



Jayne Bryant MS
Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee
Welsh Parliament

12 July 2021

Dear Chair,

Thank you for providing the final report from the Children, Young People and Education Committee's enquiry into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people in Wales.

We would like to thank you, the Committee members and staff for their hard work and diligence in producing this report during the previous Senedd term.

We look forward to maintaining a close focus on the continuing impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable children and young people, including focusing on the areas highlighted in the final report.

Yours sincerely

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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.

**Welsh Government response to the Final Report of the
Children, Young People and Education Committee
'Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Young People'**

<p>Recommendation 1 - Well-being and education: Placing our children and young people's well-being and education at the centre of all recovery planning must be a priority</p>

Accept

The approach we are taking in Wales to address the impacts of the pandemic on children and young people will keep the physical and mental health and well-being of our learners at its core. These are key enablers of learning. The Recruit, Recover and Raise standards accelerating learning programme includes provision for support and engagement through coaching – in recognition that the most disengaged learners will need coaching and emotional support, as well as support for examination preparation and skills. Similarly, our approach will seek to ensure that schools and settings have the right support and guidance available to them to support their learners' well-being and educational progression.

On 23 March the former Minister for Education made an [Oral Statement](#) on wellbeing in education. In it she shared her concerns over the impact the pandemic has had on young people and the need to support them as we look to rebuild society and our day-to-day lives. In March, we gave schools the flexibility to provide learners in years 7, 8 and 9 with the opportunity of a check-in focussed on support for wellbeing and readiness for a return to their onsite learning after Easter.

In addition to this, supporting the unique needs of our youngest learners through play has already been [highlighted as a priority](#) by the new Minister for Education and Welsh Language. The Minister recently [announced an additional £13m of funding](#) for schools and non-maintained settings to support the delivery of active educational play and experimental learning.

Recommendation 2 - Positive steps forward: Acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on our children and young people, and the disruption it has caused to their lives, is vital. But there is an important balance to be struck between recognising and addressing this, and promoting much more positive messaging about children and young people’s resilience and their opportunities going forward. Replacing the unhelpful narrative and language about “lost learning” and need for “catch-up” must be a priority

Accept

In order to support learners to move forward and achieve in their education, it is crucial that we recognise the impacts of the pandemic and provide the proper support for all parts of the system to help address these.

We know that the approach to supporting learning should focus on learners’ wellbeing and confidence, as key foundations for learning. Our renew and reform work to date has not sought to use the terms ‘catch up’ or ‘lost learning’: these terms are not consistent with the approach we take to learning in the Curriculum for Wales. A more sophisticated approach is required, recognising the different impacts the disruptions of the last year will have had on different learners. We need to support the foundations for learning like physical and mental health and well-being, and support schools to focus on the learning that is most important for their learners’ educational progression, while maintaining a broad and balanced provision.

Recommendation 3 - Contingencies: Preparing for, and resourcing, the response to supporting our children and young people through any further disruption from COVID-19 must be a priority, across all public services

Accept

At the start of the pandemic the Welsh Government mobilised support for digitally excluded learners, securing a national connectivity deal with major mobile operators to provide 10,848 MiFi devices and establishing a technical solution to allow schools and local authorities to repurpose 9,717 existing devices for use in a learner's home.

More recently, a scheme to provide data uplifts to learners across Wales was launched and will further bolster the support for connectivity services to help meet any additional demand identified by local authorities in this academic year.

Through the ongoing Welsh Government investment in the Hwb EdTech programme, as well as local authorities funding their own additional purchases, we are confident that there are options available to all local authorities to meet the existing identified demand for connectivity services and devices across Wales.

In February 2021 we provided an additional £5m to schools and settings via the Welsh Local Government Association to put further mitigating measures in place. Flexibility was provided to enable schools and settings to respond to their own specific needs. Examples of possible measures included the purchasing of face coverings, improving ventilation and purchasing canopies to create extra ventilated spaces for learners and offering protection from the weather.

These measures have helped schools and settings to respond to current challenges, as well as prepare for potential disruption in the future, ensuring their school environments are as Covid-safe as possible.

Recommendation 4 - Children's rights and voices: Adopting a children's rights approach to all decisions, across all sectors, must be a priority, and the voices of children and young people must be heard by the decision makers to help shape our road to recovery

Accept

Wales is a country where children's rights are a fundamental entitlement. We have led the way in children's rights by enshrining them in law through The Rights of the Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011.

The Welsh Government has committed in our draft [*Children's Rights Scheme*](#) to develop a long-term participation strategy to ensure children and young people are provided with meaningful opportunities to express their views.

The Welsh Government provides funding to Children in Wales, which is a national umbrella body for organisations and individuals who work with children, young people and their families in Wales. This funding enables children and young people to have their views heard by Ministers and policy makers through the 'Young Wales' programme and other participation activity.

Recommendation 5 - Recovery infrastructure: Putting in place the infrastructure for the medium- to long-term recovery from the disruption to education from COVID-19 and the implications for the further work needed on school improvement and achieving equality of outcomes. Having enough of the right people in post is key to this, as is the need to maximise the impact of all parts of the education system, including schools, local authorities and regional consortia

Accept

The Welsh Government has developed non-statutory school improvement guidance that sets out a framework for evaluation, improvement and accountability for schools, local authorities, regional consortia and Estyn, and which aligns with the new curriculum. A public consultation seeking views on the [school improvement guidance](#) closed on Monday 15 March and officials are now reviewing the responses received. The guidance will be finalised ahead of the 2021/22 academic year.

Robust evaluation and accountability arrangements to support a self-improving system' is one of the four enabling objectives of the new curriculum. The OECD's report to Welsh Government, '[Achieving the new curriculum for Wales](#)', emphasises that for the new curriculum to be successful, all aspects of the school system need to be aligned with and support the new curriculum and its underlying principle. The accountability framework is designed to align with the new curriculum principles, including the delivery of the four purposes.

The overarching purpose of the guidance is to help schools improve in order to give learners the best possible learning experiences and outcomes and, in this way, to raise standards and narrow the gap between disadvantaged learners and their peers.

Last summer Welsh Government announced an additional £29m funding to recruit, recover and raise standards in Welsh schools in response to the impact created by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding was to support the recruitment of the equivalent of 600 extra teachers and 300 teaching assistants. We have exceeded those targets. Recent recruitment data from LAs shows current numbers of around 1,800 recruits across the system incorporating Teachers, TAs and other staff (such as mentors, and youth workers) designed to support learners facing the greatest challenges.

The Welsh Government has provided over £20m for learners for the summer term 2021 to retain and extend Recruit Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS), and to support learners in transition years (years 11, 12 and 13). For the academic year 2021/2, the Welsh Government has committed over £130m, including £24m for continuing RRRS and retaining the 1800 teaching staff to provide bespoke support and mentoring for learners most in need; £33m for FE and sixth forms to support transition years, and £13m focused on early years learners. This also includes over £25m for free school meals and the School Holiday Enrichment Programme for disadvantaged learners, and £5m for the Summer of Fun.

