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**Gweinidog y Gymraeg ac Addysg
Minister for Education and Welsh Language**



**Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government**

Jayne Bryant MS
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Welsh Parliament
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8 December 2022

Dear Jayne,

Update on COVID-19 recovery as it relates to children and young people.

In response to the recommendations from the Children, Young People and Education Committee report: the 2022-23 Welsh Government Draft Budget I've committed to providing 6-monthly updates on COVID-19 recovery and how we're supporting our children and young people to recover from the impact of the pandemic on their education progress. This letter summarises some of the key developments over the last academic year, which not only aim to develop our learners, but also the practitioners who are working tirelessly to support them.

Early intervention and prevention

We know that the pandemic had a disproportionate effect on children and families living in disadvantaged communities and put added strain on services providing vital support for families in Wales. This was both because of the direct impact of the lockdown and pandemic on economic, social, mental and physical well-being, and because services provided by programmes like Flying Start and the Healthy Child Wales Programme, had been paused, scaled back or moved to virtual means of delivery to meet COVID-19 regulations, including social distancing.

The purpose of the **Early Help Fund** was to address the adverse effects of the disruption caused by the pandemic on children and young people 0-25, including those who were newly vulnerable. £14 million of additional funding has been made available within the Children and Communities Grant between 2021-23 to ease the pressure on, and reduce waiting times for, vital early help and support services in support of children, young people and parents in response to the pandemic.

Progress reports have been received from local authorities detailing their Early Help expenditure, reports show that the additional funding has been spent on a range of activities including:

- additional investment in existing contract and services delivered under the banner of early intervention programmes;
- investment in different/complementary services that has eased the pressure on others;
- investment in training and upskilling the workforce to be more responsive to the needs of families, and
- investment in increasing the capacity of the existing workforce.

Alongside this, the **Child Development Fund (CDF)** has been established. Funding of up to £18.5m has been allocated to all 22 local authorities in Wales between October 2020 and March 2023 to help them to provide additional support to children and families who have been impacted most by lockdown as a result of COVID-19, to address concerns around developmental delay, in areas such as speech, language and communication, fine and gross motor skills and personal and social development.

The fund is targeted at children aged 0-5 years of age and has enabled local authorities to boost the delivery of services and ensure needs are identified as soon as possible before they escalate to a point of crisis. Since being established, the CDF has enabled a range of interventions to be supported, which include enhanced screening, assessment and development tools to address speech language and communication delay; activities and resources to promote play and physical literacy; parenting support to promote social development; and increased funded childcare provision to support child development.

Renew and reform in maintained settings

The [Renew and Reform](#) plan, published in June 2021 and updated in September 2021, outlined our commitment to supporting learners' wellbeing and progression in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The plan supported a revitalised, reform-focused and resilient educational system that puts learners' physical and mental health and wellbeing at the heart of its approach.

We committed a comprehensive package of over £270m in the financial year 2021-22 to support education renewal. This is on top of around £220m in 2020-21. The Education Policy Institute's October 2021 report comparing education catch-up spending across the UK found that **Wales spent the highest per-pupil in the UK (£400 per pupil)**, followed by England (**£310 per pupil**) and Scotland and Northern Ireland (**£230 per pupil**).

This year we have continued to support learners and schools to deal with the impacts of the pandemic. Funding continues to be aligned to our priorities of supporting learners' well-being and progression. This includes:

Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS)

The RRRS programme has recruited and retained 1,800 full-time equivalent staff to build capacity and capability to support learners in the wake of the pandemic, in line with our Programme for Government commitment. £37.5m has been allocated in 2022-23.

Funding is distributed to schools and non-maintained settings to enable them to use the funding flexibly in tailored approaches to support their learners' particular needs. The funding formula has been driven by a focus on the most vulnerable learners and based

on a number of weightings linked to specific characteristics with overall funding capped at £150K per school. Priorities for schools to consider targeting the funding were:

- a) Pupils preparing for examinations in the forthcoming academic years 11, 12 and 13
- b) Vulnerable and disadvantaged children, as defined by a range of approaches, but including the poorest children and families, learners with special educational needs, learners from BAME communities and learners in Welsh-medium schools who live in non-Welsh speaking households
- c) Year 7, because of the disruption to the transition from primary to secondary schools.

