

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol](#)
ar [anhydraddoldebau iechyd meddwl](#)

This response was submitted to the [Health and Social Care](#)
[Committee](#) consultation on [mental health inequalities](#)

MHI 68

Ymateb gan: | Response from: ACT Training





Health and Social Care Committee

SeneddHealth@senedd.wales

24 February 2022

Dear Clerk,

Committee Inquiry: Mental Health inequalities

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.

Many of our young learners are from deprived communities 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. 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, and the Renew and Reform programme are targeted to schools or colleges, but not work based learning. **We strongly believe that we should have a duty to support the mental health and wellbeing whilst learners are accessing our provision.** Whilst the Welsh Government and Estyn consider the health and wellbeing of Work Based Learning learners, the Welsh Government's main performance measures focus on the attainment of



qualification. 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 two years. 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. We believe that such support should be available on an on-going basis.

We welcome the opportunity to present our evidence and findings to the committee and would welcome the opportunity to share more detail with you if needed, either with supplementary written or oral evidence in committee.

We are happy for the evidence to be made public.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Your sincerely

Richard Spear

MD ACT Training



Consultation Response

Which groups of people are disproportionately affected by poor mental health in Wales? What factors contribute to worse mental health within these groups?

At ACT we trained approximately 6,400 learners last year across our Traineeship and Apprenticeship programmes, with approximately 1,700 of our learners being between 16 and 24. In addition to this, ACT developed a specific, targeted Schools Programme in 2012 to support 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.

Many of our young learners are from deprived communities 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 believe that due to these factors, many of our learners are disproportionately affected by poor mental health in Wales, because of this we have developed our own bespoke mental health and wellbeing strategy to support our learners and we strongly believe that we should have a duty to support their mental health and wellbeing whilst the learners are accessing our provision.

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. As a result, we have dedicated pastoral teams within each provision area (AWO's and Outreach workers) who focus on the holistic development of our learners as individuals. We have a counselling services for our learners too. More detail about our support for our learners can be found below (annex B)



The impact of Covid on our learners has been considerable. We have seen higher anxiety levels and loss of motivation which have had direct impact on attendance levels. We survey our learners often, and recently 35% of our learners have told us that they have lost hope for the future and are concerned about what their future looks like. Equally, some of our learners have had to juggle multiple pressures; caring responsibilities, lack of safe spaces to process and deal with their confusing emotions within their home environment, bereavement, trauma, isolation, loneliness and a break down in routine has seen them struggling to find a purpose to their days which has resulted in the emergence of some unhealthy habits. For example, 32% of our learners now get less than 6 hours sleep per night. As a result of all this, we saw a 13% increase in the number of completed counselling sessions for these learners. When asked how often Traineeship learners had been bothered by feeling down, depressed or hopeless, 20% responded more than half their days whilst a worrying 16% responded nearly everyday.

These results have worsened since our 2019 survey and have seen anxiety and self-harm become two of the most common issues identified within the counselling service for learners.

The impact of the pandemic has been felt heavily amongst our Apprenticeship learners, particularly those in the healthcare sector who were often on the frontline. Referrals into our counselling service doubled since 2019 and for the first time saw Apprenticeship learners necessitating 50% of the total counselling sessions conducted for 2020-21. The most common issues identified by learners within their counselling sessions were often centred around relationship problems with friends and family. This isn't surprising when we consider how much of 2020-21 was spent in lockdown in confined spaces with the same people for prolonged periods of time. This was closely followed by work and course related stress - particularly with the uncertainty of COVID and the added complication of blended learning.



For the groups identified, what are the barriers to accessing mental health services? How effectively can existing services meet their needs, and how could their experience of using mental health services be improved?

Some of the biggest barriers facing our young people is the **knowledge about mental health services; knowing when and where to go to seek help.** In light of this, we have prioritised this over the past year and have created an online mental health and support library for our learners full of external support agencies that cover areas such as anxiety, depression and low mood, grief and loss, self-harm and suicide prevention among others.