Recommendation 6 - Education contingencies: Preparing for, and resourcing, the response to any further disruption from COVID-19, including any future need for remote teaching, learning lessons from the past twelve months e.g. in terms of digital exclusion (including issues relating to connectivity), varying experiences of learners, impact on the Welsh language skills of pupils from non-Welsh speaking households, and the importance of parental engagement

Accept

The Welsh Government remains fully committed to working closely with local authorities to ensure schools and learners have the necessary support to engage in digital learning opportunities.

We continue to invest heavily in our Hwb programme to provide maintained schools in Wales with a wide range of digital infrastructure, services and resources. This investment, which to date totals over £160 million, is helping transform the EdTech infrastructure in schools, deliver national services which are accessible to all learners and practitioners in both the school and home environment. It has also supported the distribution of more than 133,000 end user devices during the pandemic, with a further 51,500 devices ordered and being distributed throughout April and May.

Wales is very well placed to support schools, practitioners and learners during periods of remote teaching and learning through Hwb, our national digital platform for teaching and learning. Hwb provides users with access to a range of free, bilingual digital tools and resources.

Our [blended learning section](#) on Hwb includes resources to support education stakeholders with blended learning activities as well as links to advice on health and well-being. ‘*Stay Safe. Stay Learning*’ pulls together contributions from across education, and beyond, to provide support to the whole of our education system, while the ‘*Keeping safe online*’ zone also provides extensive support to all education stakeholders, including a wide range of resources and other support services.

The Welsh Government has also extended its support for digitally excluded learners until the end of the current academic year and is working closely with local authorities to ensure a range of support is available to support any periods of further disruption.

In relation to Post-16 learning, the Welsh Government has made over £10 million capital funding available since July 2020 to assist Post-16 learning providers (including further education institutions, work-based learning programmes and adult learning in the community provision) in supporting digitally excluded learners to continue their learning remotely when they have not been able to access onsite premises and facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A summary report on the Post-16 digital inclusion funding will be prepared during spring 2021. As blended learning becomes an embedded part of learning delivery going forward, more sustainable models for investment in digital infrastructure and equipment will need to be developed collaboratively with our learning providers.

The need to support Welsh language learners and their families was identified early on in the pandemic, which is why a specific work stream in the [Stay Safe. Stay Learning: continuity of learning Plan](#) was established with input from schools, regional education consortia as well as the BBC, S4C and Welsh language publishers. This resulted in additional Welsh language resources for schools – but also for parents – added to HwB. Focus was firmly placed on resources to stimulate learners' reading, listening, and use of Welsh – from Foundation Phase through to Secondary school.

In parallel, the Welsh Language Partnership Council, established to support the former Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and Welsh language on aspects of *Cymraeg 2050* implementation, former an Education Sub-Group to look at the potential effect of the pandemic on learner linguistic development as well as the support needed for parents, as well as opportunities for immersion education principles to be used to support learner catch-up.

The Sub-Group started by considering the results of a parental survey carried out by RhAG (Parents for Welsh medium education) - a Welsh Government grant funded organisation – focused on the impact of the lockdown period on parents and pupils in Welsh-medium education. The survey, which received over 800 responses, identified the need for teachers, local authorities and Welsh Government to be more pro-active in communicating simple, clear messages to parents, as well as providing practical support, advice and reassurance to parents tasked with supporting their children to maintain their Welsh-language skills from home.

We are currently working with RhAG on a second parental survey to gather how the return to school / period of blended learning has affected learners in Welsh-medium schools, and whether or not the use of intensive immersion teaching principles used in schools is providing learners and their families with the support they need to continue their Welsh language learning.

Recommendation 7 - Support for both vulnerable and disadvantaged learners: Supporting progress and educational outcomes among these groups, including (but not restricted to) those eligible for free school meals (eFSM), children from other low income households, those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), young carers, care experienced children, and learners in Pupil Referral Units and other EOTAS settings. This should be underpinned by the collection and publication of disaggregated attendance data for this group of pupils during the pandemic to identify any specific changes

Accept

A new Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system will be introduced in September 2021 on a phased basis, to replace the existing SEN system. This will create a unified legislative framework to support learners from 0 to 25 years, who have ALN. Its focus is on ensuring all children and young people that require additional support to meet their needs, have that support properly planned for and protected.

An additional £9.8 million was allocated to schools and colleges to support Additional Learning Needs in 2020-21, specifically in response to pressures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in addition to the £8 million already allocated for ALN in 2020-21 and the £20 million package of support for the ALN Transformation Programme already in place for the current Senedd term, and recognises the particular difficulties for children and young people with additional needs during COVID-19.

Five ALN transformation leads (TLs) have been in post since April 2018. They provide advice, support and challenge to local authorities, schools, Early Years settings and Further Education Institutions as they prepare for implementation of the ALN transformation programme, including through readiness self-assessments and the development of local implementation plans.

From September 2021 onwards, the TLs will switch their focus to quality assuring the introduction of the new system and ensuring it is appropriately implemented and embedded. This will include moderating and supporting the creation of Individual Development Plans; ongoing engagement with health, including a focus on the development and refinement of effective referral pathways; ongoing delivery of training packages, continuing engagement with early years and health sectors, and a particular focus on the effective implementation of the reforms in the post-16 sector.

Additionally, we published [Guidance for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners](#), which is intended to support schools and settings to ensure an inclusive approach for all learners, with specific considerations for young carers and care experienced children.

We recognise that young carers may have experienced an increase in caring responsibilities during the pandemic; either in the number of hours they are caring, the type of tasks they have been carrying out or in the number of people they are caring for. This may mean that a young carer has not been able to fully engage in home learning and has fallen behind in their studies, which may cause anxiety about their education.

The Welsh Government funded [Carers Trust Wales](#) to produce guides and lesson plans, which were launched in 2020, to help schools and settings improve their understanding of the needs and legal rights of young carers.

We remain committed to improving educational outcomes for looked after children. Our raising attainment advocate Sir Alasdair Macdonald undertook a scoping exercise between January and March 2020 exploring an integrated approach to improving educational outcomes for looked after children.

The five recommendations in the report are wide-ranging, including one to develop a Welsh Virtual schools model. We have commissioned an independent researcher, IFF Research, to undertake further research and engagement with partners to understand how the recommendations could be implemented and progress made quickly. Their final report is in the late stages of completion and will be made available shortly.

We have also increased funding for PDG-Access by £3.2m to boost support for eligible learners, bringing total funding next year to over £10m. Increasing funding for demand led budgets in this way allows us to respond to changes in need and make sure that those who most need additional support are able to access it in a timely manner.

