the capacity that supports attendance, wellbeing and attainment.

WLGA/ADEW conclude there is "insufficient funding to support all the new school improvement aims" and that without additional funding, it is difficult to build capacity for the new models.

Stakeholders have consistently raised concerns that "funding is an issue that all schools will cite as an area of high concern" with a "disparity between the increase in the needs of learners and the expectation for schools to enhance their curriculum... against a cut/cash flat position in budgets"<sup>28</sup>. Others noted that "grant funding terms and conditions can still be overly bureaucratic, restrictive and

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<sup>28</sup> Written Evidence, 'Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council', May 2025

may not reflect local needs and priorities”<sup>29</sup>, while the WLGA/ADEW warn that “efficiency savings... impact delivery and restrict a local authority and school’s ability to plan long-term investments.”<sup>30</sup>

We asked you during our session on 6 November as well as during budget scrutiny on 27 November about the First Minister’s four priorities and the fact that during summer 2025 she revised those she set after coming into office. For the avoidance of doubt, we were referring to the change of the priority set in September 2024, which read *Opportunity for every family: boosting standards in schools and colleges, and providing more homes for social rent, ensuring every family has the chance to succeed*. The First Minister told the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister in July 2025 that she was ‘simplifying’ her priorities and as of summer 2025, this priority now reads “More Homes”.

You pointed to your own education priorities and appeared to indicate that you believed raising standards of education remained one of the First Minister’s priorities, referring to the now replaced ‘Opportunity for every family’ umbrella priority<sup>31</sup>. The Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister asked the First Minister about this on 12 December and she confirmed that education is “absolutely critical” and “absolutely a priority” for her<sup>32</sup>. However, it is not one of the four headline priorities that she wanted people to measure her on in her two years as First Minister in this Senedd term and that it had not come up much in her listening exercise with the public (which informed her priorities).

**Request 5:** We would be grateful for your observations on how much of a priority raising standards of education is within the Welsh Government at Cabinet-level, rather than just within your department and your own focus. Further, how this is reflected by decisions made by the First Minister, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Welsh Language and the Welsh Government Cabinet about allocation of funding (with reference to the allocation of education-related Barnett consequentials, as discussed in our report on the Draft Budget 2026-27).

In closing, we wish to reiterate the central themes arising from the evidence gathered throughout this work: the need for greater clarity and consistency around school improvement arrangements; urgent action to support learner progression and address widening attainment gaps; strengthened approaches to attendance and behaviour; and a sustainable strategy to ensure sufficient workforce capacity across all phases of education.

We also emphasise the importance of transparent prioritisation of education at Government level, particularly in relation to funding decisions and the delivery of national expectations. We would be

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<sup>29</sup> Written Evidence, ‘Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council’, April 2025

<sup>30</sup> Written Evidence, ‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’, May 2025

<sup>31</sup> CYPE Committee, 6 November 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 10

<sup>32</sup> Committee for Scrutiny of the First Minister, 12 December 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 12 and 15



grateful to receive your response to the requests set out in this letter by 13 March 2026, so that it can inform our ongoing scrutiny and the work of our successor committee.

Yours sincerely,



Buffy Williams MS

Chair

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

# Agenda Item 3.3

## **Y Pwyllgor Deddfwriaeth, Cyfiawnder a'r Cyfansoddiad**

### **— Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee**

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Lynne Neagle MS  
Cabinet Secretary for Education

3 February 2026

## Supplementary Legislative Consent Memorandum (Memorandum No 4): Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

Following its laying on 16 January 2026, we were due to consider our report on the above Memorandum yesterday in readiness for a debate scheduled for today on the relevant legislative consent motion.

We understand that the debate has been postponed to 3 March 2026 and that a further supplementary consent memorandum will be forthcoming. As a result, the purpose of this letter is to seek clarification on a number of issues arising from Memorandum No. 4; our original intention had been to seek that clarification through recommendations, which we hope you would have addressed in the debate. The clarification we would like to receive is as follows:

1. Please can you confirm whether the amendment referred to in paragraph 24 of Memorandum No. 4 has now been tabled and if it will be included in the further supplementary consent memorandum now expected?
2. Memorandum No. 4 refers to a regulation-making power contained in amendments to clause 32, relating to the estimate of time which a child receives education from parents or other providers. It is not clear from Memorandum No. 4 whether this is a new regulation-making power or which Senedd scrutiny procedure will be applied to such regulations.

Please can you confirm the scrutiny procedure which will apply to the making of regulations under clause 32 of the Bill should amendments to that clause be agreed at House of Lords Report Stage?

3. Amendment 244 provides the Welsh Ministers with a regulation-making power to make consequential provision (a new clause proposed after clause 64). We note that this amendment addresses recommendation 4 of our first report. However, Memorandum No. 4 is silent on the Senedd scrutiny procedure to be applied to such regulations. It appears to the Committee that the Senedd annulment procedure will be applied, unless the regulations amend primary legislation, in which case the Senedd approval procedure will be applied.

Please can you confirm the scrutiny procedure which will apply to the making of regulations under the new clause to be inserted after clause 64 by amendment 244, should it be agreed at House of Lords Report Stage?

4. Please could you confirm:
  - a. which amendments in Memorandum No. 4 have been considered in the House of Lords and the outcome of that consideration;
  - b. which amendments in Memorandum No. 4 have yet to be considered and when you expect that to happen;
  - c. in relation to bullet point (b), if there are amendments yet to be considered, what this means in terms of the consent being sought for them through Memorandum No. 4?
5. In relation to any amendments to the Bill that are to be the subject of a fifth memorandum, please can you ensure that any such memorandum includes information stating whether such amendments will have been considered by the time of the consent motion debate on 3 March 2026 and if not, please can you explain what this means in terms of the consent being sought from the Senedd for them?

Please can you provide a response to these questions by Thursday 19 February 2026.

I am copying this letter to Buffy Williams MS, Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee.

Yours sincerely,



Mike Hedges  
Chair

# Agenda Item 3.4

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Dear Ms Williams,

## **A Work, Health and Skills Plan for Wales – Boosting employment opportunities for 60,000 people and tackling economic inactivity.**

On behalf of [Learning and Work Institute](http://www.learningandwork.org.uk) (L&W), I am writing to share our recent report [A Work, Health and Skills Plan for Wales](#), which I hope will be of immediate interest to you and the work of the Children, Young People and Education Committee. I appreciate this Senedd term will shortly come to an end, but I hope the Committee support service and Members' Research Service may also find it helpful for work in the next Senedd.

With the imminent devolution of employment support, the report sets out how the Welsh Government can immediately utilise its devolved powers to increase employment in Wales, deliver a potential £1.4 billion economic boost for Wales, and save taxpayers up to £500 million per year.

### **Background to the research**

L&W is an independent policy, research and development organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. Our vision is for a fair and prosperous society where learning and work enable everyone to realise their potential.

Through our work in Wales, we conduct high-level research to provide a robust evidence base for policy development. For example, our analysis of youth participation underscores a concerning national trend. Of the nearly one million young people aged 16 to 24 across the UK who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), our findings reveal that in Wales, approximately seven in ten (69%) are economically inactive - meaning they are currently neither seeking nor available for work.

This report arrives at a pivotal moment. With the commitment from the UK Government to devolve non-Jobcentre Plus support, the Welsh Government will have greater control over impactful employment policies that can reduce economic inactivity and support economic growth. The report sets out timely analysis to create a richer understanding of the groups most impacted by labour market inequalities and suggests clear, implementable policy recommendations for a more inclusive Welsh labour market.

### **The labour market realities our analysis reveals**

Our analysis provides definitive evidence that the persistent employment gap between Wales and the rest of the UK is a major economic constraint.

#### **Learning and Work Institute**

Patron: HRH The Princess Royal | Chief Executive: Stephen Evans  
Director for Wales: Michelle Matheron  
A company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales  
Registration No. 2603322 Registered Charity No. 1002775

#### **Sefydliad Dysgu a Gwaith**

Noddwr: Ei Huchelder Y Dywysoges Frenhinol | Prif weithredwr: Stephen Evans  
Cyfarwyddwr Cymru: Michelle Matheron  
Cwmni cyfyngedig trwy warrant a gofrestrwyd yn Lloegr a Chymru  
Rhif cofrestru 2063322 Rhif cofrestru elusen 1002775



Wales experiences higher rates of economic inactivity (15.8%) compared to England (14.2%). The primary driver of this disparity is disability and poor health, accounting for 6.9% of the working-age population's inactivity.

Employment opportunities and outcomes also differ greatly based on where someone lives. Mid-Wales, for example, sees the biggest employment gaps for disabled people and one in eight working age people in Blaenau Gwent are receiving Universal Credit health, this is double the proportion in Gwynedd.

These challenges are often exacerbated by a lack of skills: among people who are economically inactive due to poor health, 42% have no qualifications, a rate three times higher than the wider population.

Collectively, these barriers to employment compound inequalities affecting disabled people, those with long-term health conditions, women, and ethnic minority groups.

### **Report proposals**

The report proposes a bold, long-term 10-year strategy to close this employment gap between Wales and the UK by raising the current 73% employment rate to a minimum of 75% of working-age adults. Achieving this increase (an extra 60,000 people in work) is projected to deliver a potential £1.4 billion economic boost for Wales and save taxpayers up to £500 million per year.

As part of our recommendations, the plan calls for specific actions for the Welsh Government to:

1. **Establish a 10-year Work, Health and Skills plan**, led jointly by the Welsh Government's Health, Economy and Education departments.
2. **Develop a new, single Employment Support Network for Wales** to join up health, skills, and employment support effectively.
3. **Invest £180 million in additional annual funding** to resource this critical intervention and support the transition of those 60,000 people into work.

Further recommendations can be found [in our report](#).

With the imminent devolution of employment support, we are keen to work with the Welsh Government to utilise its devolved powers to implement this comprehensive plan to shape the future policy landscape in Wales.

### **An invitation to meet**

I would also welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss our research and the wider work of Learning and Work Institute in Wales.

My colleague Nisha Patel ([nisha.patel@learningandwork.org.uk](mailto:nisha.patel@learningandwork.org.uk)) would be happy to work with your office to find a suitable date.

Yours sincerely,



**Michelle Matheron**  
Director for Wales, Learning and Work Institute

# Agenda Item 3.5

**Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc  
ac Addysg**

**Children, Young People and  
Education Committee**

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Chief Inspector, Care Inspectorate Wales

Gillian Baranksi

9 February 2026

General Scrutiny Session – Follow-up on children’s social care

Dear Gillian,

Thanks to you and Margaret for attending our scrutiny session on 28 January 2026. We appreciate your time and engagement with the issues raised.

As we approach the end of the Sixth Senedd, we have been reflecting on the range of serious concerns raised with us about children’s social care in Wales. You will be aware that this policy area has been the subject of much of our scrutiny. Throughout this Senedd term, we have examined the experiences of care-experienced children, children who go missing and those who are criminally exploited. In addition to our own scrutiny, during this Senedd we have also seen yet more cases where frontline services have not protected children or listened to their voices. These include the failings highlighted in the Gwynedd Child Practice Review.

We are therefore taking this opportunity to follow up on the issues explored during our recent session, looking specifically at how we can secure system-wide improvement. We remain increasingly concerned that the challenges facing children’s social care in Wales arise from wider systemic issues, rather than isolated shortcomings within individual services.

This letter is therefore focused on clarifying how Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) uses its position, the intelligence and data it has and its authority to support improvement across the whole system in line with its remit. We are seeking assurance that CIW is doing all within its remit to take a strategic view of the quality and safety of children’s social care – connecting inspection findings to wider trends, identifying risks early, and using its voice to drive change. Inspection reports and data are important, but they cannot be the end point. We want to further understand in what ways CIW contributes to system-wide learning, strengthens accountability, and ensures that children’s experiences and voice shape improvement.

In that context, we would welcome further clarity on the following areas:

- **CIW's strategic role for local authority social services:** How does CIW ensure that its own inspections and its joint inspections of local authorities, its thematic reviews and its intelligence works to build a coherent picture of system performance across Wales? Are there effective mechanisms in place for CIW to identify patterns, escalate concerns to Welsh Government and support the improvement across local authorities?
- **Learning from inspections:** How does CIW assure itself – and us – that issues in inspection reports relating to the performance of social services are swiftly highlighted to other local authorities? We note that a joint CIW and Estyn inspection was carried out following the Gwynedd review. What changes, if any, will CIW be making to its future inspections to ensure cultural failings, weak governance or non-compliance with established safeguarding processes and guidance are always identified in inspection reports? ?
- **Voice of the child:** How is CIW strengthening its own approach to hearing directly from children and young people? How does this test whether children's voices genuinely influence inspection outcomes?
- **Oversight and knowledge gaps:** There is a lack of Welsh-specific oversight in Deprivation of Liberty (DoL) cases applying to children as was highlighted in our session and as set out in our previous scrutiny work. What role does CIW believe it should play in addressing this gap, and where do you believe responsibility should sit for maintaining oversight of children subject to Deprivation of Liberty orders and those living in unregistered settings?
- **Financial pressures:** We are aware of reports that some private providers of accommodation for children in care have doubled their placements costs during the implementation of the legislation to restrict profit. How concerned is CIW about the impact of this on local authority budgets and in turn the delivery and stability of children's social services in the short to medium term?
- **Looking ahead:** What is the single most important message you would wish to convey to the next Welsh Government about the challenges facing Care Inspectorate Wales and its work in trying to ensure the provision of quality services for children and young people?