In a recent survey conducted in Dec. 2021, 95% of our learners responded that they knew where to go to access support if they needed it. This library is hosted on our dedicated wellbeing website which all learners can access via their OneFile accounts.

In addition to this, there is still a certain level **of stigma associated with seeking help.** Social media and the current narrative around “it’s ok not to be ok” is really helping to dispel this but for some of our more vulnerable learners this still remains an issue. **Past experiences with seeking help** also plays a massive role in this which sometimes results in learners preferring to cope with their problems alone. In order to overcome this we invest heavily in relationship building and being able to spot the tell-tale signs early on. For example, we have introduced daily wellbeing check-ins which gives learners a chance to voice their feelings in a confidential safe space which is then picked up by our wellbeing team and followed up individually.

92% of our learners feel they are getting the right level of wellbeing support from us. Although this figure is high, we acknowledge that we have more work to do in relation to this area.

An ongoing barrier we regularly see is a **lack of commitment to the process**, in particular, a reluctance to attend appointments. For our Apprenticeship learners this is often due to work pressures or time restraints in terms of prior commitments such as family. In response we adapted the counselling service to ensure learners maintained access to vital mental health support in a time of uncertainty, crisis and collective trauma. We offered remote counselling to learners who otherwise might never have accessed the service due to their travel, location, anxiety and/or attendance issues.



As a result, we had a 42% lower DNA rate compared to 2019, suggesting that learners on the whole have engaged more reliably with remote sessions than with previous face to face sessions. Despite this success, incorporating face-to-face sessions alongside the remote services, has been vital. Whilst remote sessions bring the benefits mentioned above, they also provide challenges, such as not being able to ensure confidentiality on the learner end of the call and experiencing signal/internet disruptions. Reading body language, client sensory information and the atmosphere in the room help add to the depth of therapeutic work and learner safeguarding.

We believe that we have played our part in ensuring that the 'no wrong door' approach to accessing mental health support becomes a reality. We have done this by creating, implementing and adapting our wellbeing strategy as outlined above.

To what extent does Welsh Government policy recognise and address the mental health needs of these groups? Where are the policy gaps?

We are providing valuable mental health support for our learners every day, despite no requirement on us to do so, and despite us not being funded to do so. We are proud to play our part in ensuring that the Welsh Government policy of a 'no wrong door' approach to accessing mental health support is implemented, but there is so much more that we could be doing.

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.

Many of our young learners are from deprived communities 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 two years. 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. We believe that such support should be available on an on-going basis.

What further action is needed, by whom/where, to improve mental health and outcomes for the groups of people identified and reduce mental health inequalities in Wales?

- 1. Many great initiatives rolled out by Welsh Government such as the period poverty campaign, and Renew and Reform programme, are targeted to schools or colleges, but not work based learning.**

When considering how best to support our young people, Welsh Government need to consider the role work-based learning providers can play and ensure that we are seen as part of the solution. For example, 23% of traineeship learners come from the most deprived decile of the Wales Index of Multiple Deprivation, compared to 7% of sixth formers and 13% of FE learners. Yet, when it comes to Covid-19 related support, traineeship learners have been largely overlooked.

- 2. Reintroducing national learner survey with specific questions on learner wellbeing and mental health**

We believe that it would be beneficial for Welsh Government to consider re-introducing 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.

3. Wellbeing as part of WBL

We welcome the changes to the curriculum, will embed wellbeing 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.



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.

Rated as 3 Star Company (World Class Workplace Engagement) in the prestigious Sunday Times Top 100 List of Best Companies to Work For we have also gained Investors in People Platinum in 2020, and were awarded the Investors in People Large Employer of the year for 2021

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

ACT Wellbeing strategy

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:

- 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).
- 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).

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.