We have issued guidance to schools enable leaders to determine the right approach to support the needs of their learners, particularly those most disadvantaged and impacted upon by the pandemic, and those potentially disengaged learners. The support packages could include extra coaching support, personalised learning programmes and additional time and resources for exam year pupils.

Funding provided to non-maintained nursery settings delivering early education was aimed at supporting our youngest learners to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic through provision of staff resources, training and support materials with a focus on supporting well-being, physical and learning needs.

An independent evaluation has been commissioned on the effectiveness and early impacts of this funding. The overarching aim of the research is to provide evidence to inform decisions about the ongoing response of the Welsh Government to supporting schools and early years childcare settings to recover from the disruptive impacts that COVID-19 is having on learning. The report is expected for publication in January 2023

Community Focused Schools and attendance

We have allocated £3.84m for Family Engagement Officers this financial year and part of their role is to prevent attendance issues by building better partnerships with families and carers. This is part of our work on Community Focused Schools and tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment. On 18 November we published [guidance](#) setting out how schools can help embed this approach across Wales.

Mental health and wellbeing of learners and practitioners

Welsh Government have appointed Public Health Wales to support schools to implement and embed the [Framework on embedding a whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing](#) through recruitment of a team of implementation co-ordinators to work directly with schools to evaluate their current wellbeing provision, identifying what works well, any gaps in provision and where improvement is required. At the end of quarter 2 (end of September 2022) 340 schools are engaging with the implementation co-ordinators which equates to 23% of all schools in Wales.

Counselling is a key part of ensuring children and young people who require support with their emotional and mental health have access to the assistance they need. Welsh Government has allocated £2.3m in 2022-23, £3.35m in 23-24, and £4.5m in 2024-25

(2023-24 and 2024-25 figures indicative) to fund counselling through the local authorities. Funding is being used to support improvements in counselling and extending provision below the current year 6 threshold in line with the recommendations of the Statutory School and Community Based Counselling Services review undertaken by Cardiff University. The report, published in March 2022, gives recommendations to aid service improvements, extending entitlement to younger children and improve monitoring and evaluation.

In addition, we are providing in excess of £16.4m over the next three years to ensure national provision of the CAMHS school in-reach service. This sees dedicated mental health practitioners in schools providing consultation, liaison, advice and training. This service provision is now confirmed across all seven health boards and we have received mid-year proforma's demonstrating activity to date. This is currently being analysed however, initial findings demonstrate, most offer a similar service although there is some flexibility in their delivery methods, which is being monitored. Public Health Wales held an initial national co-ordinator meeting on 20 September 2022 and a progress meeting on 8 November.

We have commissioned Public Health Wales to develop a "what works" toolkit that will support schools to identify appropriate universal and targeted interventions for use in their school community. It will form an independent, evidence-based sources of advice on a range of interventions, programmes and training that is currently available and marketed to schools. The approach has been co-produced through work with teachers, parents and supported by the Steering Group. Information has been gathered on the information schools require when considering introducing resources to help promote mental health and wellbeing, and considerable work is being done to ensure that the language used is appropriate to the intended audience.

An initial group of six interventions were identified to test the methodology and approach with the support of the Expert Panel, convened from academic experts in the field and professionals working within psychology or mental health or child health. The interventions are a mixture of:

- universal approaches for all children or the whole school
- interventions for children who may be vulnerable to emotional or mental health problems
- interventions for children who may be showing signs of mental or emotional health problems

The Welsh Government has also created an online resource which promotes the numerous digital tools designed specifically to support young people with their own mental health and emotional wellbeing. [The Young person's mental health Toolkit](#) links young people, aged 11 to 25, to websites, apps, helplines, and more to build resilience and support them.

We have also allocated £1.45m in 2022-23, £1.5m in 2023-24, and £1.6m in 2024-25 to support the delivery of universal and targeted wellbeing interventions, and training for teachers and other school staff.

Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

Many disabled children and young people, including learners with ALN, have experienced a negative impact on their mental health and difficulties accessing education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2022 I announced an additional £10 million to provide targeted support to children and young people with ALN further disadvantaged by the pandemic. The funding could be used to add to existing support for learners with ALN and / or provide extra resources to target the impacts of the pandemic, such as mental health support and tailored support to help with attendance.

Food in Schools

Free School Meals

Our Programme for Government commits us to continue to meet the rise in demand for Free School Meals resulting from the pandemic and review the eligibility criteria as far as budgets allow. This work is underway with our immediate focus on the roll-out of Universal Primary Free Schools Meals.

According to data provided in February 2022 for the 2022 Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC):

- In primary schools, 42,084 out of 57,609 (73%) traditionally means tested eligible pupils took a free school meal.
- In secondary schools, 25,842 out of 35,464 (73%) traditionally means tested eligible pupils took a free school meal.

Free Breakfast in Primary Schools

With COVID-19 restrictions now lifted, we are keen to see primary breakfast services and clubs reopening across Wales, providing primary school pupils with the opportunity to access the primary free school breakfast offer.

According to 2022 PLASC data, 1,106 or 86.1% of maintained schools in Wales containing primary aged pupils provided free breakfasts and 43,857 children received a free breakfast on the day of the PLASC survey in February 2022. At the time of the 2022 PLASC survey, some schools were still in the process of re-establishing their breakfast provision.

School Holiday Provision

Since the start of the pandemic, we have made available over £100 million to support those eligible for free school meals. This included funding to provide free school meals during school holidays, being the first in the UK to do so.

In partnership with Plaid Cymru, we have committed £11 million to extending holiday food provision for pupils traditionally eligible for a free school meal until the end of the February half term next year.

Post-16 and transition plan

The [Renew and Reform: post-16 and transition plan](#), published in March 2022, outlines how the Welsh Government would work with providers of post-16 education to support learners and practitioners across Wales to progress from the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a delay in the publishing date due to the Omicron wave of COVID-19 cases and it was deemed appropriate to wait until the immediate crisis had abated.

Evidence on the impacts and harms of COVID-19 is emerging continuously and a further review of the published literature was conducted in June 2022 to understand how these harms have evolved. An updated version of The Wales Covid Evidence Centre's report '[A rapid review of strategies to support learning and wellbeing among 16-19 year old learners who have experienced significant disruption in their education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic](#)' was published in September 2022.

Evaluation of post-16 COVID-19 recovery funding

In April 2022, we commissioned an evaluation of the effectiveness of previously allocated COVID-19 related funding for post-16 education and training. The evaluation will provide evidence to inform the Welsh Government's strategic and operational approaches to ongoing support for post-16 education and training as the sector recovers from the disruptive impacts of the pandemic.

The evaluation will provide evidence on:

- How funding has supported the sector.
- How the post-16 recovery fund has been used in practice.
- Effective approaches to teaching and learning.
- Sector concerns.
- Collaboration across the sector.
- How the funding can support with existing and future challenges so learners can reach their full potential.

It will also explore options for a future impact evaluation and value for money framework. All data will be analysed and synthesised and published in a final report in April 2023.

Current activity to support post-16 learners

The following projects are continuing to support post-16 learners that have been impacted by the pandemic and the transition process:

- a) **Mentoring** – HEFCW have been awarded £600K to deliver a mentoring programme to benefit learners in sixth forms and colleges across Wales during the academic year 2022/23. This programme will be delivered by existing university students.
- b) **Alumni** – Many schools are already benefitting from a network of alumni who can share their own experiences of education, employment and training in a relatable way, with current learners. It also gives learners the chance to develop their confidence and resilience through peer support. Careers Wales has received

funding to deliver support to schools and colleges in establishing and maintaining an alumni community.

