

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymgynghoriad y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg ar Flaenoriaethau'r Chweched Senedd

This response was submitted to the Children, Young People and Education Committee consultation on Sixth Senedd Priorities

CYPE SP 81

Ymateb gan: ACT

Response from: ACT

ACT training is Wales' largest training provider, training approximately 6,400 learners last year across our Traineeship and Apprenticeship programmes, with approximately 1700 of our learners being between 16 and 24. We have established 7 centres across South Wales employing almost 400 people, to deliver engaging learning programmes for young people. The centres include Aberdare, Cardiff, Barry, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Ebbw Vale.

In addition to this, ACT developed a Schools Programme in 2012 to support learners excluded from mainstream settings and redress disengagement in the education system. In April 2018, ACT Schools became a registered Independent Special Schools with the capacity to educate 150 learners aged 11–16. The school is registered to admit students with special educational needs including social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. In the summer of 2021, our school learners achieved record GCSE results, with 57% achieving grades A*-C.

ACT has a longstanding commitment to developing opportunities for young people to access and engage in Apprenticeship programmes. Our Youth Apprenticeship strategy is designed to promote opportunities; engage and support employers to recruit young apprentices; provide clear pathways for progression and development for young apprentices and through our youth engagement team provide tailored advice, support and guidance for young apprentices entering the world of work or changing job role.

We strongly believe that the committee should focus on the mental health and wellbeing of young people and children in Wales, and specifically the role of work-based learning providers in improving the wellbeing of learners.

Currently there is not a clear enough requirement on work-based learning providers to focus on, or to support, the mental health and wellbeing of our learners. We believe this needs to change. Many great initiatives rolled out by Welsh Government such as the period poverty campaign, are targeted

to schools or colleges, but not work based learning . Many of our 1850 young learners from aged 11 – 25 are from deprived communities, in poverty and have experienced adverse childhood experiences. Many young people in our schools provision have been excluded or are at risk of exclusion, who are school phobic or are classed as vulnerable. We strongly believe that we should have a duty to support their mental health and wellbeing whilst the learners are accessing our provision. The Welsh Government’s main focus in Work Based Learning is the attainment of qualifications. Whilst we obviously support and recognise the importance of qualifications in driving the skills agenda in Wales, if learners are not also equipped with the critical life skills to thrive as adults they will not be able to apply their learning effectively in the workplace.

ACT has developed and delivered a bespoke wellbeing strategy for our learners as we believe that as a recipient of public funds, we have a duty to support our learners through a prevention and intervention approach.

Although this work started pre-Covid, we have accelerated this work over the last 18 months. We were grateful for the additional funds released by Welsh Government to support the wellbeing of learners through COVID and we were able to train staff in mental health first aid and enrich our curriculum with a series of wellbeing activities. However, this was a one-off fund in response to COVID and we are committed to continually improving our staff’s development in this area.

More information can be found below, and we would be delighted to discuss with you the scope of the issues that we believe the committee should be looking into, which we believe are:

- The role of work-based learning providers in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (and their family/support).
- The need for Welsh Government to consider work-based learning when developing mental health and wellbeing policies and interventions for children and young people.
- The need for Welsh Government to re-introduce the national learner survey with specific questions on learner wellbeing and mental health to obtain information and track progress on improving the mental health and wellbeing of all of our young people in Wales.

As the new curriculum will embed wellbeing into the curriculum in schools and colleges, we believe that more should be done to ensure work-based learning providers embrace a similar approach,



particularly in relation to wellbeing. We would be grateful for the opportunity to present more evidence to the committee on this specific area, and on future inquiries relevant to our learners too.

We would also be pleased to provide opportunities for the committee to discuss with our learners your priorities for the Senedd term.

Your sincerely

Richard Spear

MD ACT Training

Overview

ACT's prime focus has always been on developing the vocational and essential skills of learners, whilst also supporting learners with personal, health and wellbeing issues. The changing nature of our learners' needs, particularly younger learners, has led us to **rethink our priorities**. Many of our learners are dealing with personal challenges such as mental health issues, chaotic home lives, poor general health and poor diets. These issues have been compounded this over the last year due to the challenges surrounding Covid-19.

We strongly believe that unless we support learners to address these issues, they will not develop into successful and happy adults, despite what other skills they acquire with us.

From a successful Learner Wellbeing Pilot Project in Bridgend in 2019, we have now embedded supporting the wellbeing of our learners in everything we do. Our comprehensive, innovative and bespoke wellbeing strategy is embedded in every element of our work and goes above and beyond what is required of us as an educational provider. We have established a dedicated Wellbeing Department to support and reinforce this work.

This work was fast-tracked during 2020 due to the pressing need to support the wellbeing needs of our learners during the Covid-19 pandemic. We shifted our wellbeing support online, opened a food bank for our apprentices and traineeship learners, and partnered with a local hygiene bank.