Since September 2020 we have been monitoring the attendance rates of FSM and ALN learners. Whilst the data are not currently considered to be suitable to form an official statistical release (the data was collected at a time when schools faced many challenges and records may not be as up to date or as accurate as in more normal times. In addition, the current definition is not comparable to historical data), this is something the new Minister will take forward in this Government term.

Recommendation 8 - Whole-system approach to mental health and well-being: Delivering a whole-school and whole-system approach to learners' emotional and mental health and well-being, following our 'Mind over Matter' inquiry reports

Accept

On 15 March 2021 we published the [Framework on embedding a whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing](#) coinciding with the return to education of older children. The Framework is a key response to the 2018 Children, Young People and Education Committee [Mind over Matter](#) (MoM) report. MoM examined the emotional and mental wellbeing of children and young people, with an emphasis on the role of education. It also focused on the needs of the 'missing middle', young people with real emotional difficulties, but who do not necessarily have a diagnosable mental illness and who often received little or no support as a result.

Taken together with the work of the [NHS led Together for Children and Young People Programme](#), which is looking at the wider 'whole system approach', the Framework seeks to ensure schools, local authorities and other partners meet all the wellbeing needs of young people in a consistent and equitable way.

Additionally, we recognised throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic concern about the impact on learners and staff has continued to grow in all sectors within Education. To support this, a further £2.5m has been allocated to the Further Education sector with £0.5m ring-fenced for work-based learning.

For financial year 2021-22, a further £2m has been allocated to support mental health and wellbeing in Further Education. This funding will help maintain partnerships, encourage further collaboration and will ensure a more consistent approach to supporting mental health and well-being across the sector.

Building on the additional £2m provided in 2020-21 for the whole school approach, a further £4m is being allocated in 2021-22, providing an overall budget of £9m for the whole school approach to mental health in 2021-22.

Recommendation 9 - School funding: Delivering the recommendations of our school funding inquiry and subsequent Sibieta Review, to ensure that sufficient funding is provided for schools and distributed effectively.

Accept in principle

The main source of funding the Welsh Government provides for schools is to local authorities through the Local Government Settlement Revenue Support Grant (RSG) within the Housing and Local Government MEG. Providing local government with the best possible settlement has been central to our budget preparations again this year. We are providing local government with an uplift of £176m in 2021-22 to support front line services, including schools and social services. This builds on a significantly improved settlement in the current year to enable support and delivery of critical and valued local services focusing on schools and social care.

We continue to recognise that Education is one of the most important investments we can make to improve the life chances of children, particularly those from deprived communities and those with protected characteristics. Alongside funding for local government, which will support schools, we have made a number of specific investments. This includes £112m over 2020-21 and 2021-22 to support teachers and learners impacted by the pandemic, £23.3m additional COVID-funding to extend free school meals in school holidays for the entirety of 2021-22 and an additional £21.7m in 2021-22 to recognise the predicted increased demographic of 16-19 year olds in sixth forms and further education.

The [Review of school spending in Wales](#) provides valuable evidence to enable policy makers to make informed decisions when considering funding for schools across Wales in the future, continuing our overall aim of improving school standards and reducing inequalities. The findings will be used to aid policy makers to determine whether schools in different circumstances have sufficient funding and how to best target any increases in spending, both now and in the future, to support our education reforms.

[The 21st Century Schools and Colleges Capital Programme](#) has been investing in the schools estate annually since 2014. Welsh Government delivers the Programme in partnership with key stakeholders, i.e. local authorities, colleges and others; and it is our stakeholders that prioritise the projects for investment. When possible, a capital maintenance grant has been made available to support the local authorities' annual repair and maintenance programme.

Recommendation 10 - Qualifications: Monitoring the awarding of general and vocational qualifications in 2021 and 2022, including the balance between maintaining public confidence in the credibility of qualifications and ensuring fairness for cohorts affected by the disruption from COVID-19

Accept

The Design and Delivery Advisory Group, comprising a range of head teachers and college leaders from across Wales, supported by expert assessment advice from WJEC and Qualifications Wales, has co-constructed the approach to awarding general qualifications in 2021 and is supporting its delivery.

Key priorities informing the development of the centre determined grade model, announced by the former Minister for Education on 20 January 2021, have been supporting the wellbeing and progression of learners taking qualifications this year and maintaining the credibility of the qualifications system in 2021 and future years. As the regulator, Qualifications Wales, will monitor the awarding of both vocational and general qualifications and will publish a range of analysis regarding qualifications in 2021, to provide transparency regarding the arrangements developed for 2021.

We recognise that learners who will be taking qualifications in 2022 are keen to understand how they will be supported given the disruption from COVID-19, however in the first instance we have had to prioritise the arrangements for qualifications in 2021 to ensure these learners are able to progress to their next steps in education, work or employment.

Qualifications Wales has confirmed that adaptations will be made to qualifications in 2022, recognising the disruption to teaching and learning there has been, and a technical consultation with teachers and subject matter specialists will be held in the summer term, so that these arrangements can then be confirmed prior to inform teaching and learning plans for the next academic year.

Recommendation 11 - Major legislative reform and competing pressures:
Ensuring that sufficient resources are available to manage the impact of COVID-19 alongside the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 from September 2021 and the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 (subject to Royal Assent) from September 2022

Accept

In February 2021 the former Minister for Education agreed to extend the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) transformation programme into the 2021-22 financial year to align with revised implementation timescales. This included extending the term of the five ALN Transformation Lead posts for an additional year, to continue supporting the delivery of the ALN transformation programme. They provide advice, support and challenge to local authorities, schools, Early Years settings and further education institutions as they prepare for implementation of the ALN transformation programme, including through readiness self-assessments and the development of local implementation plans.

In addition, in 2021-22, we will distribute again an £8m ALN Grant to support local authorities and further education colleges in providing education for children and young people with additional learning needs. A £9.8 million grant to support Additional Learning Needs in 2020-21 has been distributed to local authorities and colleges, recognising specific pressures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to our ongoing support for professional learning we have increased funding for curriculum and assessment reform by some £8.3 million for the 2021-22 financial year. The vast majority of this additional funding will go to schools to support their curriculum development work during this key phase.

Recommendation 12 - Physical activity: Increasing opportunities for physical activity for children and young people, in communities and within schools, in order to maximise the physical and mental health benefits of exercise and play. Opportunities for outdoor activity should be opened up as soon as safely possible, and only subject to future restrictions if absolutely essential and evidence of the need to do so is clearly demonstrated

Accept

We have been keen to ensure all our schools and settings recognise the importance of learning outdoors both in direct response to the pandemic, but also in respect of wider learner well-being benefits. We have therefore set out clear guidance on learning, and guidance on operational issues that includes the expectation that schools and settings maximise the time learners spend outdoors.

More widely, we have also been keen to recognise the place of outdoor learning in support of learner progression through the 3 to 16 learning continuum across the curriculum. This has been set out in guidance on our new Curriculum for Wales, published last year. While this transformational curriculum is set to be rolled-out from September 2022, a great many of our schools are already drawing on its purposes and approaches in response to learning needs arising from the pandemic.