- c) **Tailored work experience** – Following a successful pilot in the 2021/22 academic year, Careers Wales has received further funding to engage with employers and provide 500 targeted work experience placements. These work experience placements will support learners who have struggled to re-engage with their education following the disruption caused by the pandemic. Between April and July 2022 Careers Wales implement a targeted work experience pilot, to support learners in year 10 who have struggled to re-engage with their education following the disruption caused by the pandemic. Over 200 young people were referred by schools with nearly 100 learners across 5 local authorities being offered placements.
- d) **University Ready** – The Open University and all universities in Wales have received funding for the next 3 years to work collaboratively to develop [The University Ready hub](#). The hub is hosted on the Open University's OpenLearn platform and contains hundreds of unique resources created and compiled by Wales' universities. Resources include videos, podcasts, articles, short interactives and online courses. These resources provide guidance for post-16 learners, their parents and teachers on making the transition into Higher Education.
- e) **Welsh Vocational Seminars** – During the course of the pandemic, learners from non-Welsh speaking households who attended Welsh-medium secondary school had reduced opportunities to learn and interact socially through the medium of Welsh. Many of these learners have now progressed to post-16 vocational programmes at college where they may be among a small minority of fluent Welsh speakers. During 2022/23 academic year the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol will develop and pilot a series of subject seminars for 16–19-year-old learners undertaking vocational courses to provide learners with an opportunity to learn about, and discuss, their vocational subjects in Welsh and is a small step towards working collaboratively to ensure the workforce is able to help Wales meet its ambition to increase the proportion of apprenticeships and further education programmes that are available in Welsh.
- f) **Attendance** - In 2021/22 attendance and enrolment data indicated that learner progression choices into post-16 provision had been less well informed due to the effects of the pandemic. Early indications from stakeholders including the Children's Commissioner suggested that a higher proportion of learners than usual were experiencing anxiety over their abilities to successfully engage with their learning. Learners who appeared to be struggling with their chosen year 12 or first-year college courses were offered increased 1-2-1 advice and guidance support to explore alternative pathways including vocational and hybrid programmes. An approach of 'swap don't drop' was emphasised across the post-16 sectors. In March 2022 local authorities were awarded £300k to recognise the costs incurred by schools in supporting learners who subsequently transferred to another provider within the first 8 weeks of enrolment.

- g) **Learner Recovery and Progression Funding** - In 2021/22 £33m Learner Recovery and Progression funding was allocated to FE colleges and school sixth forms to support learners who experienced disruption as a result of the pandemic. This funding has enabled FE colleges and school sixth forms to provide additional learning hours for learners in years 12, 13, and above. Learners were able to undertake group-based learning, learning on a 1:1 basis or a mixture of both. Learners had the opportunity to revisit previous learning and deepen their knowledge in order to meet the demands of their course, access specific pastoral support, including resilience and confidence building and develop their practical skills.
- h) **Transition Funding** - In 2021/22 FE colleges and school sixth forms received £12m to provide dedicated transition support for learners who were moving to the next stage of full-time learning, or into apprenticeships, training, or directly into work. A significant proportion of the transition funding allocated to post-16 providers has been used by schools and colleges to support year 11 learners who applied or were considering applying to FE colleges. FE colleges have delivered a range of events and activities including skills workshops, masterclasses and additional wellbeing, counselling and student services.

Post-16 mental health and wellbeing of staff and learners

Throughout the duration of the pandemic concern about the impact on learners and staff continued to grow and feedback from the sector highlighted the significant effect this was having on the mental health and wellbeing of learners and staff. Almost all young people experienced some degree of anxiety, depression and frustration related to the long period of disruption to their education, missed exams, their progression into university and/or employment prospects.

The impacts of the pandemic have been wide reaching and based on feedback from the sector, the main impacts on learners and staff include:

- **Academic pressures** – deadlines, exams, lack of understanding and changes to expectations, pressure of coping, confusion, parental pressure, returning to college and face to face learning, fear of failure, thinking about the future, retention.
- **Social and personal difficulties** – relationships, social lives, home life, family, personal problems, homesickness/loneliness/isolation, bullying, peer pressure, feeling like can't talk to others, relocation, death of family/partner/friend, impact of social media, work life balance, childcare, home-schooling, increase in self-harm and substance misuse.
- **Stress, depression and anxiety** – lack of stress management skills
- **Finances** – loss of family income
- **Digital support and access** –lack of training or access to equipment

An initial investment of £2m was allocated to the FE sector in 2020-21 with a further £2.5m allocated in January 2021 to support the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on FE learners and staff. £500,000 of this was ring-fenced for work-based learning.