As Wales' largest training provider, training approximately 6,400 learners last year across our Traineeship and Apprenticeship programmes, we believe that we have a responsibility to intervene to try and improve the health and wellbeing of our learners.

Background

After witnessing bad health choices and the lack of focus on individual wellbeing year after year, we decided that we could help the young people in our care to make better choices and to look after their health and wellbeing. We surveyed our traineeships learners in 2019 and found worrying levels of

poor wellbeing and reinforced **our belief that all post-16 training providers have a responsibility to do more to support their learners improve their health and well-being.**

After spending time in the Bridgend centre in 2019, as part of ACT's annual Senior Management job swap initiative, CEO Andrew Cooksley MBE discovered nearly all of the learners aged 16 – 18 year old on the Traineeship programme smoked. On further investigation he found that many learners also had poor diets, didn't exercise, and their self-esteem, confidence and aspirations were extremely low.

We surveyed our learners and found:

- 42% of our learners smoke tobacco, with only around 22% having never smoked.
- Only 9% always ate five fruit or vegetables every day (38% did so never or rarely).
- Only 42% of our learners said that in the last two weeks they not been bothered by feeling down, depressed or hopeless (17% said they had been bothered by this nearly every day).

These findings were and remain hugely concerning for ACT and was the wakeup call needed for us to be doing even more to support our learners to become successful, happy and healthy adults in systematic and strategic way, embedded in our everyday work. We believe it should be a wakeup call for the wider education sector too.

We have for a number of years invested in a counselling service for our learners but have long felt the need that we could be and should be doing more, and so we have developed the Learner Health and Wellbeing Strategy and a team to ensure its successful implementation.

The wider picture is also stark. Over 11% of the Welsh budget spent on the NHS in 2018-2019¹ was spent on mental health services. The estimated cost of smoking to the Welsh NHS is £302 million per year². Illnesses associated with obesity projected to cost the Welsh NHS more than £465 million per year by 2050, with a cost to society and the economy of £2.4 billion.³

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant effect on mental health and health inequalities.

¹ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2020-04/nhs-expenditure-programme-budgets-april-2018-march-2019-371.pdf>

² The economic cost of smoking to Wales: a review of existing evidence, Ash Wales and British Heart Foundation Wales

³ 'Making a Difference' Public Health Wales (2016)

According to the ONS⁴, more than two thirds (69%) of adults across the UK have reported feeling worried, or very worried about the effect of Covid-19 on their lives. The most common issues affecting wellbeing are worry about the future (63%), feeling stressed or anxious (56%) and feeling bored (49%). Social isolation, lack of access to mental health services, financial pressures and a loss of coping mechanisms have also contributed to the deterioration of mental health this year. The IFS have highlighted that groups have not been equally impacted, young adults and women have been hit hardest.⁵ Most recently, the charity Young Minds reported results from their January 2021 survey of young people and the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health showed that 67% of young people surveyed across the UK believed that the pandemic will have a long term negative effect on their mental health⁶.

Our own evidence from our learners highlight that 80% of our learners feel that Covid has negatively impacted on their mental health and wellbeing.

Our Wellbeing Strategy

The ACT Learner Wellbeing Strategy has nine elements

1. Mental Health and wellbeing
2. Safeguarding
3. Physical learning Environment
4. Personal Finances & Hardship
5. Counselling and Emotional support
6. Additional Learning Needs
7. Autistic spectrum disorder and Neurodiversity
8. Behaviour and Tolerance
9. Equality and Diversity

Below are some of the key development.

⁴<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/5june2020>

⁵<https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/The-mental-health-effects-of-the-first-two-months-of-lockdown-and-social-distancing-during-the-Covid-19-pandemic-in-the-UK.pdf>

⁶<https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/#covid-19-january-2021-survey>

- Wellbeing Curriculum

We have recently developed a bespoke Wellbeing Curriculum delivered by our dedicated Wellbeing advocate. The topics delivered are based around the key areas that create positive foundations for Mental Health and Wellbeing:

- Resilience and Confidence Building Skills
- Mental Health Awareness
- Creating Positive Relationships
- Emotional Literacy
- Self Discovery
- Skills for Effective Learning
- The Brain, Learning and Behaviour.

As a recent development, we are in the process of rolling out all elements of the wellbeing and collating learner feedback as we progress. So far, the learner feedback has been exceptionally positive. We will continue to gather feedback and monitor the impact for future reports.

- Our learning environment

The key pillar of our wellbeing strategy is to promote a safe and supportive environment for learners, which celebrates equality, diversity and inclusivity. Our strategy also promotes a positive, physical, social and mental state and creates an environment where learners feel secure, healthy and, as far possible, happy. Experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one's life and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes to wellbeing, as well as having a high self-worth, positive values and self-esteem.

We have developed online training modules and developed resources and toolkits to support delivery staff.

- Learners with ALN

In addition to this we have reviewed and improved our wellbeing offer to those learners with additional learning needs – reviewing the needs of all learners receiving ALN support.