In May 2021, this survey was re-issued to ACT Traineeship learners to collect an updated snapshot

of results. The findings of this indicate a slight improvement since 2019 results, where:

- 38% of our learners smoke tobacco, with 30% of those surveyed having never smoked
- 14% of learners eat five fruits or vegetables every day (26% never or rarely)

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 continued to develop the Learner Health and Wellbeing Strategy and a team to ensure its successful implementation.

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

In 2021/22 ACT have worked to review and relaunch its learner wellbeing strategy, with focus on three significant areas:

Psychological - Working with our learners in relation to mental health, sleep, rest, and/or financial wellbeing.

Social – Our strategy recognises this as a key contributing factor to the wellbeing of our learners and staff. It is strengthened by a culture within ACT Training, that champions learner reward and recognition, voice, inclusion, diversity, and community activities.

Physical – Working with our learners to support improvements in physical activity, nutrition, musculoskeletal and environmental factors. From staying in shape to keeping illness at bay, physical health can have a big impact on individual Wellbeing

We are committed to ensuring that our learners feel free and safe to be open about their own experiences with mental health, and that they feel comfortable to speak up when they are unhappy about something. And that there are programmes available to support them when things are hard.

The ACT Learner Wellbeing Strategy contains a number of key elements:



- Mental Health and wellbeing
- Safeguarding
- Physical learning Environment
- Personal Finances & Hardship
- Counselling and Emotional support
- Additional Learning Needs
- Autistic spectrum disorder and Neurodiversity
- Behaviour and Tolerance
- Equality and Diversity

Below are some of the key developments.

Our wellbeing team

Alongside ongoing wellbeing support provided by assessors and tutors, learners in ACT benefit from specialist roles who focus on the support of learner mental health and wellbeing. These include a dedicated Learner Health and Wellbeing Manager, as well as a team of Attendance and Wellbeing Officers in Traineeships and School Outreach workers for parents and learners alike and an in-house Counselling Service for all learners and staff. These pastoral teams are the first port of call for all learners on their respective programs and focus on engaging and supporting them to ensure we are responsive to their ever-changing support needs. To ensure that support is relevant and current the counselling service operates an education arm whereby they provide training alongside daily advice and guidance which is based on emerging common themes. This allows the pastoral teams to confidently and effectively triage learner's support needs, providing appropriate wellbeing interventions and referring onto the counselling service any learner that needs further specialist support. Examples of some of the training sessions provided include; Understanding Trauma, Active Listening Skills, Understanding Grief and Loss, Confidence and Self-Esteem, Resilience Skills, Understanding Depression and Anxiety, Relaxation and Grounding Techniques. In addition to our core staff, specialist CPD in relation to Mental health first aid, Mindfulness and Restorative approaches has been rolled out for 209 delivery staff.

A 'Mental Health & Wellbeing Support Library' of resources has been developed and produced for staff to access, covering areas such as Anxiety, Depression and Low Mood, Grief and Loss, Self-harm and Suicide Prevention and Support.



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.

In addition to the curriculum above we also have Wellbeing topics of the month that look at topical subjects which are prevalent amongst our learners. These resources are designed in conjunction with the data collated within the counselling service and allow us to educate on a wider, more personal level.

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

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. This has seen a 13% increase in counselling uptake in 2020; 468 sessions compared to 407 in 2019.

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 Award is based on the principles of equality, dignity, respect, non-discrimination and participation and will give us the opportunity to equip our learners with a powerful language that they can use to better express themselves. With our learners playing a leading role, we'll be looking to develop a moral framework based on equality and respect for all, that will help our learners grow into engaged, responsible members of society.

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 ACT delivered wellbeing support via digital wellbeing and counselling sessions. In 2020/21, ACT delivered over 2,500 digital wellbeing and/or counselling sessions to learners, and over 1,050 to staff members. Feedback from attendees in relation to attendance at these sessions is extremely positive – with 99% rating these as excellent.

- 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. Whilst, because of the discreet nature of this service, we are unable to accurately record the uptake of this provision, ACT are committed to ensuring that learners access the basics of feeling clean and are able to maintain their dignity whilst they are on programme.