Residential outdoor education experiences can also play an important role in supporting the roll-out of the new curriculum for Wales. The centres provide expert-led learning outside the classroom and recognised wellbeing benefits. In recognition of the impact the pandemic has had on residential outdoor education the Minister for Education [announced a joint £2m fund](#) with the Minister for Economy, Transport and North Wales to support the sector in Wales.

Colegau Cymru have been grant funded to deliver a national project which addresses the active wellbeing of learners and staff and examines how active wellbeing positively impacts on mental health. The project involves peer led research on active wellbeing to develop a range of resources and infographics to support the active wellbeing of learners and staff. It also aims to identify gaps in research regarding the links with physical activity and well-being in Further Education. This research presents an opportunity to engage with learners and staff to better understand the connection between activity and wellbeing.

The Welsh Government's guidance to childcare providers on keeping settings safe underlines the importance of maximising opportunities for outdoor activity. As part of the ECEC vision, which will dovetail into the new curriculum, children will be able to access a high quality and stimulating environment both indoors and outdoors.

Recommendation 13 - Sustainability of the workforce: Addressing the recruitment and retention issues in the child (physical and mental) health workforce, and ensuring that the Welsh Government and Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) look strategically and creatively at how this workforce is used and the skillsets needed. This should include consideration of roles which bridge the gaps between services (for example between primary and secondary care and between specialties)

Accept

The Health Education and Improvement Wales and Social Care Wales [Workforce Strategy for Health and Social Care](#), launched in October 2020, will establish system wide workforce transformation and ensure workforce sustainability for the future. Detailed workforce plans will be developed for a range of services, including children and young people.

Recommendation 14 - Poverty: Demonstrating a clear recognition of the strong link between poverty, mental ill health and suicide, taking urgent action to address the economic impacts of the pandemic on children and young people’s mental well-being, and mitigating against a potential increase in suicide. Linked to this, further urgent work is needed to explore the potential for extending statutory education and training beyond age 16, to positively contribute to reducing poverty and the associated links with mental health problems for young people, including young suicide

Accept in principle

The Welsh Government is committed to reducing the incidence of suicide and self-harm and developed Talk to me 2, our strategy to prevent suicide and self-harm in Wales.

In addition to the Welsh Government guidance [‘Responding to issues of self-harm and thoughts of suicide in young people’](#) published in September 2019 and alongside broader mental health funding, we have also committed an additional £0.5m per annum to tackle suicide and self-harm. This includes funding four new posts to drive forward this work and co-ordinate the multiple agencies with a role to play in this agenda. The new National Suicide Prevention Co-ordinator, supported by three Regional Co-ordinators, is joining up approaches and leading the development and implementation of new actions to prevent suicide and self-harm.

Our Ministerial Task and Finish Group on a Whole System Approach is considering all the issues, including suicide and self-harm, which impact on young people’s emotional and mental wellbeing and our Final Budget 2021-includes a commitment to double funding in this area to £5m.

In 2020 Welsh Government asked the Wales Centre for Public Policy to consider what evidence exists surrounding Raising the Participation Age (RPA) of compulsory education/training to 18, with a view to informing ministerial discussions and decisions around future policy development in this area. The [report](#) was published on 24 February 2021. The report highlighted that participation rates in post-16 learning in Wales were very high at the age of 16 and the need for statutory changes to enforce higher rates of participation were questioned by stakeholders. Appetite for the need to introduce RPA legislation to enforce participation in post-16 learning was weak, with concerns expressed about the logistics of implementation and enforcement, and its impact on young people from hard to help/hard to reach groups. An overarching view was that young people should be offered a range of post-16 options (education, employment and training), and that a compulsory school-based post-16 route would be too narrow a choice for some groups of young people.

[Through the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework \(YEPF\)](#), Welsh Government has a long-standing commitment to maximise the opportunities for all children and young people. This includes supporting their progression into education and training and then employment, enabling them to fulfil their potential. We recognise that economic and personal circumstances present some groups of young people with huge challenges to progression, the pandemic has only intensified this issue.

The YEPF is currently supported by the Youth Support Grant (YSG), which is paid to local authorities and funds both youth work activity and YEPF activity. This includes £2.5m for tackling mental/emotional health and wellbeing issues through youth work approaches, and £3.7m of funding from the Housing and Local Government MEG to prevent youth homelessness.

Recommendation 15 - Seeking help: Communicating the importance of seeking timely advice to avoid delays in diagnosis and necessary treatment. Ensuring young people and their families are aware that children's physical and mental health services are open, and that there is clear signposting to services and sources of support

Accept

Throughout the pandemic, mental health services remained open and able to support children and young people, including those whose needs are at tiers 0 and 1. All health boards have given assurances to Welsh Government that this has been the case. In practice, whilst services are affected and service models have had to adapt, we have continued to expect a safe and sustainable response for children and young people who needed the support of mental health services.

To ensure children and young people received the support they needed during the pandemic, services have accelerated the use of non-traditional methods. This can be across the NHS (e.g. Attend Anywhere videoconferencing), local innovation (e.g. Gwent Community Psychology and Gwent Attachment Service resources), and Welsh Government led (e.g. Young People's Mental Health Toolkit).

Welsh Government has also stepped in to fund support services under pressure due to COVID-19 for example the '*Beat Eating Disorders Helpline*', which provides information and advice for people living with eating disorders and their families.

Welsh Government convened the Mental Health Incident Group at the onset of the pandemic and co-ordinated the prioritisation and continuation of crisis care. The CAMHS Clinical leads from each health board also met weekly, sharing best practice, information, and reporting potential problems as they developed. Both groups focused on the continuation of key services including crisis, as well as developing mechanisms for service adaptation to the evolving landscape of care.

Recommendation 16 - Digital infrastructure: Addressing the 'digital divide', to ensure children and young people across Wales have equitable access to telehealth services, and ensuring NHS Wales' ICT infrastructure is fit for purpose and can support effective, remote ways of service delivery

Accept

The Welsh Government has provided significant funding over the last two years of more than £40m to support infrastructure enhancements, such as network server infrastructure, increased bandwidth, and mobile devices. This has helped to reduce legacy risks and increase the resilience and security of national digital infrastructure.

Digital Services underpin the modern NHS in Wales and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the critical role of modern, agile digital services and systems in the delivery of Health and Care.

The digital response to COVID-19 was delivered at an accelerated pace, with several all-Wales programmes deployed nationally in 6-8 week cycles. These included an all-Wales video consultation service, led by the Technology Enabled Care Programme and supported by NWIS. Since March 2020 over 170,000 virtual consultations have taken place and more than 12,000 professionals have been given access to the service which is now available across over 100 specialties in Primary, Secondary and Community care and is being extended to Dental, Community Pharmacy & Optometry. User feedback from clinicians and patients is overwhelmingly positive.