This £2.5m supplementary funding provided additional resource to enable institutions to invest further in providing support to staff and learners. The majority of this funding was

used to recruit additional counselling and wellbeing staff and mentors and, in some institutions, to buy in an out of hours counselling service. Funding was also used to provide staff with COVID-19 specific resilience training.

The impacts of COVID-19 continue to be a priority and investment continues to strengthen support for learner and staff mental health and wellbeing in FE. An increased allocation of £6m has been approved for the FE sector for the 2022/23 academic year which is made up of £2m core funding plus an additional £4m to help combat the mental health and wellbeing impacts of the pandemic.

The investment this year will help provide the additional support required to increase the size of wellbeing/welfare teams to respond to growing numbers of referrals, counselling provision for learners, and to fund activities for resilience building and to support learners social and emotional wellbeing.

The effect of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing of staff and learners forms part of the evaluation of post-16 COVID-19 recovery funding and is being explored through interviews, survey and focus groups with learners in the sector.

Speech, language and communication

The Talk with Me speech, language and communication (SLC) [delivery plan](#) was published in November 2020. Elements of the plan were prioritised and / or developed to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. In response to emerging evidence about the impact of lockdowns on children's SLC development, additional funding is being provided to Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) services in all health boards and specialist centres each year from 2020-21 to 2023-24.

Evidence based Hanen 'It Takes Two to Talk' training was funded for 105 SLTs across Wales (out of a total workforce of 650 SLTs in Wales, many of whom work with adults and therefore would not require this training) and course handbooks for parents provided to 22 main libraries. Funding for the training increased from £200k in 2020-21 to £750k in 2022-23 and will reduce to £400k in 2023-24.

Feedback from activity undertaken in 2021-22 included:

- reduced waiting times
- positively impacted on continuous service delivery
- impact of delivering additional quality interventions in a timely way and in line with evidence base
- better outcomes for patients
- increased staff well-being
- early intervention will reduce the potential need for further or prolonged SLT support in the future
- empowered parents to support their own child's speech, language and communication needs
- increased productivity, and reduced waste within the system

Support for wellbeing and development

Building on the success of the Summer of Fun, which was held during the summer of 2021, in October 2021 we announced £20m for the Winter of Wellbeing programme to further support the commitments set out in Renew and Reform and to provide more opportunities for children and young people aged 0-25 to develop their social, emotional and physical well-being. The programme was delivered through five strands of activity, with the following organisations receiving funding to deliver Winter of Wellbeing activities:

- £6m to local authorities: delivered activities mostly through Play lead officers and by continuing the work of the Summer of Fun; partners included the third and private sector.
- £3m to National organisations: delivered by Sport Wales, the Society of Chief Librarians, the National Music Service, Urdd Gobaith Cymru and Amgueddfa Cymru, and the Federation of Museums and Art Galleries of Wales.
- £10.7m funding allocated to education settings and providers including:
 - primary and secondary schools
 - further education colleges
 - £1.3m allocated to HEFCW to ensure institutions worked collaboratively with Student Unions in delivering the activities.
- £300k to support a multi-faceted evaluation.

In addition, as part of the Winter of Wellbeing, up to £2m was made available to support the delivery of a trial of Additional Enrichment Sessions across volunteer schools during the 2021/22 academic year. The trial guaranteed participating learners with five hours a week (for 10 weeks) of additional sporting, cultural, creative, recreational and leisure enrichment activities before and / or after normal school hours. At least 20% of the time (1 hour a week) was required to align with academic support by tailoring sport or enrichment activities to include some core academic skills. Thirteen schools (8 primary and three secondary and two through-schools (for ages 4-16)) and one college were supported by Welsh Government to set up and deliver Additional Enrichment Sessions.

An evaluation of the Winter of Wellbeing is underway. Activities ended on 31 March 2022. The evaluation will be published at the end of December 2022.

Research and evidence

Wellbeing

The Welsh Government funded, Schools Health Research Network (SHRN) carry out a biennial survey of secondary schools and provide data on the health and wellbeing of 11–16-year-olds in Wales. Between September 2021 and January 2022, 123,204 11–16-year-olds from 202 (95%) secondary and middle schools across Wales participated in SHRN's Student Health and Wellbeing (SHW) survey.