During the session, you also committed to providing us with further information in two areas:

1. How extensively CIW inspectors speak directly with children and young people living in social care settings, and how this has changed over time.
2. When CIW last inspected Gwynedd Children's services prior to the 2025 report and the findings of that inspection.

We would welcome this information at your earliest convenience, and if possible by 5 March 2026, to ensure that we can consider the response at our final meeting of the Senedd term.

Thank you again for your engagement with our work and for your continued contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people in Wales.

Yours sincerely,



Buffy Williams MS

Chair

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.





Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref: MA/DB/0218/26

Buffy Williams MS  
Chair of Children, Young People and Education Committee

Mike Hedges MS  
Chair of Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee

10 February 2026

Dear Buffy and Mike,

You will wish to be aware that I have today laid, the Child Minding and Day Care Exceptions (Revocation and Transitional Provision) (Wales) Order 2026. It will revoke and replace the 'Child Minding and Day Care Exceptions (Wales) Order 2010'.

The purpose of the Order is to set out circumstances where registration as a child minder or day care provider under the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 is not required. When a provider is exempt from registration, they don't have to comply with the requirements set out in the [Child Minding and Day Care \(Wales\) Regulations 2010](#) or have regard to the [National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare](#), and they are not inspected by Care Inspectorate Wales.

I would like to offer the Committees the opportunity to receive a technical briefing from officials on the operation of this Order. The purpose of such a briefing would be to support Members' understanding of:

- how the Order is intended to function in practice,
- the intended effect of the instrument, and
- the consultation undertaken and how responses were addressed.

If the Committees wishes to take up this offer, arrangements can be made through Legal, Governance and Programme Unit (LPGU) officials, who will liaise directly with your clerking teams to identify a suitable date.

Please do not hesitate to contact LPGU if the Committee requires any further information or clarification.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dawn Bowden'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a small dot at the end.

**Dawn Bowden AS/MS**  
Y Gweinidog Plant a Gofal Cymdeithasol  
Minister for Children and Social Care

# Agenda Item 3.7

## Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc

ac Addysg

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**Children, Young People  
and Education Committee**

Lynne Neagle MS  
Cabinet Secretary for Education  
10 February 2026

**Senedd Cymru**

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**Welsh Parliament**

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## Implementation of Education reforms

Dear Lynne,

Thank you for giving evidence in October as part of our Implementation of Education Reforms inquiry. This was the end of our evidence gathering for the Senedd long inquiry. This letter provides a final opportunity for us to share our views on the effectiveness of the implementation of these two key pieces of education legislation: [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Act 2021](#); and the [Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal \(Wales\) Act 2018](#).

We adopted a different approach to this work, keeping it a live inquiry throughout the course of the Senedd. This meant stakeholders could keep us updated in real time on what is working well and what isn't. We think this responsive, and long term approach lends itself well to scrutinising implementation of a key policy or legislative change. A key feature of this work has been regular "check-ins" which have usually involved school visits, citizen engagement and oral evidence.

Following each check-in, we have reported on findings, either via correspondence or our last output, the interim report.<sup>1</sup> This ongoing inquiry has also informed other pieces of work, in particular our inquiry [do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare](#); budget scrutiny and annual scrutiny of bodies such as Estyn, the Children's Commissioner and Qualifications Wales.

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<sup>1</sup> First check in: [Letter from Chair, CYPE Committee to Minister for Education and Welsh Language, Key education reforms: summer 2022 check in, 8 August 2022](#) Second check in: [Letter from Chair, CYPE Committee to Minister for Education and Welsh Language and Deputy Minister for Social Services: Implementation of education reforms: outcome of our summer 2023 check in, 17 July 2023](#) Third check in: [CYPE Committee, Implementation of education reforms: Interim report, July 2024](#)



As part of this final check in, we visited a school, and had the oral evidence session with you on 23 October 2025. Following the publication of the ALN Toolkit in November, we also brought together some members of our Online Advisory Group for the Disabled Access inquiry to give their views on the Toolkit.<sup>2</sup> Some of these issues we also covered in our general scrutiny session with you on 4 February 2026.

This letter sets out our final views, focusing on developments since our third check-in and report in July 2024.

## Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018

We have particularly focused on implementation of this Act during the Senedd, not just in this inquiry, but through other strands of our work. We have welcomed the focus you have brought to addressing some of the implementation challenges. We think the recent review was a positive step. We hope that the actions coming out of the review will start to see real and tangible improvements for children, young people, families and staff supporting them. We note your five areas of action, which all chime with our previous findings. We have summarised these as:

- Clarifying who and how learners with ALN get support;
- Ensuring national consistency;
- Improving support and information for families;
- Strengthening multi-agency integration; and
- Advancing bilingual and inclusive education.

### Additional Learning Needs Code

During the oral evidence session, you highlighted that there wasn't sufficient time in this Senedd to amend the Additional Learning Needs Code. We appreciate that this is the case, but are disappointed that this work did not begin earlier in this Senedd term, especially when it was clear early on in the Senedd term there were issues with the Code. We therefore hope that the next Welsh Government will prioritise this work following the May elections, and that the next Senedd and relevant stakeholders are given sufficient time to scrutinise the Code. The Code is an essential part of the legislative framework underpinning the ALN system.

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<sup>2</sup> Welsh Parliament, Citizen Engagement Team, ALN Toolkit for Parents: Advisory Group Review, December 2025

## Clarifying who and how learners with ALN get support

The situation for public finances continues to be challenging. We welcome the additional £113 million in the Welsh Government's Final 2026/27 Budget for local authorities to deliver core services, including schools. We also welcome the additional £4 million for the ALN BEL in the Education MEG in the Final Budget, which follows the £5 million for the Reforms strand of the Local Authority Education Grant already allocated in the Draft Budget. But, we know that this still presents challenges to local authorities and schools.

As we have documented throughout this inquiry, the number of children recognised as having ALN and receiving an Individual Development Plan is significantly lower than those who received support under the previous SEN system. We have explored the possible reasons behind this in detail previously, and do not repeat them here. However, to us, it appears that the greater amount of work involved in supporting each pupil with ALN, including preparing and maintaining an IDP, has meant that schools have had to 'cut their cloth accordingly' and essentially raise the bar for what counts as ALN. We remain concerned that some children will be missing out on necessary support partly because of the financial climate. It must remain a priority for the Welsh Government to ensure that all children who need ALN support receive it, and that decisions are not driven by financial constraints.

As you have acknowledged, it is imperative that key elements of the ALN definition are clarified, such as 'significantly greater difficulty in learning' and 'additional learning provision' as opposed to what is 'generally available', so there is a common understanding of these and so the ALN definition can be consistently applied.

We welcome the news, from the general scrutiny session on 4 February 2026, that the upcoming guidance is expected to be published by the end of March and will set out:

- The process to identify and evidence ALN using the two stage legal test;
- Clear expectations on how decisions are communicated,
- How disputes and reconsideration are handled; and
- How families exercise the right to appeal.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [CYPE Committee, 4 February 2026, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 88](#)

Also during the session on 4 February , you noted that the work on defining general provision would take longer due to the scale, significance and the need to consult widely. You said this would follow after the Senedd election.<sup>4</sup>

**Conclusion 1:** We believe it is imperative that greater clarity is provided about the definition of ALN and how it should be applied, and hope that the upcoming guidance will do that.

1. Can you provide a timeline for when the work on defining general provision will be completed and be in place?

An ongoing issue in this inquiry and other linked work has been the options and support available to learners with ALN when they finish compulsory education.

One particular issue has been around the entitlement available. The language in the ALN Code indicates that a young person is entitled to only two years of further education unless a local authority determines they have reasonable needs for more education or training in particular circumstances. This reflects what is in the Additional Learning Needs (Wales) Regulations 2021. But in the President of the Education Tribunal Wales' recent review, she noted that this does "not appear to take account of duties under the Learning and Skills Act 2000. She called for "further clarification on how these two potentially conflicting concepts are intended to interact".<sup>5</sup>

You acknowledged during the session on 23 October that there is need for greater clarity on how the various legislation interact, including the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022, and indicated that work was being undertaken to provide this clarity.<sup>6</sup>

**Conclusion 2:** We think it is essential that this important entitlement for post 16 education is clarified so that learners, and their families know what they can expect and can make informed decisions about what is best for the individual learner.

2. Can you provide an update on how questions about the interaction between the ALN Code, Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 and the Learning and Skills Act 2000 will be resolved?

## Improving support for families

The oral evidence session was before the publication of the [Toolkit for parents and carers with additional learning needs](#). During the session you said that this had been developed with families.

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<sup>4</sup> CYPE Committee, 4 February 2026, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 90.

<sup>5</sup> Education Tribunal for Wales, Review of the Additional Learning Needs Legislative Framework in Wales, Judge June McConnell, 1 September 2025, paragraph 2.9.

<sup>6</sup> CYPE Committee, 23 October 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 133-135.

After its publication we sought the views from members of our Online Advisory Group who had provided an invaluable insight and input into our disabled access inquiry. A copy of the engagement report is provided alongside this letter.

Participants from this Group felt that the toolkit:

*"... oversimplifies the realities of the ALN process, including timelines, local authority involvement, and the transition between school and local authority responsibility. Participants agreed that the toolkit presents processes as seamless and straightforward, whereas the reality for many parents is much more nuanced, complex and often emotionally challenging."*<sup>7</sup>

They wanted to see more detailed practical advice, in particular around challenging decisions and navigating the complex processes. Where the toolkit does highlight avenues for challenge, they felt it was "overly simplistic" and did not sufficiently convey the costs, stress, complexities and risks associated with routes such as judicial review or appeals.<sup>8</sup>

They also called for the toolkit to have more information on children and parent's rights, and to include more detail on the steps needed to get support. They also made suggestions on how the information in the toolkit could be more clearly communicated, for example with the use of flowcharts. They also wanted to see the toolkit "more adequately prepare parents for a complex and often lengthy timeline they are likely to encounter." Finally, they wanted to see the toolkit more clearly recognise the wide diversity of needs, while continuing to emphasise the importance of individualised provision and support.<sup>9</sup>

3. What are your views on the issues raised by our Advisory Group, and how some of the issues raised might be addressed?

We know that when the system fails, some families will decide to home educate. While for many, home educating is a positive and proactive choice, for some it can be a response to a lack of adequate support. This was highlighted in the report of the survey of parents and carers, which found that 85 per cent (28 of 33) said their decision to begin home educating was influenced by a concern that the schooling offered by the local authority would not meet their child's learning needs. Half of these said they would prefer their child to return to school if appropriate support and provision was in place.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Welsh Parliament, Citizen Engagement Team, ALN Toolkit for Parents: Advisory Group Review, December 2025

<sup>8</sup> Welsh Parliament, Citizen Engagement Team, ALN Toolkit for Parents: Advisory Group Review, December 2025

<sup>9</sup> Welsh Parliament, Citizen Engagement Team, ALN Toolkit for Parents: Advisory Group Review, December 2025

<sup>10</sup> Welsh Government, Evaluation of the additional learning needs (ALN) system: survey of parents and carers, October 2025, p69

We note that alongside the commitment to publish guidance regarding the ALN definitions which we outline earlier in the letter, you also highlighted additional guidance would be published in tandem. This guidance will set out the expectations of support in specific circumstances including for looked after children, home educated children and those in Education Other than at School.<sup>11</sup> As you may be aware, the issues of the first two groups have been raised in our other scrutiny work.<sup>12</sup>

In both our pupil absence inquiry and disabled access inquiry we heard of families who had felt that they had no option but to home educate because of a lack of appropriate support in school.<sup>13</sup> We are aware that home education is in the main a positive choice for children and their families, but we cannot ignore the stories we heard from those families who felt they had no choice.

4. Can you provide further information on the support that will be given to children with ALN and their families who are home educating? What more can be done to ensure that families don't feel forced to make a decision to home educate because of a lack of support for their child's needs in school?