- Staff wellbeing

The wellbeing of our staff is also of critical importance and so we have also developed a staff Wellbeing strategy and support its implementation. We have received a grant from Welsh Government for staff wellbeing training to ensure that provide a supportive environment for learner. The training includes

the following key elements:

- Mental Health First Aid Training (Youth and Adult courses)
 - Mindfulness Now
 - Mental Health Teacher's Toolkit (this is what the Wellbeing Advocates are delivering as outlined above)
 - Restorative Approach Practitioner Training
 - Restorative Peer Mediation Training
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- Universal support offer

We have developed a universal support offer within the delivery of our training programmes. All learners are and will continue to benefit. We have expanded and made our Counselling service more accessible giving service users a choice to engage in English or Welsh, and to receive the counselling online, face to face phone or by text.

Accessibility of our support is of key importance – making sure all of our learners understand the support we offer. To support this we are marketing the support available to learners and are developing a new learner wellbeing app, and a new online counselling referral process.

- Smoking cessation

Our Stop Smoking Campaign in partnership with ASH Wales has built on the work in Bridgend as highlighted above. The campaign has seen 500 learners across Traineeships receive a Stop Smoking Awareness session followed up by 1-to-1 support from our Wellbeing Team for those learners that want to give up.

We have links with local pharmacies across all our local areas where Pharmacists have continued that support for our learners by providing free NRT treatment. To date we have had 15 learners attend their local pharmacies and are receiving 1-to-1 support within centre through the Stop Smoking clinics the Wellbeing team offer. Long-term impact is to be monitored. Phase 2 is about to be rolled out which will see those local Pharmacists coming into centre to continue the Education process.

- Rights Respecting School

We are working on becoming a Rights Respecting School, in partnership with the UNCRC. This will mean that our work will focus on 4 key areas, namely- Wellbeing, participation, relationships and self-esteem.

The impact of Covid

We already deal with young people who have faced many challenges. Many who have already been affected by adverse childhood experiences and this experience, added to previous negative experiences, will significantly exacerbate behavioral issues, resulting in a significant increase in pastoral and well-being needs.

We understood early on in the pandemic that we needed to increase and change the support we offered our learners.

Provision of online wellbeing support. ACT shifted delivery of its wellbeing approach to digital following the Covid-19 lockdown, where learners received regular wellbeing updates and ongoing check-in surveys through OneFile, delivering 824 fully digital wellbeing and counselling sessions. 99% of learners positively rated ACT's digital approach to wellbeing support.

ACT food bank programme. During the lockdown period, ACT set up and ran an outstanding food bank programme, resulting in over 9 tonnes of essential food parcels provided to Apprenticeship and Traineeship learners and vulnerable people within the community.

Hygiene bank. ACT have established links with Cardiff hygiene bank, and are able to offer learners living in deprivation areas the opportunity to access free hygiene products. Two deliveries have been received to date, and further impact will be tracked throughout 2020/21.

Annex A

More about ACT

ACT is Wales' largest training provider, and last year trained approximately 6,400 learners last year across its Traineeship and Apprenticeship programmes, with 96% of learners rating our course as excellent/good.

Since its establishment in 1988, ACT's mission has been to make a positive difference to people's lives by providing excellent learning programmes. We value our strong relationship with the Welsh Government, as its leading provider of training and Apprenticeships, delivering dynamic training packages designed to meet the needs of young people and employers across 30 different industry sectors.

Named in the prestigious Sunday Times Top 100 List of Best Companies to Work For, we have gained Investors in People Gold Award since 2010 and that in 2017 we were placed 7th best IIP Gold company in the world. We were also named the BITC Responsible Large Employer of 2018.

We have established 7 centres across South Wales employing almost 400 people, to deliver engaging learning programmes for young people, who are disengaged from pre-16 education. The centres include Aberdare, Cardiff, Barry, Bridgend, Caerphilly and Ebbw Vale.

We deliver a range of courses and qualifications – from Traineeships, Apprenticeships and Higher Apprenticeships across over 30 different sectors, to employability training and short commercial courses.

Annex B

The pilot programme

Following our Andrew Cooksley's experience shadowing our engagement tutors, we developed a Learner Wellbeing project at our Bridgend Skills Centre. In a bid to quit smoking and improve their lifestyle habits, the learners were given gym memberships and participated in various workshops with third sector organisations such as Ash Wales, raising awareness around the damaging and lasting effects of poor lifestyle choices. As a result of the project:

- 42% of the Bridgend learners now class themselves as non- smokers (compared to the 37% at the start of the project)
- 55 % of learners reported they wanted to give up smoking at the end of the project (compared to 39% at the start of the project)
- 4% of learners are now going to bed earlier to get a better night's sleep
- There has been 10% rise in learners now rating their health as excellent.
- Increase in attendance of approx. 3%

Although this was a small project (45 learners) with modest but positive outcomes, if this was replicated across the post-16 education and skill sector the impact would be very significant.