Within the recent Recovery Plan for the NHS in Wales the Minister for Health and Social Services announced the creation of a TEC Centre to build on the work of Tec Cymru in rolling out video consultation services in Wales. Lessons learned from the COVID-19 response will be applied to other areas where digital technology can offer benefits in a care environment, delivering services closer to home and enabling people to remain independent in their own homes for longer.

Our investment in digital inclusion is made through the cross-government Digital Communities Wales programme. As part of our COVID-19 response additional targeted support was provided through Digital Communities Wales to supply tablets to care home residents and training to facilitate access to health services, including video consultations.

Recommendation 17 - Mind over matter: Continuing to implement the recommendations of our original and follow-up reports which, in light of the pandemic, are now more relevant than ever

Accept

A full response on the recommendations of Mind over Matter was provided to the Committee on [20 December 2020](#).

Ensuring the emotional and mental wellbeing of children and young people has been a cross governmental priority of the current administration. Since 2018, the Minister for Health and Social Services, and subsequently Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and the Welsh Language, and Minister for Education have been working with experts through a Joint Ministerial Group on a Whole School and Whole System Approach to Wellbeing.

On 15 March 2021 we published our statutory '[Framework on Embedding a Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing](#)'. It places wellbeing at the heart of learning and, together with funding of £9m in 2021-22 will deliver the support learners need now, in relation to the pandemic, and also in the longer-term.

Recommendation 18 - Self-harm and suicide: Ensuring that now, more than ever, the right services are available to identify and support children and young people in crisis. Taking a robust, systematic approach to understanding the impact of COVID-19 on levels of self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide among children and young people, in order to take mitigating action and ensure appropriate support is available

Accept

The guidance '[*Responding to issues of self-harm and thoughts of suicide in young people*](#)' was launched in September 2019. The guidance, developed for teachers and other professionals working with children and young people, such as youth workers, focusses on early intervention and the safe management of self-harm and suicidal thoughts when they arise. It provides a quick and accessible source to the principles of best practice and signposts to other sources of support and advice. The guidance is shortly to be reissued to schools through the DYSG, education and training newsletter for Wales.

Additionally, the Minister for Health and Social Services agreed to extend Talk to me 2 until 2022, to bring it in line with timescales of the new Together for Mental Health Delivery Plan 2019-2022. The plan includes a number of actions to prevent suicide and self-harm. The implementation plan, which underpins Talk to Me 2 is overseen by the National Advisory Group which brings together stakeholders from the third sector, Welsh Government, the police, NHS, Public Health Wales and experts in suicide prevention and elsewhere.

Following the revision of the Delivery Plan, formal reporting against the actions commenced in April 2021, six months after publication. However, we would expect health boards to have already taken forward actions in response to the individual reports they received in, as part of the NHS Delivery Unit's Review of Care and Treatment Plans.

In relation to post-discharge follow-up, we expect health boards to follow the recommendations in the National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide with Mental Illness. This includes follow-up within 2-3 days of discharge from in-patient care.

In 2020, the Minister for Health and Social Services and Minister for Education announced £40,000 funding to Swansea University to undertake research into online expressions of suicide and self-harm and its links to online bullying. Work will complete in the summer of 2021, and will involve extensive co-production and will lead to a further resource for young people and others who encounter these issues.

The Welsh Government commissioned the NHS Delivery Unit to work with Public Health Wales and Professor Ann John to review deaths by probable suicide and incidents of self-harm between the years 2015-2020 in young people up to 25. This was directly in response to concerns about the potential impact of COVID and the restrictions on young people. We shared previously with the Committee the findings from the review and we have committed to continue more focused surveillance during this period. We are also working with the police and coroners to look at

opportunities to improve data sharing and we will update the Committee on this work in due course.

Any potential increase in the number of young suicides may not be apparent until a formal trend analysis is undertaken in the medium term when data becomes available. To what degree COVID-19 is a contributory or key factor to any potential increase in number, will be a complex conclusion to reach. However, it is well evidenced that quarantine, local and national lockdowns, and social isolation more generally will have created an increase in risk factors and a decrease in protective factors. Alongside continued economic uncertainty, we understand we must do everything possible to prevent an increased risk of young suicide.

Prevention and the ability to intervene early is key. This is why we have significantly strengthened the Tier 0/1 support services alongside a range of regional approaches to reduce suicide and self-harm including bereavement support, training and awareness raising.

Recommendation 19 - Mental health and well-being of students: ensuring that provision is sufficient and meets the specific needs of all learners. Mental health provision must be more consistent between pre- and post-16 education, and across different providers, to ease learner transition from one to the other as they progress along their learning

Accept

Our Framework on embedding a whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing highlights transition across settings as a time that can be particularly destabilising for some learners.

For younger learners the importance of early years support, establishing partnerships between parents/carers and education settings from the earliest stage will help smooth the process. At the other end of the scale, the Framework highlights the key transition from school to the workforce or Further / Higher Education as a time of stress and anxiety, and additional well-being support to learners in their final year of school is recommended. Schools should work with partners, for instance FE providers, with planning occurring well in advance to facilitate smooth transition of learners and recognising the specific needs of vulnerable learners in particular. Including the learner and their parents/carers in the process will ensure their needs can be met.

Other transition points include health transitions (including older learners moving from children's to adult services), where these external transitions can cause anxiety, worry and concern that may manifest in the classroom. This may be exacerbated by schools not being engaged at an early enough stage, or not engaged at all and there is a need to joined-up working between school and health.

The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) Implementation plan supports stronger tracking and transitions of young people through the system particularly at the pre- and post-16 stage. The YEPF is currently supported by the Youth Support Grant (YSG), which is paid to local authorities and funds both youth work activity and YEPF activity. This includes £2.5m for tackling mental/emotional health and wellbeing issues through youth work approaches, and £3.7m of funding from the Housing and Local Government MEG to prevent youth homelessness.

Recommendation 20 - Support for learning: Ensuring that learners and students who have experienced gaps in their learning because of the pandemic are supported. In particular, as its regulator and primary funder, the Welsh Government must give the further education sector the funding and flexibility it will need over the years ahead to support learners to overcome the disruption they have faced after they transition from school and/or before they progress beyond FE.

Accept

The Welsh Government has already announced a number of interventions to support the existing cohort of learners progressing into post-16 education in 2021/22.

In the first instance a number of online resources have been created, this will be supplemented by tailored transition programmes for year 11s transitioning to year 12, year 12 to year 13 and year 13 into further and higher education or employment. These transition programmes have been designed in collaboration with post-16 providers and consortium and will allow providers flexibility to deliver each programme to meet individual's needs.

An additional £33m has been approved to support post-16 transition and education enhancement in 2021-22. The allocation and guidance for this funding will be informed by the outcomes of a rapid review being undertaken by Estyn and sector working groups to identify the changing needs of learners.