## **Strengthening multi-agency integration**

Throughout all our work, the importance of an integrated approach from public services and others supporting children and their families has been a constant theme. We know that there continue to be long waiting times for diagnosis and support from health services. Obviously, support through the ALN system is not supposed to be dependent on specific assessments or diagnosis and should be based on a child's individual needs. Although this does not seem to be how it is working in practice in some cases. There is a clear need for swifter access to diagnosis and support through the NHS, education and social services, as well as the third sector and other support organisations. During the oral evidence session you mentioned a trilateral meeting with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing, with a further one due to happen.<sup>14</sup> You said on 4 February that this had taken place.<sup>15</sup>

Driving forward the necessary improvements requires a cross Government approach, with each responsible Cabinet Secretary and Minister ensuring this remains a priority. To successfully work it also

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<sup>11</sup> [CYPE Committee, 4 February 2026, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 89](#)

<sup>12</sup> The Committee's inquiries into: [Services for care experienced children: exploring radical reform](#); [Pupil Absence](#); and [Do disabled children and young people have equal access into education and childcare?](#)

<sup>13</sup> [CYPE Committee, Pupil Absence, November 2022, paragraphs 136-137](#) and [CYPE Committee, Do disabled children and young people have equal access to education and childcare, July 2024, paragraphs 248-249](#)

<sup>14</sup> [CYPE Committee, 23 October 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 106](#)

<sup>15</sup> [CYPE Committee, 4 February 2026, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 94](#)

needs full support and buy in from local government. It is unclear to us how effective this joint working is.

5. Can you provide an update on outcomes from the trilateral meetings?

6. How effective do you think cross-Government working has been in ensuring ALN support is holistic, integrated and timely? Reflecting on your time in the Government, what has worked effectively, and what do you think should change?

7. Have local authorities, the NHS and the Welsh Government been able to work together to effectively meet the needs of learners? Are there examples of good practice and how can this be disseminated across Wales?

An important element of ensuring effective multi-disciplinary working is the role of the Designated Education Clinical Lead Officer (“DECLO”), established by the 2018 Act. We continue to be unimpressed that while the current position may comply with the letter of the law, it does not follow the spirit of this Act. It has been frustrating that when we have raised this previously, we have not felt that there has been real engagement with the scale of change we believe is needed. Instead there has been a reliance on saying that the Act is being complied with by four DECLOs being shared across seven Health Boards. We do not believe this was the express intention when the legislation was going through the Senedd, for example the Explanatory Memorandum referred to “a senior, strategic lead in each health board area overseeing the board’s responsibilities”.<sup>16</sup> We reiterate our findings in our interim report, and our recommendation that every health board should have its own dedicated DECLO.

**Conclusion 2:** Every Health Board in Wales should have its own dedicated DECLO. The current situation where Health Boards share a DECLO may follow the letter of the 2018 Act, but it does not follow the spirit. The DECLO is a critical role to support multi-disciplinary work and ensure holistic learner focused support.

## **Advancing bilingual and inclusive education**

Ensuring all education staff have the sufficient training to support ALN learners is essential to delivering fully inclusive education. It is apparent that training and information is not always readily

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<sup>16</sup> [Welsh Government, Revised Explanatory Memorandum – November 2017, Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act 2018, paragraph 3.62](#)

available to staff. We have previously made recommendations around mandatory training on disability (which we acknowledge is different to ALN). We were disappointed these were rejected.

We also acknowledge the changes in this area, in particular the establishment of Dysgu. It is too early to see what impact Dysgu will have on improving professional learning opportunities for education staff. But we would like some reassurances about the opportunities for all staff who work with and support children with ALN to access training and guidance to ensure they are providing the highest quality support. Such opportunities should be available to everyone supporting ALN learners, whether they are employed by schools and local authorities directly, or are contracted out, for example those who provide transport.

8. What training and development opportunities are available to staff who work with children with ALN? In particular, those who may be contracted to support children, such as transport escorts.

Having bilingual support is essential to support children and their families effectively. We are also aware of the broader challenges in recruiting and retaining education staff with Welsh language skills. As you are aware, this is something we looked at during our scrutiny of the then Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Bill<sup>17</sup>, and our more recent policy inquiry on teacher recruitment and retention.<sup>18</sup>

It is essential that the Welsh medium sector has the same expectations for ALN training and skills as are in the English medium sector. We have consistently made the argument for ensuring that education staff have access to training to help them in supporting children with ALN or disability. We were disappointed that our recommendation for mandatory disability awareness training for all education staff was rejected, as part of our disabled access inquiry.<sup>19</sup> This would have provided a baseline that would have helped in ensuring both English and Welsh medium education settings had staff with the skills and knowledge to confidently provide support.

**Conclusion 3:** In the forthcoming Strategic Education Workforce Plan, the Welsh Government should ensure that there is sufficient training to support the delivery of Welsh medium ALN support and provision. This should include both Initial Teacher Education and professional learning for serving teachers.

We know that the first five yearly review of the sufficiency of Welsh medium additional learning provision has been initiated. This will be an important review that the future Senedd and Welsh

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<sup>17</sup> [CYPE Committee, Welsh Language and Education \(Wales\) Bill: Stage 1 Report, December 2024](#)

<sup>18</sup> [CYPE Committee, Teacher recruitment and retention, January 2026](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Letter to Chair, CYPE Committee from Cabinet Secretary for Education, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Minister for Children and Social Care, 30 September 2024, Recommendation 19](#)

Government will need to take account of, including issues such as the “reasonable steps” test the Act places on efforts to make provision in Welsh where this is desired.

We note that since the 2018 Act was passed, the Senedd has moved from five year to four year terms. It is unclear to us whether it was the original intention that there should be a review in every Senedd term. If that was the case, this may need revisiting. We appreciate this would require a change to primary legislation.

9. In setting a five year timescale, was the original intention of the 2018 Act that the review of the sufficiency Welsh medium additional learning provision should be carried out once every Senedd term? If so, are there any plans to revisit the timings of the reviews to reflect the change in the length of the Senedd term?

## Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021

The 2021 Act was a once in a generation change to education in Wales. The level of change that has been expected of the education system should not be underestimated. This has been done in conjunction with the also seismic ALN reforms under the 2018 Act. Additionally, the education system is still also dealing with the long tail of the pandemic, and increasing societal changes that schools are being expected to manage, and in some places mitigate. As we said in our recent teacher recruitment and retention report, schools are being asked to do a lot, and there is a clear need to minimise any further change in the system.<sup>20</sup>

We know that in some cases, the effectiveness of the implementation of the new curriculum has been mixed, with Estyn observing “there remains too much variation in schools’ understanding of the purpose driven curriculum”.<sup>21</sup> It is important that there is support to ensure that all learners are receiving the same level of education, even if the individual curriculum in different schools will differ. While there will not be uniformity, there must be enough consistency. To better support schools in implementing the 2021 Act and delivering the Curriculum for Wales, we believe there is a need for clearer guidance on assessment and progression. This continues to be one of the most challenging areas in implementing the new curriculum, with schools reporting difficulties in assessing individual learners’ progression and where they are on the learning continuum. Estyn told us that providing minimum age-related expectations would be useful<sup>22</sup> and you indicated on 23 October<sup>23</sup> that work

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<sup>20</sup> [CYPE Committee, Teacher recruitment and retention, January 2025](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Estyn, Annual Report 2023-24, Teaching and the Curriculum](#)

<sup>22</sup> [CYPE Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 43 and 72-73](#)

<sup>23</sup> [CYPE Committee, 23 October 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 153-157](#)

was ongoing to develop these, recognising that detail isn't there at the moment for schools<sup>24</sup>. We warmly welcome the work to develop these age related expectations to provide greater clarity for schools.

10. When do you expect to publish further guidance on assessment and progression, such as the age-related expectations you have said were under development? Will this provide a clear framework for education professionals to assess pupils, support their learning development and provide clarity on how they should progress under the Curriculum for Wales?

## **Our approach to scrutiny**

Finally, as we have taken a novel approach to our scrutiny on these two pieces of legislation, we would welcome the Welsh Government's feedback on our approach. Do you believe this has been a helpful approach to scrutiny? Are there any aspects that worked well, or did not work well in your opinion.

We would appreciate a response by 6 March. We appreciate this is a quicker turn around than usual, but this will enable us to reflect on the response in our legacy output.

Yours sincerely,



Buffy Williams MS

Chair

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

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<sup>24</sup> CYPE Committee, 6 November 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 75

# Agenda Item 3.8

Lynne Neagle AS/MS  
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg  
Cabinet Secretary for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref MA/LN/2345/25

Mike Hedges AS/MS  
Chair, Legislation, Justice and Constitution  
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16 February 2026

Dear Mike,

Thank you for your letter of 3 February, requesting clarity on a number of points within the supplementary Legislative Consent Memorandum (Memorandum No 4) for the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

I have provided a response to each of the questions raised below. For ease of reference I have included the question set out in your letter.

- 1. Please can you confirm whether the amendment referred to in paragraph 24 of Memorandum No. 4 has now been tabled and if it will be included in the further supplementary consent memorandum now expected?*

The amendment to apply the Senedd approval procedure to the regulations referred to in paragraph 24 was [tabled](#) on Thursday 5 February 2026, ahead of Third Reading on Monday 9 February. Two amendments within this tabled list apply to Wales and therefore both will be included within a further supplementary LCM (Memorandum No. 5).

- 2. Memorandum No. 4 refers to a regulation-making power contained in amendments to clause 32, relating to the estimate of time which a child receives education from parents or other providers. It is not clear from Memorandum No. 4 whether this is a new regulation-making power or which Senedd scrutiny procedure will be applied to such regulations.*

The regulation-making power referenced in the amendment is not a new power. The regulations referred to are those to be made under proposed section 436C(4) of the Education Act 1996 (as inserted by Clause 32). Amendment 164 was agreed at Report Stage and provides that regulations made by the Welsh Ministers under the listed provisions of the Education Act 1996, including 436C(4), (as inserted by Clauses 32 and 33) are subject to the Senedd approval procedure.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

3. *Please can you confirm the scrutiny procedure which will apply to the making of regulations under clause 32 of the Bill should amendments to that clause be agreed at House of Lords Report Stage?*

The scrutiny procedure for the regulations under Clause 32 is subject to the Senedd approval procedure. Delegated power for the regulations was tabled under Amendment 164. This amendment requires all regulations for the CNIS provisions under Clauses 32 and 33 to be affirmative always rather than affirmative in the first instance and negative thereafter.

4. *Amendment 244 provides the Welsh Ministers with a regulation-making power to make consequential provision (a new clause proposed after clause 64). We note that this amendment addresses recommendation 4 of our first report. However, Memorandum No. 4 is silent on the Senedd scrutiny procedure to be applied to such regulations. It appears to the Committee that the Senedd annulment procedure will be applied, unless the regulations amend primary legislation, in which case the Senedd approval procedure will be applied. Please can you confirm the scrutiny procedure which will apply to the making of regulations under the new clause to be inserted after clause 64 by amendment 244, should it be agreed at House of Lords Report Stage?*

Amendment 244 was agreed during the House of Lords third sitting at Report Stage on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, on 28 January. I can confirm that the Senedd annulment procedure will be applied, unless the regulations amend primary legislation, in which case the Senedd approval procedure will be applied.

5. *Please could you confirm which amendments in Memorandum No. 4 have been considered in the House of Lords and the outcome of that consideration*

All amendments in Memorandum No. 4 were considered during the House of Lords Report Stage on Wednesday 28 January.

All amendments were passed apart from Amendment 120. This amendment proposed to expand the criteria under Clause 31 for LAs to provide consent for certain children to be removed from school to include children subject to a child protection plan within the last 5 years. The amendment did not pass because it was superseded by non-government Amendment 121A, tabled by Baroness Barran, the Conservative Shadow Education Minister in the Lords.

Amendment 121A proposes to expand the scope of the consent mechanism from 5 years to children who have ever been subject to section 47 or section 31 enquiries or an order, and all those considered a 'child in need' under section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

The agreement of the non-government amendment triggers SO. 29 and is subject to legislative consent. However, the amendment as drafted is only applicable to Wales in part. This is because section 17 of the Children Act 1989 does not apply to Wales. The equivalent provision is contained within the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

As an agreed non-Government amendment, this provision will be covered by SO29. I am mindful that the position on the amendment is not finalised and at the very minimum will require imminent drafting changes.

My officials are engaging closely with the Department for Education in relation to the non-government amendment and relaying the Welsh Government's position and potential

implications for Wales. I will incorporate the final position on this provision in the forthcoming sLCM and have encouraged UK Government to bring forward any amendments as soon as possible so as to ensure the Senedd can consider in advance of the legislative consent debate. This will ensure the Senedd is able to consider a more finalised version of the Bill and potentially avoid the need to lay multiple LCM on the same amendment.

