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



**Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government**

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Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
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15 August 2023

Dear Jayne

Six monthly update - 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 have committed to providing 6-monthly updates on COVID-19 recovery and set out how we are supporting our children and young people to recover from the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This letter sets out the key developments over the last six months, which aim to develop both our learners and our practitioners. This letter builds on the first update which was provided to the Committee in December 2022.

Early intervention and prevention

The **Early Help Fund** which was introduced in 2021 has now ended. 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 aged 0-25, including those who were newly vulnerable. £14 million of additional funding was made available within the Children and Communities Grant between 2021-23.

Progress reports detailing targets and milestones achieved through the Early Help Fund were received as part of routine grant management processes for 2021-22 and further reports were submitted by Local Authorities for 2022-23. These reports have provided detailed information in relation to the types of intervention and support funded by the additional Early Help allocations.

Some examples of the funded projects under each of the activity headings are outlined below:

Additional investment in services delivered under existing programmes:

- Additional groups and sessions for families of pre-school children which include speech, language and communication support, antenatal support, parent/carer support groups, parent and toddler sessions and baby groups.

- Increased community provision that engaged children who were struggling to reintegrate back into school life due to absence caused by COVID-19.
- 1-1 support for individuals within childcare settings to be able to successfully transition to school.

Investment in services that may boost provision in one area whilst easing the pressure on another:

- A number of projects to support emotional wellbeing which range from counselling support, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and projects which have given families the tools to develop resilience.
- Advice lines which offer advice, information and signposting, including sending out resource packs, offering basic welfare rights advice and other early intervention support to families whilst on the waiting list.

Investment in training and upskilling the workforce:

- Training to support parenting which includes toileting, sleep training and Solihull¹.
- Investment in upskilling staff to include training in the Circle of Security, Systematic Practice, Staff Resilience, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Non-Violent Resistance Supervision, NSPCC Trauma & Child Brain Development and Cruse Bereavement/Loss training.

Investment in increasing the capacity of the existing workforce:

- Funding to employ additional family practitioners to work with families who needed one to one support.
- Additional funding to increase staffing within services such as the Young Carers Team, the youth mentoring programme, the Resilient Families Service and the Building Stronger Families Team.

Alongside this, the **Child Development Fund (CDF)** was established. Funding of up to £18.5m was allocated to all 22 local authorities in Wales between October 2020 and March 2023 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 CDF has now ended.

Since being established, the CDF 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
- Increased funded childcare provision to support child development

¹ The Solihull Approach is a team of professionals within the NHS. They work with practitioners and parents to develop new resources to support emotional health and well-being in children, families, adults and older adults.

- Various training courses for childcare professionals, health visitors, early years practitioners to support speech, language and communication
- Provision of focused resources to support training and enable parents and families to continue at home speech, language and communication support to aid development, provision of training and resources such as *ERIC – The Children’s Bowel and Bladder Charity*
- A number of projects to enable children to interact and develop their social, physical and communication skills, such as mini art explorer sessions, forest school sessions
- Increasing staff capacity in services, such as advice and support services, continence nursing services and LAC services, to help deal with the increase in referral numbers, address the complex nature of identified needs, improve the quality of care offered and reduce caseloads

Early childhood play, learning and care

In 2019, the First Minister launched our approach for early childhood education and care for all babies and children aged 0-5, which will build on current programmes and further develop high- quality provision of early education and care in Wales. In June 2023, following feedback from stakeholders representing both the education and childcare sectors and with careful consideration, the Deputy Minister for Social Services and myself agreed that the term early childhood education and care would be replaced with early childhood play, learning and care (ECPLC). The change reflects our focus on individual babies and young children and their learning and care journey and putting play at the heart of our approach in Wales.

To improve the quality of provision, which will improve settings ability to tackle impacts on babies and young children, we have recently published [A Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales and its accompanying documents, Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care in Wales: A Reflective Practice Toolkit and Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care: Developmental Pathways for 0-3.](#)

A Quality Framework for Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care has been developed through co-construction by practitioners, for practitioners. It is expressed from the viewpoint of the practitioner, drawing on expertise from across the 0 to 5 early childhood play, learning and care sector. The aim of the Quality Framework is to ensure that no matter which setting a child attends, be it a school, day care or a childminder, expectations of their experience, of how they are supported and nurtured are the same and quality early childhood play, learning and care is provided, which meets the requirements of the Curriculum for Wales, and the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare in Wales, for all children.