Recommendation 21 - Preparing learners for the world of work: Supporting and enabling the wider experiences, placements and attainment of life-skills that not only enriches the lives of individual learners and students, but also provides important opportunities to prepare them for the world of work, and to improve their life chances

Accept

Careers and work related experiences features as a cross-cutting theme in the new Curriculum for Wales and, for the first time, it runs through the whole 3 to 16 learning continuum. We recognised that more support to schools was required beyond the guidance published on 28 January 2020, particularly as this aspect of the curriculum will be mandatory. That is why we committed to working with practitioners and experts on additional careers and work related experience guidance, the output of which be consulted on by the new Minister.

In this way the new curriculum will enhance exploration of opportunities through which all learners can understand the relationship between their learning and the world of work. Learning about careers and work-related experiences is fundamental to developing skills for work and life. The enhanced guidance will support the provision of a breadth of learning, drawing together a range of experiences, knowledge and skills that will help learners make more informed decisions about their career pathways. Experiences will aim to broaden horizons regarding possibilities that lie ahead and should provide high-quality advice about skills and career pathways, raising the aspirations of those who may not otherwise consider certain available options.

The impact of COVID-19 has meant that large-scale physical events have not been possible. Instead we utilised digital channels to create an authentic, virtual event experience that could open doors to new and larger audiences. In July 2020, a live Year 11 Virtual Open Event was delivered in partnership with Careers Wales-Working Wales, brought together by 30 post-16 providers across four regions over four days. Content was pulled together through engagement with 220 providers and made accessible during the campaign period.

The event reached almost 3 million people, engaged over 12,000 accessing materials and Careers Wales-Working Wales website content, and attracted over 1,300 to the live regional sessions.

Recommendation 22 - Vocational and academic learning: Continuing to work towards establishing “parity of esteem” between vocational and academic learning, and instituting the bold changes that are likely to be required to achieve this

Accept

A number of activities have taken place up to and during the pandemic to progress the Prosperity for All Commitment to smooth the transition between vocational, technical and academic routes, and to ensure pathways are clear, meet the needs of individual learners and take account of Welsh economic and social priorities:

- Curriculum Planning and Funding processes for Further Education Institutions, Local Authority Sixth Forms, and Adult Learning in the Community have been aligned;
- Policy advice has been gathered that explores the key characteristics of effective progression systems in post-16 education to inform future policy development planning;
- The recent Estyn Thematic Review on [Post-16 partnerships - Shared planning and provision between schools, and between schools and colleges](#) has provided a number of recommendations to progress work to improve collaboration between providers to ensure learners understand all post-16 options available to them, and to improve transition in to post 16 learning;
- Engagement with the Department for Education in the UK Government has been ongoing to determine the implications for Wales of post-16 technical education reform in England.

These activities will be drawn together in line with the policy direction of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research to determine a road map for the coming government term.

Recommendation 23 - Pandemic pressures funding: Learning—and monitoring the outcomes—from the considerable funding interventions that have been made in both sectors as a result of pandemic pressures. Particular attention needs to be paid to the impact of funding intended to support vulnerable learners, and those more likely to have been impacted by the pandemic. These investments have created opportunities to understand and capture innovative approaches and to share the lessons learned across the education sector

Accept

In February this year we announced a further £9.8 million to support Additional Learning Needs in 2020-21 specifically in response to pressures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This was in addition to the £8 million announced last year and the £20 million package of support for the ALN Transformation Programme already in place for the Senedd term, and recognises the particular difficulties for children and young people with additional needs during COVID-19.

It is anticipated that the funding will impact significantly on the backlog of assessments caused by pressures arising from the coronavirus pandemic. Local Authorities will submit high-level final reports at the end of the funding period describing how the funding was used.

Following the allocation of a range of support for post-16 learning, the Welsh Government have commissioned Estyn to undertake a rapid review to capture the approaches, used by both colleges and school sixth forms, in providing support and curriculum bridging activities for learners enrolling onto post-16 provision in the 2020/21 academic year. The outcomes of this review will inform the allocation and use additional funding found to support education enhancement in 2021/22.

The Welsh Government has made over £10 million capital funding available since July 2020 to assist Post-16 learning providers (including further education institutions, work-based learning programmes and adult learning in the community provision) in supporting digitally excluded learners to continue their learning remotely when they have not been able to access onsite premises and facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. A summary report on this digital inclusion funding will be prepared during spring 2021.

As blended learning becomes an embedded part of learning delivery going forward, more sustainable models for investment in digital infrastructure and equipment will need to be developed collaboratively with our learning providers.

Recommendation 24 - FE and HE as assets in Wales's overall recovery: Actively positioning and funding both the further and higher education sectors to fulfil their potential to play vital roles in the recovery of Wales and its people from COVID-19. A multi-billion pound post-16 education sector that can transform the life chances of almost 300,000 learners each year, and is involved in so much of the activity we know drives prosperity, has a huge role to play in our recovery. The most must be made of this enormous asset to Wales. Any future reform of the tertiary education system should take this into account

Accept

Our universities and colleges will play a crucial role in helping Wales recover from the pandemic. That includes their critical role in supporting the foundational economy, building on their existing collaborations with partners such as public service boards, charities and schools, as well as national organisations and government, which have been so important in the HE and FE sector's contribution to the pandemic.

Our universities, HEFCW, and Student Finance Wales have worked together to make Wales the first higher education accredited Real Living Wage sector in the UK, delivering this before much of the Welsh public sector. Whilst not all colleges have Real Living Wage accreditation, all Further Education colleges and designated institutions are signed up to the principles of a real living wage for all of its direct employees. As part of its recent annual pay review, Colegau Cymru has reminded its member FEIs in Wales of their commitment to pay the Real Living Wage and accreditation is something that the sector continues to consider.

Supporting our economic recovery will be a key focus of HEFCW's work in the coming year, building on the work of its Looking Forward Group. The Council has been asked to work with the HE sector to consider what opportunities can be created to support graduates, furloughed workers and others negatively impacted by the pandemic with opportunities to retrain, reskill or access higher education, perhaps for the first time. That includes supporting the development of modular and short courses aligned to economic need to create more flexible opportunities for individuals to retrain, reskill or switch careers.

In further education, responding to the impacts of the pandemic and preparing for economic recovery is foremost in the minds of colleges and Colegau Cymru. Our colleges are currently working closely with Welsh Government, Qualifications Wales, and awarding organisations, as well as partnering schools and universities, to ensure smooth transition of learners into further and higher education. This transition will include bridging any gaps in a learner's education and support wellbeing as a result of the impact of lockdowns and missed face-to-face learning time.

Colleges have also been delivering the £15.5m Personal Learning Account programme to provide support to employed people, furloughed workers and individuals that have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. The programme has helped people gain higher level skills and qualifications in priority sectors, empowering individuals to take responsibility for their learning. This approach has

opened up opportunities for people to switch careers or upskill in their chosen occupation.