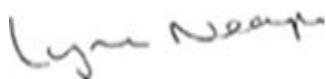
6. *In relation to any amendments to the Bill that are to be the subject of a fifth memorandum, please can you ensure that any such memorandum includes information stating whether such amendments will have been considered by the time of the consent motion debate on 3 March 2026 and if not, please can you explain what this means in terms of the consent being sought from the Senedd for them?*

As set out under my response to Question 1, two amendments that apply to Wales were tabled on Thursday 5 February and agreed at Third Reading on Monday 9 February. These relate to the addition of 'young carers' in the information to be included on children not in school registers, and the procedure for regulations referred to under Amendment 125. There may also be a further amendment in relation to the social care provisions. All amendments will be included in a further sLCM, along with the non-government amendment referenced above.

Considering the above proposed amendments, and to ensure a further sLCM can be laid and considered ahead of the motion debate, I have moved the date of the debate to 17 March. This will enable the Senedd to consider a more finalised version of the Bill.

I would like to thank you and the Committee for your work on the Bill to date.

Yours sincerely



**Lynne Neagle AS/MS**

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg  
Cabinet Secretary for Education

Copied to: Buffy Williams, Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee

# Agenda Item 3.9

**Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc  
ac Addysg**

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**Children, Young People  
and Education Committee**

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Chief Executive, Welsh Local Government Association  
Chris Llewellyn

17 February 2026

## Prioritising Education Within the Final Local Government Settlement

Dear Chris,

I am writing on behalf of the Committee following our recent general scrutiny session on 4 February with the Cabinet Secretary for Education.

During the session, the Cabinet Secretary reiterated her commitment to securing additional core funding for education within the Final Local Government Settlement – an objective she first set out during draft budget scrutiny on 27 November 2025<sup>1</sup>. We welcome her confirmation that this had been reflected to a meaningful degree in the final budget, resulting in an additional £112.8 million for local government<sup>2</sup>.

She also explained that, following discussions across Government, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government wrote to local authorities on 20 January to underline that this additional investment recognises the financial pressures facing education services and social care.

We welcome this acknowledgement of the challenges schools are facing and of the importance of ensuring they are adequately funded. At a time when public finances remain extremely challenging, we recognise that the additional resource provided through the Revenue Support Grant may not

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<sup>1</sup> CYPE Committee, 27 November 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 35

<sup>2</sup> CYPE Committee, 4 February 2026, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 11

meet every pressure. However, we see the improved final settlement as a vital means of enabling local authorities to support schools as far as possible.

Throughout the budget process, we have been very aware of these financial pressures on schools. Your submission to the Finance Committee's consultation provided a clear account of the financial challenges facing local authorities, including the £137 million gap for 2026-27 and the escalating pressures associated with additional learning needs (ALN). The Cabinet Secretary for Education acknowledged the seriousness of this position during our budget scrutiny session on 27 November. She noted that some local authorities now have ALN on their corporate risk registers<sup>3</sup>. Her evidence reinforced the need for continued prioritisation of core education services.

Her view - one we share - is that what schools most need is stable, sufficient core funding to deliver their day-to-day work, where the greatest impact is made on children and young people's lives. We realise this fact is not lost on local authorities who are obviously closer to the 'chalk face'. We know that core funding for schools is delivered primarily through the Revenue Support Grant and local authorities decide how to allocate the resources available to them. Against that backdrop, the uplift in core funding presents an important opportunity to continue prioritising education. We want to see this funding reach education services.

We also note that the Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government's letter to local authorities said the settlement "offers a valuable opportunity for local authorities to allocate significant resources to their schools, to focus on the key pressures of Additional Learning Needs (ALN), school transport, workforce, and workload".

In light of this and the Cabinet Secretary for Education's position, we wish to underline the importance of using the additional resources within the settlement to support schools. We fully recognise the difficult financial context in which local authorities are operating and the wide range of responsibilities you must balance, including the other main pressure of social care. Nonetheless, our shared ambition to improve outcomes for children and young people depends on ensuring that the system as a whole can sustain the progress we all want to see.

We therefore hope that local authorities will carefully consider how the uplift in core funding can best support education services, particularly in areas such as ALN, school transport, workforce and workload. With a new Senedd and Welsh Government term approaching, this feels like an important moment for all parts of the system to work closely together. Local authorities are fundamental delivery partners in education. We are keen to ensure that, as responsibility passes to a successor committee in the next Senedd, learners continue to receive the stability and support they need through sufficient funding for schools.

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<sup>3</sup> CYPE Committee, 27 November 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 34



We are copying this letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government and the Chair of the Local Government and Housing Committee for their awareness, recognising that this is an important moment to strengthen the foundations of the education system for the years ahead.



Buffy Williams MS

Chair

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Cc

Lynne Neagle MS, Cabinet Secretary for Education

Jayne Bryant MS, Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government

John Griffiths MS, Chair, Local Government and Housing Committee

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.



## FOA Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee

[SeneddChildren@senedd.wales](mailto:SeneddChildren@senedd.wales)

16<sup>th</sup> February 2026

Dear Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee,

I am writing in regard to the decision to no longer offer Sociology GCSE as an option for learners in Wales from 2026 and the impact of this removal of an opportunity to learn about issues which are highly relevant to contemporary social challenges.

The AQA Sociology GCSE is currently offered as a 'designated' GCSE in Wales, however under the new system, Qualifications Wales have deemed it to be too similar to the new approved Social Studies GCSE, and have therefore decided it will no longer be available as a 'designated' GCSE from September 2026.

Concerns were first raised with me in March 2025 by members of my Youth Advisory Panel, and I have since received over 20 individual letters from young people who are current or recent students of Sociology GCSE, as well as approaches from current teachers of Sociology GCSE from Swansea and from Newport.

The concerns include:

- the lack of sociological theoretical content and academic rigour within the proposed Social Studies GCSE which is intended to replace the Sociology GCSE offer, and hence it not offering as strong a pathway to Sociology A Level or beyond, and thereby disadvantaging Welsh students compared to English counterparts
- the lack of clear explanation for why Sociology GCSE could not continue to be offered as an option alongside the new qualification
- weakness of the initial consultation on the proposed changes, which perhaps did not make it sufficiently clear that the proposed Social Studies GCSE would effectively replace the Sociology GCSE and only received 12 responses.

I have since written to WJEC, Qualifications Wales and more recently, to the Cabinet Secretary for Education. And I have included my correspondence to the latter two in this letter. Whilst the responses I have received have offered a more in-

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*Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.*

*We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.*



depth explanation into the decision-making progress, and whilst I welcome the further funding to Adnodd and WJEC for support for Wave 2 of the GCSES (including Social Studies), I remain concerned that the initial consultation on the proposed changes did not provide ample opportunity for engagement and was therefore not reflective of learners' views.

I am also concerned about the lack of time available for teachers to effectively prepare to teach the new Social Studies GCSE, with the specification only having been published in Dec 2025, and a discussion meeting happening in March 2025, this leaving virtually no INSET days available for preparing to teach an entirely new course.

I would be grateful if you would consider this as an issue to be examined in more depth by the committee, and in doing so, I encourage this process to be paused and to be postponed by an academic year, enabling teachers to be more fully prepared for what is a very different course to the one which it is replacing.

I would hope that this time could also allow for further and more meaningful consultation with teachers and most importantly learners.

Yours sincerely,

Rocio Cifuentes MBE  
Children's Commissioner for Wales

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

I am writing to share my growing concerns about the decision to remove Sociology as a GCSE option for learners in Wales from September 2026, which I fear will impact detrimentally on Welsh learners, leaving them disadvantaged compared to English counterparts. I have already written to and met with both Qualifications Wales and WJEC, however I am not reassured by their response, hence this letter.

These concerns were first raised with me in March 2025 by young members of my Youth Advisory Panel, and I have since received over 20 individual letters from young people who are current or recent students of Sociology GCSE, as well as approaches from current teachers of Sociology GCSE from Swansea and from Newport.

Initial concerns were threefold: firstly, around the lack of sociological theoretical content and academic rigour within the proposed Social Studies GCSE which is intended to replace the Sociology GCSE offer, and hence it not offering as strong a pathway to Sociology A Level or beyond, and thereby disadvantaging Welsh students compared to English counterparts; secondly, and based on the strength of the first concern, around the lack of clear explanation for why Sociology GCSE could not continue to be offered as an option alongside the new qualification; and thirdly, around the weakness of the initial consultation on the proposed changes, which perhaps did not make it sufficiently clear that the proposed Social Studies GCSE would effectively replace the Sociology GCSE and only received 12 responses.

I took these concerns to both WJEC and Qualifications Wales in March 2025 and met with them subsequently in July 2025. I understand the importance of ensuring that exams in Wales more closely reflect the National Curriculum for Wales, and the need to ensure that all exams publicly available are available bilingually. However, my discussions with WJEC and Qualifications Wales suggested a lack of clarity as to the locus of decision making on the issue. WJEC indicated they would like to be able to offer both qualifications and could potentially translate an English qualification to ensure Welsh language compliance, however they felt constrained in their ability to do so by the Qualifications Wales/ Welsh Government policy framework which they felt discouraged offering two similar qualifications. My discussion with Qualifications Wales implied that it was up to WJEC and came down to a business decision.

Whilst I was not assured during my discussions about the rationale for the change itself, I have recently become even more concerned about the proposed timescales for this change to take place, which appear to leave very limited time for teachers to be adequately

prepared to teach a whole new proposed course by September 2026. I understand that while the specification for the new course was published in September 2025, no further resources were published until today 17<sup>th</sup> December 2025. It is my understanding that only one online meeting has taken place in November 2025 to introduce the new course to teachers, and that a further meeting is planned for March 2026. I am aware of strong concerns from teachers about this leaving an unacceptably short window to prepare to teach students this course from September 2026.

I am aware that similar concerns around proposed changes to History GCSE and Science GCSEs have been listened to and have resulted in a delay to the proposed introduction of new qualifications. I would urge you to at the very least press pause on this process and postpone by an academic year the date by which the proposed changes to Sociology/Social Studies are intended to take effect. This would enable teachers to more fully prepare for what is a very different course to the one which it is replacing. Furthermore, I would hope that this time could also allow for further and more meaningful consultation with teachers and learners about the proposed changes.

I am writing as Children's Commissioner to highlight these concerns which as mentioned have been raised with me directly by children and young people who are concerned about the potential removal of an opportunity to learn about issues which are highly relevant to contemporary social challenges, and to be taught by experienced teachers with adequate resources to deliver this course.

As a former student and teacher of Sociology myself, I have a deep understanding of as well as sympathy with these concerns, and would like to see the teaching of sociology protected for the benefit of learners in Wales.

I look forward to your response,

Diolch yn fawr

Rocio Cifuentes

C.C Philip Blaker, Qualifications Wales

Ian Morgan, WJEC

Dear Philip

I have been contacted by a number of professionals as well as more than 20 learners, including members of my young people's advisory group, following the recent publication of consultation findings related to the National 14-16 qualifications.

The concerns relate to the removal of Sociology as a GCSE option from September 2026.

Those who have taught or studied this topic as a GCSE speak passionately about the impact that this sort of subject can have on their critical thinking and analysis skills, and their wider world view. In short, of all the topics studied in our secondary schools, Sociology has to be one of the most aligned with the ethos of the Curriculum for Wales.

Whilst there is to be a new GCSE Social Studies course, those with experience of the details of the Sociology course have highlighted a large number of valuable areas, including core sociological concepts and theories, that do not appear to be covered at all in the new course, based on the information currently available. Concern has also been raised at students being at a disadvantage in comparison to their peers should they pursue Sociology at KS5 without having had the foundation of the KS4 course. This is particularly a concern because of the perceived lack of equivalent academic rigour in the proposed Social Studies course.

The young people who have reached out to me do not feel that their experiences are being listened to and acted upon.

Teachers who have contacted me speak of the importance and rising popularity of this subject, with one of the schools having a current cohort of 100 learners aged 14-16-year-olds within their department.

Although I am aware of consultations on the wide suite of qualifications, I would urge you to take stock of this feedback, to review the specification with this in mind, and also to listen to experienced teachers' views on this.

I understand that there were similar concerns raised about the new History specification, which were listened to and able to be accommodated through a revised specification. Although this meant a one year delay in introducing the new course, I would feel this to be proportionate if it results in a better end product that will best prepare students for further study in this popular and important subject area as part of the wider ethos of the Curriculum for Wales.

I would be happy to meet to discuss this further and explore the options at this crucial juncture. Please contact my Executive Support Assistant Ceirios Chesters if you are happy to arrange a meeting; [Ceirios.chesters@childcomwales.org.uk](mailto:Ceirios.chesters@childcomwales.org.uk) or 01792 765600.