A recent [briefing from the SHRN](#) published in August 2022 examines change over time in three key mental health and wellbeing measures collected through the survey and provides a snapshot of youth mental health and wellbeing immediately before and 18-months after the start of the pandemic.

The results showed a small but statistically significant fall in 2021 (23.0%) compared to 2019 (23.7%). Declines in mental wellbeing were observed across all genders and year groups.

The overall percentage of 11–16-year-olds indicating clinically significant depressive symptoms, increased from 24% in 2019 to 28% in 2021. Girls and students self-identifying as neither a boy nor a girl, were around two and four times more likely than boys, respectively, to reach this threshold in 2019. This disparity had widened further by 2021, following no observed change in the proportion of boys reporting depressive symptoms compared to statistically significant growth for girls and students identifying as neither a boy nor a girl.

In 2021, 14% of 11-16 year-olds in Wales reported that they often felt alone, up from 12% in 2019. Loneliness increased with age, with students in Year 11 around twice as likely as those in Year 7 to report often feeling alone. Breakdown by family affluence showed higher reported loneliness among students of lower affluence compared to higher affluence, with small increases among both groups between 2019 and 2021

Collaborative Evidence Network (CEN)

In 2021, the Welsh Government invited expressions of interest for collaborative research to be undertaken by academics across our universities into various aspects of education that related to the needs of the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE). Underpinning this was a focus on the impacts of the pandemic and the ways in which these can be mitigated. Following a bidding process, a total of 18 projects across five lead institutions received funding.

A review of the reports is ongoing. Final reports are to be uploaded onto Hwb and findings disseminated via a series of themed online forums scheduled for early 2023.

Estyn Annual Report 2021-22 interim messages

To maximise impact and share the annual report's findings as early as possible, Estyn published interim messages on 28 September ahead of publication of a full report in the new year.

The interim messages provide an early insight of what's working well and what needs strengthening across education and training sectors in Wales. The findings also offer an insight into a number of themes such as the Curriculum for Wales; the Additional Learning Needs reform; the impact of poverty on attainment; improvements in providers that have made rapid improvements; and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report notes that across all sectors, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to be felt throughout the academic year 2021/22. As the year progressed and providers returned to a more 'normal' way of operating, the full impact of the previous year and a half on learners, staff and the general work of providers became more apparent. The report notes a number of positive aspects alongside some issues and concerns to be addressed.

The report can be found here: [Recovery from COVID-19 – Estyn Annual Report 2022](#)

Forward planning

In order to ensure that schools are in a strong position to address any further disruptions to learning, particularly over the winter period, and to ensure that a clear focus on learning and wellbeing is maintained during these periods of disruption, all schools in Wales will be expected to develop a Learning Continuity Plan in the Autumn Term 2022.

The Learning Continuity Plan will be supported by guidance and additional resources, as well as a programme of professional learning for practitioners which will be delivered by the Regional Consortia. The guidance and resources are being developed in four stages:

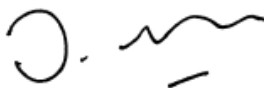
- Stage 1 – [Learning continuity guidance](#) for schools published outlining the overarching principles for learning continuity, types of disruption and roles and responsibilities.
- Stage 2 – [Maintaining learning continuity planning template](#) published to support schools.
- Stage 3 – Additional [guidance for learning continuity in exam years](#), led by WJEC published, with full package of support in place by the end of term.
- Stage 4 – Additional supporting resources delivered from December 2022 onwards.

In order to build on the success of the Renew and Reform programme, a Learning Continuity Board has been established which will co-ordinate this work across the Communities and Tackling Poverty Department, the Education and Welsh Language Department and the Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning Department.

This work will be underpinned by a range of data, research and evidence. This will include the tracking of children and young people to understand the long-term impacts of the pandemic on their learning and well-being outcomes; and establishing the pattern of the geographical impact of the pandemic on learners to understand where there has been disproportionate impact and where additional mitigating actions might be required.

Learning continuity will continue to be supported by the RRRS grant and through the development of our approach to digital and blended learning. A range of mitigating actions will also be put in place to support learning continuity in line with the emerging evidence.

Yours sincerely



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