The pandemic has highlighted the important role our institutions play in developing and sustaining thriving, informed and resilient communities. We recognise and continue to encourage the work that the Welsh HE sector has done to develop civic mission activities across institutions, brought together through a unique national Civic Mission Network and Civic Mission Framework.

Emerging from the pandemic presents challenges, but also opportunities to revitalise and rethink the further and higher education offer. In November we published our overarching [vision statement](#) for the post compulsory education and training sector (PCET) which provides a summary of the challenges we face and outlines the principles that will guide our journey towards meeting them. The challenges created for Wales's economy and education sector as a result of COVID-19 mean that it is more important than ever to take a strategic, coherent, and efficient approach to overseeing tertiary education, under the auspices of a single Commission.

Subject to legislation, the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research will have extensive funding, planning and regulatory powers, enabling it to improve quality, efficiency and efficacy across the PCET sector. It will ensure that our tertiary education and research sector is organised to meet the needs of learners, the economy and the entire Welsh nation. It will be responsible for aligning tertiary education and training more closely with the needs of employers in Wales, helping to build a stronger future economy. It will work collaboratively across the PCET sector to improve individual and national outcomes.

To date, a number of consultations have been conducted with PCET stakeholders, including a Draft Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill, which followed the previous Government's decision to postpone the Bill's introduction, due to the challenges of COVID-19. This provided a further opportunity to examine the detailed policy proposals on the PCET reform, with a specific question to stakeholders on the pandemic's impact on the proposals contained within the Draft Bill. This has enabled the PCET reforms to benefit further from the sector's experiences of COVID-19.

Recommendation 25 - Digital and blended learning: Understanding, sharing and harnessing the benefits of digital and blended learning across the post-16 education sector. Whilst blended and digital learning has presented considerable challenges to institutions and to learners, it also has considerable potential to improve the learning experience and educational outcomes of learners if used in the right way. The pandemic response has been deeply disruptive, but there is also an unprecedented opportunity to launch a structured, sector-wide programme to learn from it, both to improve learning, and to improve the digital skills of the people of Wales

Accept

A number of activities to collect data, learner and provider experiences, and examples of practice relating to the pandemic and to discuss the future of learning are currently underway in Wales, the UK, and internationally.

This growing evidence base will feed into continued work with the sector on how digital technology can be integrated and embedded into delivery to enhance the learner's experience, and how learners and staff can be equipped with digital capabilities and confidence, under our existing ten year strategic framework for digital learning in the Post-16 sector: [Digital 2030](#).

We recognise that there are significant opportunities to continue to mainstream blended and digital learning models in the post-16 sector, and that there is considerable enthusiasm and expertise in the sector that can be harnessed.

Our annual grant funding to Jisc enables Post-16 learning providers in Wales to access a range of services, support and expertise provided by Jisc, including specific activities under Digital 2030, and to benefit from wider research and thought leadership. The Welsh Government is supporting professional development for staff working in the Post-16 sector to develop their digital skills and confidence in using appropriate technologies for their teaching and learning activities. This includes directly funding individual and collaborative sector-led professional development projects in the FE and Adult Learning sectors, and bringing in specialist expertise and support from Jisc.

The recent Estyn [thematic report](#) on remote and blended post-16 learning has provided a set of recommendations and discussion prompts to help shape our work with the sector to develop a more sustainable approach to digital learning.

On the broader point relating to digital skills, the recently published [Digital Strategy for Wales](#) sets out a national vision for jointly adopting a digital approach across Wales, with Digital Skills identified as one of six missions which will drive engagement and delivery with stakeholders. The aim is to create a workforce that has the digital skills, capability and confidence to excel in the workplace and in everyday life. The supporting delivery plan sets out the actions to be taken forward now, next and in the future under the Digital Skills mission.

Recommendation 26 - Safeguarding: Continuing to monitor the levels of safeguarding referrals and the number of children in need of care and support, including responding to any changes as a result of the pandemic (e.g. due to poverty, neglect or domestic violence)

Accept

The Welsh Government will continue to monitor levels of safeguarding referrals and the number children in need of care and support. Throughout the pandemic, close engagement was undertaken with Chairs and Business Managers of Safeguarding Boards, All Wales Heads of Children's Services and the National Independent Safeguarding Board to ensure that the numbers of safeguarding referrals were monitored and reviewed. Engagement with all partners will continue in order to identify any changes concerning levels of referrals.

At the start of the lockdown period there was a marked decrease in safeguarding reports to Children's Social Services about children at risk. This situation has steadily improved and referral rates are back to expected levels in the majority of local authorities. Some local authorities are now seeing an increase in referrals compared to this time last year.

The weekly social services checkpoint data is gathered from each of the 22 Local Authorities in Wales which provides an effective means of ongoing monitoring. This data collection has been undertaken since mid-April 2020 and is ongoing.

Recommendation 27 - Support for families: Monitoring and supporting the effectiveness of services and approaches to support families and to prevent children coming into the care system, including monitoring the numbers of care experienced children within the context of aims to safely reduce these numbers. Taking forward evidenced based strategies, for example the work to develop a pilot Family Drug and Alcohol Court in Wales, and the Welsh research findings of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Accept

The Welsh Government recognises the importance of providing support so vulnerable families can safely stay together. To support children's social services, help keep families together and mitigate the impact of COVID-19 we have invested almost £8.5m of COVID reserve monies. This includes money to support reunification activity, support for foster carers, family group conferencing and a COVID hardship fund for care leavers.

The rising numbers of children in care has been an escalating problem for a number of years and the First Minister introduced a three-year programme of Reduction Expectation Plans in 2019, as a direct response to this issue. Reduction Expectation Plans aim to re-balance the system and support families to care for their own children, including undertaking additional reunification activity, so children can return home once family issues have been resolved.

In Year 1 (2019-20) looked after children numbers increased by 4%. However, when compared against a backdrop of 7% rises in each of the previous three years, the rate of increase reduced. So far in Year 2 (up to quarter 3 in 2020-21), looked after children numbers have increased by a further 2.2%, which represents a further slowing in the rate of increase, against the challenge of COVID-19.

There is cause for optimism though, official statistics show in 2019-20, there was a 7% decrease in the number of children entering care. This is the largest decrease in recent years and aligns with the introduction of the reduction expectations work. There were also decreases in 2017-18 (3%) and 2018-19 (2%). We know during COVID-19 that fewer children are exiting from care which is helping contribute to the growing looked after children numbers, although at a slower rate.

2021-22 will be the third and final year of reporting against reduction expectation plans and we have established an Oversight Board to further support local authorities as they deliver their plans. The Oversight Board will lead on a number of work strands including:

- Developing and implementing a Learning and Improvement programme, including facilitating the All Wales Heads of Children's Services Peer Learning Framework and a peer-learning network to share practice and learning across the whole system.
- Delivering a suite of seminars with Social Care Wales and partners to support workforce well-being, strengths based approaches and sessions on specific models of practice such as resilient families and reunification. To date a

number of virtual seminars have been held on Family Group Conferencing, Parental Advocacy and preventing new-borns entering care, which have been well attended.