Yours sincerely

cc. Ian Morgan, Chief Executive of WJEC



Ein cyf/Our ref LN/01484/25

Rocio Cifuentes  
Children's Commissioner for Wales  
[Natasha.Gorton@childcomwales.org.uk](mailto:Natasha.Gorton@childcomwales.org.uk)

30 January 2026

Dear Rocio,

Thank you for your letter dated 18 December, raising your concerns and those of your Youth Advisory Panel that Sociology GCSE will no longer be available in Wales from 2026.

The Welsh Ministers' functions relating to the regulation of qualifications and oversight of Wales's qualifications system were repealed in 2015 with the establishment of Qualifications Wales. As the independent regulator of qualifications (up to degree level) in Wales, Qualifications Wales has responsibility for regulating qualifications, setting the criteria for qualification approval, commissioning new qualifications and restricting the range of qualifications offered, including at GCSE and A Level. It also has responsibility for the recognition and regulation of awarding bodies in Wales. WJEC, as the awarding body for approved GCSEs and A Levels, has responsibility for the administration of these qualifications.

I note that you have both written to and met with Qualifications Wales and WJEC to raise and discuss your concerns with them. In the context of this engagement, I understand that Qualifications Wales has provided further detail in respect of the decisions it has taken as part of the programme of work it is leading to introduce a new National Suite of 14-16 qualifications. To recap, in October 2021, Qualifications Wales published their [decision report](#) which detailed the range of new GCSEs that would be made available from 2025 to support and reflect the Curriculum for Wales. Whilst Sociology GCSE was not included within the new suite of GCSEs, it was confirmed that a new [GCSE Social Studies](#) would be developed. I can also confirm that Qualifications Wales consulted on the range of GCSEs that would be available within the report titled '[Right Choice for Wales' consultation](#) in 2021. The question gathering views on Qualifications Wales's proposal to develop a new GCSE Social Studies had 315 responses. The consultation document noted that a GCSE Social Studies may replace GCSEs in subjects such as Sociology, law and citizenship, depending on its final design.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

This GCSE qualification will be introduced for first teaching in Wales in September 2026. WJEC published the qualification specification in September 2025, a year in advance of first teaching.

Social Studies is a new subject under the Curriculum for Wales. It is one of the five subject areas within the [Humanities Area of Learning and Experience](#) (Area). The Humanities Area encourages learners to engage with the most important issues facing humanity, including sustainability and social change, and helps them to develop the skills necessary to interpret and articulate the past and the present. It encompasses geography; history; religion, values and ethics; business studies and social studies. These disciplines share many common themes, concepts and transferable skills, while having their own discrete body of knowledge and skills. The Humanities Area supports learners in realising the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales, supporting them to become ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world.

One of the statements of what matters for this Area is 'Human societies are complex and diverse, and shaped by human actions and beliefs'. Experiences in this Area can encourage a critical understanding of how societies are and have been organised, structured and led, in the learners' own locality in Wales, as well as the wider world. As part of their learning in this area, learners may also be introduced to other complementary disciplines, such as classics, economics, law, philosophy, politics, psychology and sociology, if and where appropriate.

The aim of the GCSE Social Studies is to build on this, to support learners to develop an understanding of the discipline and its value, whilst encouraging active participation and engagement with social issues through social enquiry, discussions and social action. GCSE Social Studies takes a multidisciplinary approach to exploring the Humanities and will provide a broad foundation for progression to a range of post-16 qualifications in this area, including Sociology A level.

There are currently two 9-1 GCSEs in Sociology which can be offered to 14-16 learners in schools as 'designated' qualifications under the Qualifications Wales Act 2015. 'Designated' qualifications differ from 'approved' qualifications, which are fully regulated by Qualifications Wales and for which they publish 'approval criteria'. There has never been an 'approved' GCSE Sociology in Wales.

Qualifications Wales cannot designate a qualification that is the same as, or similar to, an 'approved' qualification (e.g. the new GCSE Social Studies). Qualifications Wales has therefore undertaken an exercise to compare the new, approved, made-for-Wales GCSEs being introduced in September 2025 and 2026, to each currently designated 9-1 GCSE. This included the AQA GCSE Sociology and their approval criteria for GCSE Social Studies. (The exercise was only undertaken on the AQA qualification as WJEC has indicated that they will not be running the Eduqas GCSE Sociology once GCSE Social Studies is introduced.) Although there are differences between the Sociology and Social Studies qualifications, Qualifications Wales's review panel concluded that there was sufficient similarity between them to prevent them designating GCSE Sociology. They have subsequently confirmed that GCSE Sociology will not be made available to 14-16 learners, after the final cohort of Year 10 learners starting in 2025, due to its similarities with GCSE Social Studies.

Qualifications Wales has advised that the reasons for this decision were:

- The Assessment Objectives (AOs) for GCSE Sociology and GCSE Social Studies are almost the same. There is an additional AO in the GCSE Social Studies, but the two qualifications ultimately target very similar skills.
- GCSE Social Studies takes a multidisciplinary approach to exploring the Humanities and will provide a broad foundation for progression to a range of post-16 qualifications in this Area, including Sociology.

Qualifications Wales has reached this decision through a thorough and consistent process undertaken by individuals with appropriate experience and expertise. Subsequent to this, Qualifications Wales wrote to schools on 30 January 2025 to provide an [update on the National Qualifications](#), including designation decisions relating to 9-1 GCSEs. Sociology continues to be available at AS and A level in Wales, with learners able to progress onto these qualifications without having taken the subject at GCSE.

It is of course crucial that schools have the tools and guidance needed to deliver these new qualifications to learners. Following the success of the professional learning approach taken for the implementation of the Wave 1 GCSEs, and the resources and supplementary materials developed, I have provided further funding to Adnodd and WJEC to ensure that the same support is provided for Wave 2 GCSEs, including Social Studies.

WJEC are in the process of producing a package of bilingual resources that will mirror the support offered for the introduction of the Wave 1 qualifications. The bilingual resources are being developed by WJEC's Subject Teams, in conjunction with curriculum specialists and are designed to support and enhance teaching and learning, with a focus on new topics which are being introduced within these qualifications. As planned, these are being published in phases beginning from late autumn 2025 with, as you have noted, WJEC publishing on 17 December Sample Assessment Materials (SAM) for [Unit 1](#) – Society and Social Issues, [Unit 2](#) – Investigating Society and Social Issues and [Unit 3](#) – Social Change in Contemporary Society, of the new GCSE Social Studies. It is anticipated that WJEC will publish the Guidance for Teaching later in January, with the full suite of bilingual resources to be available by summer 2026. Additionally, WJEC's Professional Learning Team has prepared a [comprehensive programme](#) of training opportunities designed to give practical guidance to schools, alongside the resources and supplementary materials, as they prepare to deliver Wave 2 qualifications. This will include [face-to-face](#) professional learning events in February and March 2026.

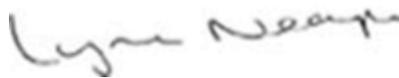
Given its complexity and importance, the reform of National 14-16 Qualifications has always been gradual and staged, ensuring that the interests of learners were protected at all times. It is now standard practice for qualification specifications to be made available a year before first teaching, not just for GCSE qualifications in Wales, but for other qualifications in Wales and across the UK. New qualification specifications were not always published this far in advance, and this is a lesson learned from previous reforms.

GCSE Social Studies is being introduced under Wave 2 of the reform, allowing greater time for the sector to familiarise themselves with the Approval Criteria for the qualification, which was published in summer 2023, in advance of first teaching in September 2026. As noted, although there are differences between the current GCSE Sociology and planned GCSE Social Studies qualifications, Qualifications Wales's review panel concluded that there was sufficient similarity between them to prevent them designating GCSE Sociology in Wales. Schools will therefore be broadly familiar with large elements of the content.

You also reference GCSE Psychology in your letter, noting you are aware that similar concerns have been raised in respect of its future availability in Wales. To confirm, Qualifications Wales has confirmed GCSE Psychology does not form part of the approved offer of GCSEs for pre-16 learners in Wales. Like Sociology, Psychology is named in the curriculum as a complementary discipline within the Humanities area of learning and experience, which learners may be introduced to where appropriate.

In line with Qualifications Wales's [Designation Policy](#), they have completed a review to determine if GCSE Psychology overlaps with an approved qualification. As Psychology sits in a different sector subject area to Social Studies and Sociology, it was reviewed against different qualifications to determine any overlap. The review found that GCSE Psychology was unlikely to undermine the approved GCSE offer, so it would remain eligible for designation, providing it meets the other requirements of the Designation Policy. This includes the requirement that qualifications are available in both Welsh and English, to support Qualifications Wales's policy intent of securing a fully inclusive and bilingual range of 14-16 qualifications. It is for awarding bodies to decide if they would like to apply for their qualifications to be designated in Wales. Subject to eligibility, Qualifications Wales's [Welsh Language Support Grant](#) is available to awarding bodies to assist them in making their qualifications available through the medium of Welsh. Qualifications Wales continue to advise stakeholders, including centres, to discuss their needs with awarding bodies and encourage them to apply for designation if there is a qualification they wish to offer.

Yours sincerely,



**Lynne Neagle AS/MS**

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg  
Cabinet Secretary for Education



Rocio Cifuentes MBE  
Children's Commissioner for Wales

[cymwysterau.cymru](http://cymwysterau.cymru)  
[qualifications.wales](http://qualifications.wales)

By email

22 April 2025

Dear Rocio,

Many thanks for taking the time to write to us to relay the concerns you have heard from learners and educational professionals around our decision not to allow the designation of GCSE Sociology once the new made for Wales GCSE in Social Studies is introduced. Your letter raises a number of points each of which are addressed below.

### **Sociology and its relationship to Curriculum for Wales**

Through your engagement with learners and teachers your letter identifies Sociology as a subject that:

*has to be one of the most aligned with the ethos of the Curriculum for Wales.*

Firstly, it is worth clarifying that the reason why GCSE Sociology does not form part of the approved suite of GCSEs is because of its status within Curriculum for Wales.

Our starting point for National Qualifications has been Curriculum for Wales. All of the National Qualifications relate to and support Curriculum for Wales. In terms of GCSEs within the Humanities Area our basis for determining the range of GCSEs available has been the curriculum guidance. For Humanities the curriculum guidance states that the Humanities Area:

*encompasses geography; history; religion, values and ethics; business studies and social studies. These disciplines share many common themes, concepts and transferable skills, while having their own discrete body of knowledge and skills. Learners may also be introduced to other complementary disciplines, such as classics, economics, law, philosophy, politics, psychology and sociology, if and where appropriate<sup>1</sup>*

As Social Studies is one of the five disciplines specifically named in the guidance we have previously consulted on and agreed that a GCSE in Social Studies (alongside GCSEs in Business,



Geography, History and Religious Studies) will be created to ensure GCSE qualifications in Humanities fully reflect the breadth of the Humanities Area. We consulted and took decisions on two separate occasions on the inclusion of GCSE Social Studies as one of the range of qualifications in the National Qualification suite and also on the design and content.

Sociology is mentioned in the curriculum guidance as a complementary discipline that learners may be introduced to where appropriate. Given its status we confirmed in October 2021 that GCSE Sociology would not form part of the range of National GCSEs.

At the heart of the vision for the new National 14-16 Qualifications is that there is a curated suite of qualifications aligned with Curriculum for Wales that are coherent and inclusive; that no qualifications exist which would undermine any other qualifications. There is a strong risk that the continued designation of GCSE Sociology would be at odds with this.

### **Content in GCSE Sociology and GCSE Social Studies**

There will be some content overlap between the new GCSE Social Studies and the current GCSE Sociology. However we are not expecting the new GCSE Social Studies to replicate the current GCSE Sociology.

For example both qualifications include content on agents of socialisation and the techniques they use to socialise individuals. Both specifications have content relating to research methods and social issues and so themes about inequality and diversity (familiar within GCSE Sociology) are also considered in GCSE Social Studies.

However, GCSE Social Studies is not a GCSE in Sociology - it has been designed not only to meet the requirements in the approval criteria, but purposefully to be accessible to teachers from a wide variety of subject backgrounds, including Sociology. WJEC have involved teachers of Sociology at every stage of the development of GCSE Social Studies.

### **Development of analytical and critical thinking skills**

Your letter identifies the valuable analytical and critical thinking skills that GCSE Sociology fosters. It is worth noting that the Assessment Objectives (AOs) for GCSE Sociology and GCSE Social Studies are almost the same. Therefore, in a similar fashion to GCSE Sociology, the new Social Studies qualification will provide learners with the opportunity to develop and apply these important analytical, evaluative and critical thinking skills.

### **Progression to A Level Sociology**

We note the concern in your letter around the removal of GCSE Sociology and its potential to disadvantage learners who want to progress to A Level Sociology. GCSE Social Studies takes a multidisciplinary approach to exploring the Humanities and will provide a broad foundation for progression to a range of post-16 qualifications in this Area, including A Level Sociology. Learners taking Social Studies will not be at a disadvantage when it comes to A Level Sociology. It is also important to appreciate that many schools in Wales do not offer GCSE Sociology and many learners already take A Level Sociology without having studying the subject at GCSE.

## **Lack of academic rigour in GCSE Social Studies**

The GCSE Social Studies qualification has been designed to be of equivalent demand to other GCSEs in the suite and this is reflected in the content of the qualification, the assessment objectives and forms of assessment within the qualification (which include the same proportion of examination and Non Examination Assessment as the other Humanities GCSEs).

The full specification for the qualification will be published by WJEC in September, with the sample assessments following later that term. I would encourage those you have engaged with to consider these documents fully when they are published so they have a fuller picture of GCSE Social Studies and how it compares to GCSE Sociology.

## **Young people do not feel their experiences are being listened to and acted on**

Extensive collaboration and engagement with key stakeholders has been central to our approach to developing National Qualifications. We have involved young people throughout the co-creation process, for example through youth friendly versions of our consultations (including consultations on both the range of made for Wales GCSEs and the high level design requirements for GCSE Social Studies). We have also spoken directly to learners on centre visits, involved our learner advisory panel in discussions on the range of National Qualifications and commissioned external organisations to conduct specific engagement and research with learners on National Qualifications. This feedback and input has helped to inform and shape our decision making.

Throughout this process it is worth noting that the majority of respondents to our consultation on the range of approved GCSEs agreed with our proposal to create GCSE Social Studies.

## **Decisions around GCSE History**

The context for decisions made around GCSE History are quite different to those for Social Studies. We took the decision to delay the introduction of the new GCSE in History by a year in response to feedback from the Association of Directors of Education in Wales and teaching unions who identified the need for more time for history teachers to familiarise themselves with the new specification and resources that are being developed to support it.

This delay was linked to the extent of change in content within the history specification, for example in relation to the requirement to cover medieval history in the new specification and the inclusion of a more diverse range of historical topics including those from outside of Europe and North America. The content of the GCSE specification for history has not changed in any way as a consequence of the delay to Wave 2 implementation, the only change has been a delay to its introduction from September 2025 to September 2026.

WJEC are currently in the process of submitting the GCSE Social Studies specification to Qualifications Wales for approval. Therefore, the content and focus of this qualification will not fundamentally change from that which has been presented in WJECs qualification outline.

## Next Steps

We hope that this letter addresses the concerns outlined in your letter, however if you would like to discuss this further and follow up on any of the points raised then please contact Lucy Blair ([Lucy.Blair@qualifications.wales](mailto:Lucy.Blair@qualifications.wales)) who can arrange a meeting.

Yours sincerely



Philip Blaker  
Chief Executive

23 February 2026

Buffy Williams MS  
Chair  
Children and Young People's Committee

Dear Chair,

I agreed to write to the Committee on a number of matters following my attendance at our annual scrutiny session on 15 January 2026.

### **Update on the situation with unplaced learners at Coleg Cambria**

I wrote to the Committee on 7 January 2026 to provide information on the increase in participation in full time education in further education colleges in the 2025/26 academic year.

At our scrutiny session, the Committee asked for an update on the one remaining waiting list at Coleg Cambria. Through our regular engagement, we understand 47 learners on the initial waiting list were either placed or are no longer looking for a place. Coleg Cambria have signposted alternative provision to all learners on the waiting list and is no longer in contact with the remaining learners.

### **More information on the reasons why the proportion of learners who want to undertake an apprenticeship is disproportionate to the number of learners who end up doing one**

Medr was pleased to [respond](#) to the Committee's recent report on routes into post-16 education and training. Our response highlighted our work to better understand the factors that influence both learner choice and employer capacity to offer apprenticeships and ensure apprenticeship provision is responsive to the needs of learners, employers and the wider economy.

Our response also recognised the need for improved advice and guidance to address the gap between learners' interest in apprenticeships and their participation. We highlighted that when the proportion of learners undertaking an apprenticeship between age 16 and 19 is taken into account, the gap between aspiration and participation is notably smaller. This highlights the importance of continuing to support a variety of routes into apprenticeships, recognising that learners access apprenticeships through a range of pathways.

Rydym yn croesawu gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg, ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence in Welsh will be answered in Welsh, and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding in English.

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On 17 February 2026, we [published](#) the outcomes of our recent consultation on the new Apprenticeship Programme in Wales. Respondents highlighted the importance of flexibility to enable learners of all ages to access opportunities for skills development and meet skills needs; the need for improved guidance and wraparound support for learners throughout their journey; the need to enhance employer awareness and capability by providing clearer information, supporting wider employer participation (especially SMEs); and more mentoring and collaboration to improve confidence and retention.

We will continue to explore what additional support employers need to be able to offer apprenticeships, including the availability, accessibility and appropriateness of information available to them as we develop the new programme.

### **Information on how many of the Tata Steel employees who were supported through public skills funding went on to secure employment or progress to other positive routes on completion of their learning**

It is too soon for the destinations data for this particular cohort of learners to be in our datasets. The data covers 2023/24 onwards and, given that the provision is still ongoing, it is not yet included in the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset. However, we will be publishing Personal Learning Account performance measures for the first time in March at which point we will be able to take a closer look at this data.

We know that these short professional development opportunities and industry-recognised qualifications support individuals to upskill or reskill, enhance their career prospects within their current role or to retrain and move into a new career pathway. We have various case studies which help demonstrate this if the Committee would find it helpful to see them.

### **Analysis of Further Education enrolment trends**

We continue to monitor enrolment trends, and recently published data on [Progression from Year 11 to tertiary education, August 2017 to January 2025](#). The provisional proportion of learners progressing from Year 11 to tertiary education was 90% in 2024/25, unchanged from the previous three years.

We have also committed to introducing a new practice of publishing earlier provisional [data for enrolments in FE, work based learning and adult community learning](#). This publication was updated in February 2026 to include provisional full-time figures for learner numbers in 2025/26.

We will continue to monitor this closely to understand trends in learner participation and evaluate the impact of our work to promote participation in post-16 education.

I hope the Committee finds this additional information helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information or clarification.

Yours sincerely,



**James Owen**  
Chief Executive

# Agenda Item 3.12

Lynne Neagle AS/MS  
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg  
Cabinet Secretary for Education

Vikki Howells AS/MS  
Y Gweinidog Addysg Bellach ac Uwch  
Minister for Further and Higher Education



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Buffy Williams MS  
Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee

25 February 2026

Dear Buffy,

Thank you for the invitation to appear in front of the Children, Young People and Education Committee on 4 February and your continued work on boosting educational standards and for your commitment to improving the lives of children and young people in Wales.

Please find below additional information requested along with our response to the questions we were unable to reach during the session.

## **Evaluation report on community-focussed schools**

We committed to share a copy of the independent process evaluation of our Community Focused School approach. The evaluation was undertaken by Alma Research. Their report has been published (24 February) and can be accessed here:

<https://www.gov.wales/process-evaluation-community-focused-schools-funding>.

## **The final report from the Literacy Expert Panel**

A written statement on the work of the Expert Literacy Panel will be made shortly, this will include their report which will be shared with the Committee separately.

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:  
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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

## **Further information on assessments on the affordability of increasing student loan outlay at a greater rate than the UK Government and the impact this will have on future support packages**

Officials would be happy to offer the committee a technical briefing on your question around student loan outlay.

## **Details on the number of applicants placed in higher education from the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile 1**

### 2025 Entry

In 2025, there were a total of 3,225 Welsh domiciled placed applicants from the lowest quintile of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD Q1). This figure represents a 1.8% increase compared to the number of placed applicants from WIMD Q1 in 2024.

Furthermore, 18.2% of the 18-year-old population within WIMD Q1 were successfully placed in higher education in 2025. This placement rate is 0.3 percentage points lower than the WIMD Q1 entry rate recorded in 2024.

Source: [UCAS Undergraduate end of cycle data resources 2025 | UCAS](#))

### 2026

For the 2026 academic year, by the January equal consideration deadline, there were 3,340 Welsh domiciled applicants from WIMD Q1. This marks a 7.1% increase compared to the number of applicants from WIMD Q1 at the same point in 2025.

Additionally, 21.0% of the 18-year-old population from WIMD Q1 made an application by the January equal consideration date for 2026 entry. This is an increase of 0.9 percentage points in the applicant rate compared to the same point in 2025.

Source: [2026 cycle applicant figures – 14 January deadline | UCAS](#))

In response to questions unreached:

**Can the Minister provide an update on whether any decision has been made on the continuation of Taith with respect to the decision to rejoin Erasmus from 2027? Would there be any change in Taith's activity when both schemes are operating at the same time?**

We remain committed to ensuring continuity of opportunities for learners and as the details of our participation in Erasmus+ continue to develop, we will carefully consider the implications.

Officials are engaging closely with UK Government counterparts and the other Devolved Administrations on the shaping of Erasmus+, and there is ongoing Ministerial-level dialogue to ensure that Wales's priorities, including the strengths of Taith, are fully reflected. We are committed to ensuring that the lessons learned and good practice developed through Taith inform the future delivery of Erasmus.

Our priority remains the successful delivery of the current Taith programme and ensuring that learners continue to benefit from the international opportunities they deserve, to ensure

there is no gap in provision, and that learners across all sectors in Wales have access to as many opportunities as possible, regardless of which scheme facilitates these opportunities. As such, we have confirmed an extension of Taith until 2028, with all Taith funded projects due to conclude by 31 August 2027. Erasmus+ funded projects are then expected to begin in the 2027–28 academic year, meaning there will not be an overlap in project delivery between the two programmes.

**The Committee is expecting to receive an end of financial year report from Welsh Government in April 2026 which we have been told will include an assessment of Seren’s progress since the previous assessment in 2018. Could you provide an update on any insights or lessons learned that you’re aware of at this point?**

Seren monitors participation and learner engagement with the programme on an ongoing basis. This data helps us check whether the programme meets learner needs, demonstrate value for money and make improvements where necessary.

Based on this data, we decided to change how we deliver the programme. From April 2026, a dedicated team will lead delivery, with an updated support programme for schools and colleges launching in September.

As mentioned previously, Seren's end-of-year data report will be presented to this committee in April 2026. This will provide a benchmark to measure the impact of changes to the programme.

We have also commissioned an independent review of Seren. This will assess progress since 2018 and whether the changes made under the 2023 operational strategy are working. An interim report is due over the summer, with the final report by the end of the year. We are updating how we identify learners for Seren. The new guidance will be evidence-based and consistent across Wales.

**Could the Minister provide an update on the work of her post-16 Ministerial Advisory Group, including what issues have been covered so far?**

The Tertiary Education Ministerial Advisory Group (MAG) was established to provide strategic, informed and constructive advice on the major challenges and opportunities facing Wales’s tertiary education system. The Group has met on two occasions, and third meeting is scheduled for early March.

On 13 February, a Written Statement was issued updating Members on the Group's purpose and its work to date: [Written Statement: Tertiary Education Ministerial Advisory Group – Purpose, Remit and Update \(13 February 2026\) | GOV.WALES.](#)

Yours sincerely,



**Lynne Neagle AS/MS**

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg  
Cabinet Secretary for Education



**Vikki Howells AS/MS**

Y Gweinidog Addysg Bellach ac Uwch  
Minister for Further and Higher Education

# Agenda Item 3.13

Dear Cabinet Secretary for Education and Committee Chairs,

I'm writing as a mum from XXXXXXXXXXXX. My daughter, XXXX, has trained since she was a little girl to audition for a specialist musical theatre and/or dance degree at a leading college in England. We have discovered that, because she is Welsh-domiciled, she may be unable to access Student Finance Wales for these courses even if she earns a place through a competitive audition.

Over recent weeks I have tried to understand the position. I have contacted multiple specialist colleges and Student Finance Wales. I am attaching our email thread with SFW (16 Sept 2025, 24 Sept 2025, 7 Oct 2025, 8 Oct 2025) for your information. In summary, I was advised that some providers do not meet the current designation conditions for Welsh students; that automatic designation in franchise arrangements requires both the lead university and the partner provider to be OfS-registered; and that where specific designation hasn't been sought, SFW applications will be declined. Colleges have begun posting notices to that effect, leaving Welsh families with no viable funding route for a musical theatre and/or dance degree.

I understand that, on paper, the routes of automatic and specific designation still exist. But in practice, the way the arrangements are now operating has shut Welsh students out of specialist training unless providers choose to apply for specific designation (which only enables a reduced tuition fee loan, leaving families to bridge several thousand pounds per year). For ordinary families, that shortfall is impossible and it turns an audition success into a closed door.