- Transformation and Support Team check-in sessions have been held with local authorities (Cardiff, Wrexham and Torfaen) to identify:
 - learning and service improvements to share across Wales
 - further support across the system needed to promote family restoration and support children to stay with their families

The Welsh Government recently announced the establishment of a Family Drug and Alcohol Court Pilot (FDAC) in Wales, running from 2020-23 and supported by the Centre for Justice and Innovation. Following expressions of interest the South East Wales Local Family Justice Board has been awarded the pilot.

The pilot will be evaluated with a view to using the lessons from the pilot to support the extension of the FDAC model to other areas. There is robust evidence that the FDAC model has a positive effect on family reunification, substance misuse cessation, the avoidance of repeat proceedings for the same child or subsequent children, and the reduction of the need for care.

Work is at a planning stage with activity and cases due to commence in autumn 2021. This will instigate a problem-solving court approach to care proceedings that parents can choose to enter, rather than going through standard care proceedings. The latest research including engagement with the Wales Centre for Public Policy and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory continues to inform the ongoing work to reduce the numbers of looked after children in Wales.

Recommendation 28 - Corporate parenting: Paying specific attention to the corporate parenting support for care experienced children, with a specific focus on working across Welsh Government portfolios to reflect care experienced children's need for support with their education and mental health

Accept

A Cabinet Paper was presented and agreed in 2019, setting out our aim to strengthen corporate parenting by local authorities and widen responsibilities across all public services. To help implement the proposals a Task and Finish Group, chaired by David Melding MS and including members of the Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group, was established. The Group met twice and held a stakeholder event, involving care-experienced children, in January 2020.

A clear way forward was agreed, however COVID-19 has impacted on planned work. It was broadly agreed that it was not the right time to hold engagement events and ask public bodies to take on additional corporate parenting responsibilities during the pandemic. We are, however, looking to restart this work with renewed energy in the new Senedd Term. Activity is proposed in three areas:

- Voluntary Charter - We are looking to co-produce a voluntary charter that organisations can sign up to setting out their commitment and unique offer to care experienced children. This charter will enable all stakeholders to sign up to a common statement of improved support and action when working with care experienced children. The charter will allow signatories to set out how they engage with care experienced children and what they propose to do differently or offer in addition to care experienced children in the future. The charter will set out core principles, to be underpinned by revised codes of practice where needed. It should define expectations of commitment and engagement by each partner organisation.
- National Conversation - To inform the development of the voluntary charter a 12 week stakeholder engagement exercise is planned to raise the profile of corporate parenting across public services and senior leaders. To raise the profile of corporate parenting across different sectors there are planned targeted engagement events with local authorities, the NHS, housing partners and others.
- Statutory Guidance - We will use our existing legislative powers to strengthen statutory guidance, clarify roles and responsibilities and extend duties across the public sector.

In addition, a new senior leadership group has also been established within Welsh Government by the Permanent Secretary, to help deliver a new ambition and vision for care experienced children and a common sense of ownership across all policy portfolios. It is intended that this will drive better multi-disciplinary, cross-departmental working by those who provide services to them, based on better universal and targeted support, less risk adverse decision making, strong professional practice and clear local leadership.

Recommendation 29 - Care leavers: Supporting care-leavers and monitoring the economic impact of the pandemic on this group of young people

Accept

From the early days of the pandemic, Welsh Government has collected weekly data from local authorities in respect of support for care leavers in order to understand the impact of COVID-19 on these young people, particularly in relation to financial hardship and accommodation issues. The data has shown small numbers of young people across Wales requesting help and that help has been provided via the recurring St David's Day Fund (SDDF - £1m) and in 2020-21, the Care Leavers COVID-19 Hardship Fund (CLCHF - £1m). The weekly data collection is planned to continue.

Welsh Government guidance for allocating SDDF funding to care leavers was amended during the pandemic to focus on COVID-related expenditures such as rent, bills, food, support for children, laptops and mobile telephones, broadband and phone credit connectivity. This guidance remains in place. The recurring and additional funding recognises that care leavers are often employed in the sectors which have been hardest hit by the lockdown restrictions and those in education or training have been similarly impacted.

We know from the SDDF grant reports received from local authorities that the funding has been used as per requirements, providing a necessary safety net to keep these young people accommodated and supported. We will soon know from the grant reports to be received from local authorities in relation to the CLCHF, how this money has been spent and how it has benefited these young people.

Welsh Government officials continue to meet regularly with our statutory and third sector partners to stay updated about how care leavers are being supported. For example, we worked with Voices from Care to develop social media messaging about staying safe during the pandemic and about accessing the SDDF. The weekly data we receive and our formal Welsh Government statistics provide us with a good range of evidence from which we continue to develop our policy responses.

Recommendation 30 - Babies and early years: Ensuring that the youngest children in our society, and the perinatal mental health of their parents and carers, is supported and prioritised as part of recovery planning

Accept

Our Early Childhood Education and Care vision is aimed at all children from 0-5 with provision being flexible and responsive to individual circumstances.

We have commissioned Swansea University to undertake a Delphi study to harness the knowledge of experts. The study is designed to gain a consensus on the methods early years practitioners can use to help identify, mitigate or address any adverse impacts of COVID-19 on children under age 5. This will report this summer and inform policy going forward.

In 2021/22 we have also committed an additional £42m funding into mental health support in Wales, this includes £7m of service improvement funding in which perinatal mental health services will be one of the key priority areas.

This is in addition to the spend that we have previously committed to perinatal mental health services since the establishment of community services across Wales in 2015, which is now supported by nearly £3m per annum.

Recommendation 31 - Care experienced children: Reviewing and documenting the primary impacts of COVID-19 specific to care experienced children and young people, with a view to ensuring any concerns are swiftly addressed

Accept

The Welsh Government continues to collect weekly data from local authorities in respect of care and support for care experienced children. From this data, we learned about various pressures in the system and sought assurances as necessary from sector partners holding the statutory duties for these children. This weekly data collection is planned to continue. In addition, the Children's Commissioner for Wales led two 'Coronavirus and Me' surveys which have been useful sources of information in respect of how children and young people in general are feeling and work undertaken by CASCADE and Voices from Care has been equally informative.

We continue to meet regularly with our statutory and third sector partners to stay updated about how care experienced children are being supported. Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a consistent item on meeting agendas at our range of meetings with the sectors including the Improving Outcomes for Children Ministerial Advisory Group, the Children's Residential Care Task and Finish Group and the Family Justice Network.

Following the Senedd elections, arrangements are now being developed and decided by the new Ministers regarding how we continue this type of engagement work with our partners. Regular meetings, the weekly data we receive and our formal Welsh Government statistics provide us with a good range of evidence from which we continue to develop our policy responses.