It is also impractical and unfair to expect families to chase eight or more separate colleges for answers and hope that each one understands and navigates Welsh designation in time. Parents cannot and should not be responsible for fixing a systemic issue college by college. Some specialist colleges have indicated they will not go down the specific designation route at all. That leaves Welsh applicants with no pathway, regardless of talent or effort. This is compounded by the fact that most of the long established, industry-recognised conservatoires and specialist colleges for musical theatre and dance are in England. If Welsh students cannot access support for those courses, they are effectively shut out of the main professional training pipeline.

The timing is now critical. XXXX is aiming to start in September 2027, which means auditions begin from September 2026 and decisions will move quickly. Without clear funding arrangements, Welsh students will have to withdraw or decline offers purely because of where they live.

This isn't about special treatment; it's about fair access. XXXX knows places are won through audition, and we aren't assuming an outcome. We simply need to know that funding rules won't be the reason she has to say no whether it's for a musical theatre degree or a dance degree.

I am asking for urgent, higher-level scrutiny and a practical route forward:

1. A clear public statement (in plain language) on what Welsh-domiciled students can expect for 2026 audition season and 2027 entry to specialist musical theatre and/or dance degrees in England, without sending families back to each individual provider.
2. A workable pathway that does not place the burden on families, for example, a time-limited, streamlined process (with Medr and providers) to secure specific designation where appropriate, or an interim arrangement that restores fair access while the system is reviewed.

3. Recognition of the impact of the reduced tuition fee loan under specific designation and consideration of transitional support so successful Welsh applicants to musical theatre and/or dance degree programmes are not excluded purely because of funding.

An audition year is not just a date, auditions are seasonal, momentum matters, and opportunities don't always return. This is about the future of Welsh talent in dance and musical theatre, and about making sure our young people are not disadvantaged because of where they live.

Thank you for your time and for anything you can do to provide clarity and a fair route forward. I would welcome the opportunity to give evidence or supply further details.

With thanks,

**XXXXX XXXXXXXX**

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Peredur Owen Griffiths MS  
Chair  
Finance Committee  
Senedd Cymru

Mark Isherwood MS  
Chair  
Public Accounts and  
Public Administration Committee  
Senedd Cymru

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**Reference:** AC535/caf

**Date issued:** 26 February 2026

Dear Peredur and Mark

## Challenges and opportunities for Welsh public services

As you are aware, I am approaching the end of my term as Auditor General over a period that coincides with the Senedd election. Whatever the policy priorities for the next Welsh Government, the incoming administration faces some big questions around the future sustainability of our public services.

We recently released a [podcast series](#) that explored my perspective on some of those issues. My reflections built on the work of Audit Wales over the past eight years, as also summarised through my earlier [Picture of Public Services](#) reporting, my [‘Firefighting to future-proofing’](#) commentary, and my [‘No time to lose’](#) report on implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The podcasts also touch on themes discussed during my appearance at the [Finance Committee on 5 November 2025](#) as part of its Welsh Government budget scrutiny and in my [supporting written evidence](#). That evidence highlighted various relevant examples from my more recent work.

As your committees reach the end of their own terms, I wanted to put on record a summary of some of the thinking that sits behind the podcast series, although this is by no means exhaustive.

Frustratingly perhaps, much of what I have set out is not new; for example, my reflections around our public service landscape mirror issues raised by my predecessor and, before that, by other commentators. These issues are, in my view, ever more pressing. In the course of my time as Auditor General, I have seen much that is good. But the challenges facing public services are huge and the scope for improvement considerable. I hope that these reflections, and the fabulous work of my colleagues at Audit Wales, will be drawn on by the next Senedd and Welsh Government as they seek to address those issues.

As I step down, I should like to thank both Committees and the wider Senedd for their support for the work of Audit Wales throughout my tenure.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adrian Crompton', with a long horizontal stroke underneath.

**ADRIAN CROMPTON**  
**Auditor General for Wales**

Copied to: Senedd Policy & Legislation Committees

# Auditor General reflections on challenges and opportunities for Welsh public services

## Wales has a strong and capable public service

The people of Wales rely on our public services – we see their impact and delivery all around us in our schools, our hospitals, our homes, our environment, our communities.

Those services in turn rely on the skill, hard work and dedication of hundreds of thousands of public servants – frontline staff, politicians, senior leaders – whose motivation is to serve their communities and to improve the lives of others.

Services have been tested by two decades of financial pressure, demographic and social change, ever increasing demand, and wider challenges from climate change, Brexit and global events. The COVID-19 pandemic rocked our society to its core and called for an unprecedented response. The residual effects of the pandemic are still with us today in the shape of pent-up demand for services and fundamental changes to society and behaviours.

There is much to reflect on and learn from the pandemic response, as we are still seeing played out through the UK public inquiry and wider scrutiny. However, we should recognise we also saw the very best of the public service in Wales during the response. Frontline workers continued their vital work, often under immense pressure; the NHS and local and central government collaborated to deliver life-saving initiatives such as the Test, Trace, Protect programme and mass vaccination; all parts of the public service adapted swiftly through remote working and service redesign to continue supporting their communities.

Though a dreadful time for so many, the response showed what can be achieved when public services are united around a clear, common objective and pulling in the same direction. We saw this too in how public services worked together to accommodate and support displaced Ukrainians arriving in Wales from early 2022 onwards, building on learning from the pandemic response.

But excellent service delivery is not just about responding to emergencies. The public have a right to expect it always and for the flexibility, collaboration and pace we saw in the pandemic to be standard. They should also expect that public money is well-managed and delivering good value.

## Persistent and emerging challenges

Through the work of my office, I have consistently reported on some persistent challenges faced by the public sector.

### Financial pressures

In local government, budgets have been squeezed. Fast rising costs in areas like children's services and temporary accommodation are bringing some councils to the very edge of financial sustainability.

Generally, we see councils having a sound grip on their immediate financial pressures but with many relying on reserves to balance budgets.

This approach is unsustainable in the long run. Individual councils, and the sector as a whole must strengthen their long-term planning, forecasting and oversight if they are to remain financially viable.

In the NHS, the Senedd passed legislation in 2014 requiring individual health bodies to break even over a three-year period and to have medium-term financial plans that are approved by the Welsh Government. Yet despite these statutory expectations, most health boards have been unable to meet that break-even duty for several years.

Despite record levels of investment and ever-increasing levels of savings, health boards are struggling to control costs driven by rising demand for services, overall growth in pay costs, and other inflationary pressures. With most health boards still unable to produce financially balanced three-year plans, the overall NHS deficit position is unlikely to change for the foreseeable future.

Those financial pressures stimulate an understandable focus on short-term financial management. But this reactive approach hinders the longer-term planning and transformational changes that are needed to create more financially sustainable services.

This is all before we add into the mix wider pressures, for example around the investment needed to support policy priorities around decarbonisation, deal with the impacts of climate change, and help society adapt. I have reported previously that the scale of spending that might be needed in these areas, and where that funding will come from, remains unclear.

Against this backdrop, making the most of every pound of public spending is essential. The work of my office gives assurance that, overwhelmingly, public money

is well managed. Many public bodies demonstrate strong governance and accountability. However, there is still waste, error, and fraud. Exercises like the data matching we facilitate as part of the UK-wide National Fraud Initiative are an important part of our counter fraud landscape. However, there is much more that public bodies need to do to raise their game in response to increasing fraud risks.

## **Demand and performance**

Demographic and societal change, and the lingering impact of the pandemic are driving ever-increasing demand.

In some important areas, service performance and quality are declining. My 2025 report on cancer services, for example, described a failure to meet key waiting time targets and growing inequalities in outcomes despite increased funding. These issues are compounded by workforce shortages, ageing infrastructure, and rising public expectations.

Simply allocating more funds does not guarantee a solution. Except for 2022-23, the NHS has seen large, above inflation increases in its funding in recent years yet still it is unable to break even and performance in many areas is unsatisfactory.

And that ever-growing share being taken by the NHS undoubtedly squeezes the resource available for other areas. That changing pattern of funding between sectors needs to be rebalanced if important services are to be sustainable, and better outcomes need to be achieved across the board with the public money that is available.

## **Complexity and fragmentation**

The public service delivery landscape in Wales is crowded. By way of illustration, my office audits the accounts of close to 100 larger public bodies and structures, even before considering other smaller bodies that I audit, notably the over 700 town and community councils.

In addition, various partnership and collaborative arrangements exist to address the challenges and problems that cannot be addressed by individual organisations alone; for example, Public Services Boards, Regional Partnership Boards and Corporate Joint Committees.

These partnership structures are of variable effectiveness – with some very good and others less so. They often work on differing geographical footprints and can have

overlapping memberships and objectives. They each require contributions from many of the same players, so spreading available resource more thinly.

While every one of our public bodies and partnership structures is no doubt rooted in a well-intentioned rationale, the combined effect is overly complex.

That complexity leads to a system that can be fragmented and slow-moving, with overlapping responsibilities and unclear lines of accountability. This complexity can hinder transformation and make it difficult for citizens to navigate services or understand who is responsible for what.

Our work also shows how many public bodies often fail to capture the service-user perspective. This affects service design, public understanding of lines of accountability, and the ability of service users to navigate what can be complex and poorly signposted systems.

## **Trust and confidence**

I have growing concerns about declining trust and confidence in public services and governance structures across Wales.

That is not unique to Wales and is fed in part by factors beyond our control – broader geopolitical and domestic political issues, societal changes, change in the way people access media, information and analysis, the public's view of politics nationally and internationally.

Some factors, though, are much more within our gift. To win and maintain public trust and confidence, we must consistently demonstrate public service delivery that is timely and of good quality. When outcomes are poor and are not seen to improve – or seen to worsen – it is unsurprising that the public loses confidence in the public sector's capability. Not so much in the efforts of individuals and frontline services, but organisationally and system-wide.

We know from our own work and wider evidence that poverty and inequality remain deeply entrenched in many communities despite the best efforts of local government and others.

Similarly, my work in the NHS has shown that the failure to meet targets in key areas such as elective waiting times and ambulance handovers has sadly become the norm. This is demoralising for staff and will colour patients' views.

A further factor, on which I have a direct line of sight, is governance. It might not sound the most obvious cause of low public confidence, but I believe it is important.

The overwhelming majority of public sector organisations are well governed most of the time. Regrettably, though, I have reported on too many examples of poor organisational governance at every tier of the public sector – from the Welsh Government itself to the NHS, local government, some central government organisations, and the smallest tier of government in our town and community councils.

I fear even a small number of such cases colour the public's perspective of public sector governance in the round. These failures invariably feature some weaknesses in process such as poor record-keeping, application of policy, or a lack of transparency. But more significantly, in my view, many governance failures in public organisations are rooted not in process but in human behaviour.

If those in the public sector, especially in positions of leadership, lose sight of the required values and behaviours, the effects are damaging. They manifest in the form of poor decision making, relationship breakdown, wasted public money – on settlement payments, legal or consultancy fees – and distracted organisational leadership and service provision.

And every time the public sees such examples, it further undermines their confidence and trust: trust that is essential if the public is to support the kind of transformation required to make our public services sustainable for the long term.

## Opportunities to do things better

### Getting the basics right

Effective public service delivery begins with getting the basics right. Years of financial pressure has left some important areas under-invested and this needs addressing if we are to improve services and increase public sector productivity.

#### Digital

The technology already exists to transform service delivery, reduce costs and improve the user experience. I recognise that the public sector is already working to improve its approach to realising benefits from digital solutions and identifying services requiring transformation.

This work must replace antiquated IT systems, improve the quality and shareability of data, recruit and retain scarce skills in high demand across the economy, and reshape service delivery with citizens and users at the heart. The challenge is considerable.

The potential efficiency gains in those services are enormous, with more modern and responsive public services delivering improved service to customers. However, I have also emphasised the importance of balancing spending on infrastructure with work to tackle the root causes of digital exclusion. And while artificial intelligence presents great opportunity, it is not without risk.

My work on councils' digital strategies has revealed uneven progress. Only half of Welsh councils had up-to-date digital strategies, and many lacked robust arrangements for resourcing, monitoring, and evaluating impact.

In the NHS, digital transformation can be extremely slow and made more difficult by funding and capacity constraints, information governance challenges, and a lack of consistency on the 'Once for Wales' approach.

One prime example of these challenges can be seen in my previous reporting on the implementation of the Welsh Community Care Information System where, unfortunately, the reality of implementation did not meet the original ambition.

More specific and closer to home, my audit work could be made far more efficient and effective if the bodies we audit had modern systems for their financial and

performance information. In many cases, bodies instead have ageing, unreliable systems that are difficult to interrogate or integrate.

Many systems are outdated and not fit for purpose, limiting the ability of organisations to manage operations effectively or provide timely, reliable data for audit and decision-making. This technological deficit hampers both assurance and accountability, and crucially the ability to modernise and join up services to make them more efficient and improve the end-user experience.

So investing in updated finance and performance platforms is not simply to benefit the auditor – that is a relatively marginal matter. The more important question, and what should be front of mind for senior leaders, is how can they expect to run well-governed organisations, and take informed decisions, without them? Outdated systems can also increase cyber-security risks, something public bodies cannot afford to be complacent about.

## **Workforce**

Workforce pressures are a recurring theme across my work. In all sectors and many specialised areas, staffing challenges – exacerbated by rising demand – have strained service delivery.

Examples from our work include capacity and capability challenges within the Welsh Government's civil service, pressure resulting from recruitment and retention challenges in the NHS and education, and in other specialised areas such as digital transformation, planning, active travel, building safety, and flood defence.

We see in our audit of accounts work too that many organisations are struggling to recruit and retain high quality finance professionals. This is concerning, and not just because we need these people to help produce good quality sets of accounts but because the finance profession has an important role to play in plotting a path to a more sustainable future for our public services.

Competition for specialist skills is inevitable, even within the public sector, and there will always be questions for public bodies to ask themselves about what they do in-house and what could be done by other organisations. But there needs to be a stronger approach to developing coherent workforce strategies, aligning staffing models with future service needs, and developing staff accordingly. Without this, policy ambitions risk being undermined by operational constraints.

## **Asset and infrastructure management**

The efficient maintenance and improvement of existing assets such as roads, hospitals, schools and flood defences is every bit as important as getting value for money in building new infrastructure. After all, new assets will only deliver promised benefits if they are properly maintained.

All too often our work has highlighted the false economy of allowing maintenance backlogs to build up. Not least within the NHS where challenges with an outdated estate can drive inefficiencies, cost and impact negatively on patient care.

So a disciplined approach to asset management, for each part of the public estate, is an essential component of the change we need to see.

Overall, the Welsh Government spends more than £3 billion a year on infrastructure, although a lot of that is delivered through other public bodies. My recent review of how the Government is managing that significant spend shows clear effort to align it with wider strategic outcomes.

But these benefits will not magically materialise. It will need a concerted effort to line up the machinery of government – baking these benefits into plans from the outset and ensuring they are delivered over the longer-term. These issues are within the Welsh Government's gift to put right but rely on a sustained improvement in programme and project management that has not been achieved to date.

The underlying weaknesses in some of these basic building blocks of our public service contributes to the second area where I believe change is required, namely productivity and value for money in the public sector.

## **Productivity and value for money**

In the face of rising demand pressure and ever-more stretched budgets, improving productivity and delivering better value for money is essential.

Our work points to some of the productivity challenges for the public sector, especially in the NHS where outputs in terms of activity have not increased in proportion to additional inputs in terms of money and capacity in areas such planned care.

I am sure that leaders across the public sector share an ambition to make a step change in productivity. There's enough evidence from the positive examples we have found in our work to be confident that significant amounts of public money can be

freed up. But it will take a disciplined, focused, cross-government approach over several years to fully realise the potential and make the exceptional the norm.

Hence, my reports consistently highlight that VFM is not just about spending less, it is about making the money we do have work better. A good example is the number of people who are in hospital awaiting discharge. While there has been some recent improvement, the picture across Wales remains challenged, absorbing huge costs and adversely affecting patient flow and the optimal rehabilitation of patients.

Many discharge delays are a result of waiting for social care support, often linked to funding and resource pressures in local authorities. Better funding to increase social care capacity would therefore free up significant NHS resource and represent a cost-effective way of improving patient experience and outcomes.

In a context of constrained budgets and rising demand, public bodies must focus on outcomes, not just outputs, and ensure that every pound spent contributes meaningfully to public well-being. At a very basic level, our work shows that too often public bodies lack reliable data with which to assess value for money and are unclear as to the outcomes they are looking to achieve.

My work on Active Travel, for instance, demonstrated how the Welsh Government itself is unclear about how assessment of its policy is to be achieved. As a result, significant sums had been invested without a robust means to assess its effectiveness and value for money.

And I have reported previously on how the Welsh Government had not done enough to ensure its investment in affordable housing contributes to wider policy objectives and to be able to tell a clear story on that front.

Many public organisations struggle to report on outcomes effectively. Performance tends to focus on outputs—such as the number of services delivered—without evaluating the difference those services make.

It is vital too that the public sector views value for money through the lens of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, which requires public bodies to consider long-term impacts, prevention, integration, collaboration, and involvement. As I have emphasised through my reporting on implementation of the Act, we cannot afford for public services to design solutions that do not meet people's needs, burden future generations with avoidable higher costs, or miss opportunities to deliver more with the same or less.

That much sharper and relentless focus on the delivery of value for money also requires a mindset shift to one focused on prevention and the longer term.

## Shifting to a long-term, preventative mindset

Public Health Wales has estimated that for every £1 invested in public health interventions, there is a return of £14. This includes reduced demand on hospitals, social care, housing, and emergency services.

But too often, public services operate in crisis mode, responding to immediate pressures rather than planning for the future. This short-termism is reinforced by annual budget cycles, reactive funding decisions, and political incentives that prioritise quick wins over sustainable outcomes.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act provides a legislative framework to do something different – to act for the long-term and to act preventatively by addressing the root causes of issues, rather than dealing with the symptoms.

However, I have highlighted recently some prime examples where public bodies have been struggling to make a meaningful shift towards prevention, as evidenced for example in my work on cancer services and on how councils are managing temporary accommodation demand. This is despite there being clear evidence that investment in prevention makes sense from a value for money perspective.

Though Wales has an overarching, legislative framework to drive a longer-term, preventative mindset, our work suggests it is not yet doing so.

One of the challenges with prevention is that benefits take time to materialise. This lag can make prevention politically and operationally difficult, especially in a climate of financial pressure. However, the long-term gains—in health, well-being, and cost savings—are substantial and well-evidenced.

The Welsh Government has a critical role in enabling prevention. This includes setting coherent policy frameworks, aligning funding mechanisms, and creating incentives for collaboration.

It must lead a shift towards long-term financial planning, integrated delivery models, and cross-sectoral working. This means breaking down silos and ensuring that prevention is a whole-of-government priority.

Prevention cannot be achieved through isolated programmes. It requires a more radical, whole-system change and joined-up working between a range of agencies such health, social care, housing, education, and the third sector, with aligned accountabilities and funding streams and shared outcomes. Prevention must be embedded not just in strategy documents, but in everyday decision-making,

budgeting, and service design. Without this any policy aspirations around prevention risk becoming more rhetoric than reality.

## **Reducing complexity**

As noted earlier, the current landscape of Welsh public services is characterised by a web of organisations, partnerships, and governance structures. The cumulative effect is a system that is fragmented and difficult to navigate.

While it is not for me to blueprint the alternative, I am clear on the need to simplify and avoid further complexity. If starting from a blank sheet of paper, we would surely not design the arrangements we currently have in place.

Reducing complexity is not about dismantling collaboration but about streamlining it. We need fewer, clearer structures with well-defined and sharper lines of accountability.

This is also not simply about rationalising the number of public bodies or making their collaboration with each other more effective. Reducing complexity and strengthening integration and collaboration applies just as much to the internal functioning of public organisations. These are expectations set by the Well-being of Future Generations Act where our work demonstrates much more needs to be done.

Citizen-centred design must underpin this simplification: services should be organised around the needs of people, not the convenience of institutions. This means engaging communities in shaping services, using plain language in communication, ensuring that performance information is meaningful and accessible, and considering the equality and other impacts of decisions. It also means being honest with the public about what constitutes safe and affordable public service provision, especially in relation to health and care services.

A simpler, more streamlined public service in Wales would also help breakdown silos within and between sectors and support better sharing and embedding of good practice. The latter is something that Wales seems to struggle with and all too often my work points to unexplained and often unacceptable variation in performance across different public bodies. This is despite our relatively small size and the close connections of many in the public sector. When good practice is established in part of the public sector, a more robust approach to 'adopt or justify' elsewhere may be required.

As Auditor General I see complexity manifested in other ways, including through our annual audit of the accounts of public sector bodies. A dry topic to some, this work is

essential if the public and the Senedd are to have an accurate and timely picture of the state of the public finances. For individual organisations, that accuracy and timeliness are essential if good decisions are to be taken.

For our local authorities, for example, the financial regime in which they operate is becoming increasingly technical with disproportionate emphasis on things like asset valuations and pension liabilities. Important, but obscuring what truly matters to users – councillors, officers, the public – namely, how public money is spent and the value it delivers.

I see some particular challenges emerging in this area which, if not addressed, will quickly weaken the overall financial regime and lead to poor decision making and a reduction in transparency.

## **Leadership**

Addressing the areas I have mentioned will require political and executive leadership.

That means being honest about the scale of change required, making difficult decisions, and communicating clearly the necessary trade-offs. It also means modelling the behaviours we want to see: integrity, collaboration, and a relentless focus on outcomes.

The Welsh Government has a pivotal role to play in enabling this transformation. It is our system leader, sets the tone, and provides the legislative and financial frameworks within which other public bodies operate. While the Welsh Government does much that is good, too often I find myself reporting that it needs to be clearer and firmer in its system leadership.

My work has also highlighted examples where the Welsh Government can do more to support implementation of legislation it has introduced and follow up on whether it is being implemented effectively and having the desired impact.

It must provide clarity and coherence across policies, funding, and accountability frameworks. Mixed messages – such as promoting prevention while incentivising short-term performance targets – undermine progress.

This has been my central message in much of the work we have done around the Well-being of Future Generations Act. So that, for example, the expectation on organisations to plan and act for the long term and with prevention in mind, is not undermined by funding decisions, target setting, and accountability frameworks that incentivise the opposite.

I recognise the intense pressures faced by public sector leaders. These are difficult jobs. It is testament to them that our work often highlights examples of good practice where leaders have taken bold decisions in difficult circumstances.

But as noted already, my work on governance and transparency has also shone a light on the small number of cases where leadership fails to uphold the desired values. The result can be costly, public confidence erodes and service effectiveness suffers.

The challenges facing Welsh public services are complex and systemic. They cannot be solved by technical fixes or incremental change. They require bold decisions, honest conversations, and a shared commitment to doing what is needed.

## Conclusion

Despite the significant challenges facing public services, there is potential for meaningful reform and improvement, especially if the themes I have described are sincerely addressed.

Wales is a small, tightly networked country; a population of just over three million people; a newly expanded legislative parliament and a government with significant autonomy; its public spending budget of nearly £30 billion represents almost one third of Welsh GDP; and despite challenges its public sector is highly capable and well-resourced compared to many countries.

One of our advantages is our scale. We are big enough to act strategically but small enough to be agile, collaborative and innovative. We can convene the key players on any issue, enabling us to act swiftly and cohesively in a way that is much harder in larger jurisdictions. That is a great base to work from.

The expansion of the Senedd to 96 members marks a further significant milestone in Welsh democracy. The public sector will rightly look to that new Senedd and Welsh Government for leadership in tackling the challenges I have outlined.

I very much hope that the larger legislature uses its additional capacity to improve scrutiny and accountability, and thereby to strengthen evidence-led policymaking. If not, a hard-won constitutional change will have been wasted.

As it does so, the message I would leave after eight years in the role of Auditor General is that radical transformation is needed.

It is possible, but difficult, and will require a clarity of purpose on the scale of that seen during the Covid years.

Public service leaders across Wales recognise the scale of the challenge and many are already navigating complex environments with limited resources. But the pace and progress need to be increased.

If not, our current model of public service delivery is not sustainable. Money will become even more thinly spread, services will continue to deteriorate, and outcomes will worsen. There must be a shift from short-term firefighting to long-term futureproofing, as I have called for consistently.

The Welsh Government has a critical role in providing leadership and in creating the conditions for transformation. This includes reducing funding uncertainty where possible, aligning policy and delivery frameworks, incentivising collaboration and

encouraging investment in prevention. It must also lead by example, embedding the sustainable development principle in its own operations and ensuring that its actions match its policy intent.

And even then, success will hinge on individuals making the right choices. Funding, process, frameworks and policies are important, and of course the work of auditors, regulators, politicians, and the media are essential in holding public organisations accountable. But those scrutineers should not, and cannot, be everywhere. Ultimately, our public services rely on thousands of people making the right choices, taking the right decisions, and acting in the right way.

The challenge for government and organisational leaders throughout the public sector is to make that as easy as possible – to lead by example, to role model desired behaviours, to give clarity about the scale of challenge and permission to make the changes required, and to create an environment in which all those in public service can play their part.

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