Ministerial Review of Play

On 3 February 2023, the Deputy Minister for Social Services welcomed a report from the independent Ministerial Review of Play Steering Group. One of the key themes is play and education, supporting children in accessing their right to play across educational settings both during and outside of school hours. My officials are working closely with Play Policy officials to achieve the best outcome for children and young people. The

Deputy Minister is considering the recommendations and will formally respond after the summer recess.

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 has been provided to Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) services in all health boards and specialist centres each year from 2020-21 to 2023-24.

Feedback on the impacts of activity undertaken in 2022-23 include:

- training and increased capacity has benefitted the whole workforce, and improved service delivery and wellbeing.
- improved waiting times for service users.
- children with ASD/suspected ASD can benefit from targeted therapy to improve interaction.
- additional staff has resulted in earlier interventions which have prevented issues escalating.

On 13th July 2023 GSR published a research report, entitled '**Supporting Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) Development in the Early Years: An Evidence Review of Universal, Population and Targeted Interventions**'. This will support practitioners across Wales to select evidence-based interventions to support SLC at universal, population and targeted levels of intervention. Evidence suggests that services providing SLC support have seen an increase in demand and complexity since the pandemic, and it is therefore now even more important that children are given the right support, by the right person, at the right time.

The Welsh Government has a continuing commitment to ensuring all children have the best start in life. An important contribution to this is ensuring all children have the best opportunity to develop strong SLC skills, leading to better outcomes in older childhood and adulthood. While some will need specialist intervention, many children have transient needs in the development of these skills which could be eliminated with early intervention. There is evidence that these universal, population and targeted interventions are effective, but it is less clear which are the most robust and likely to convey the most benefit to children according to their need.

The aim of this research was to identify interventions which have strong evidence of improving SLC outcomes for children aged 0 to 4 years 11 months and could be adopted or adapted for use across Wales at a universal, population and targeted level. The findings of this report will be shared widely with partners and stakeholders across the Early Years system in Wales (Flying Start and Families First practitioners, SLT teams, parent/infant relationship teams, Early Years advisory teachers, parenting support services) and will feed into the development of the intervention element of a Welsh Government funded Speech, Language and Communication Package.

Supporting children and young people's learning and well-being outcomes

Learning Continuity

In November 2022 I published a **Written Statement** - [Written Statement: Publication of guidance on emergency planning and response for education settings and learning continuity \(29 November 2022\) | GOV.WALES](#) which announced the publication of **Learning Continuity Guidance** - [Learning continuity guidance \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#) (reviewed and updated in April 2023).

The purpose of this guidance is to ensure that the impacts of any future disruptions to children and young people's learning are minimised and ensure that disruption to learning on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic is never seen in our schools in Wales again. The guidance sets out the expectation that every school in Wales should develop a learning continuity plan. This means that if disruptions to learning should occur, for any reason (excluding disruptions that are caused by industrial action), then parents and carers, teaching staff, support staff and learners all understand that face-to-face learning will be replaced with remote learning.

It is expected that schools develop their learning continuity plans in partnership with their local authority as part of their routine business planning arrangements and linking to the wider Emergency Planning and Response Guidance for Education and Childcare Settings [Emergency planning and response guidance for education and childcare settings \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#). Learning continuity planning will be further supported by the publication of a **Digital Education Plan** which is currently in development and will be launched at the end of September 2023.

Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS) Programme

In 2020, the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS) funding programme was introduced. This funding has been designed to enable all schools in Wales to recruit additional staff to ensure that they have the capacity needed to support children and young people's learning and well-being and to ensure that the impacts of the pandemic are minimised. RRRS funding has been distributed to all schools in Wales, with an additional weighting for more vulnerable and disadvantaged learners. The RRRS funding allocated to schools in 2020-21 was £59.1million, in 2021-22 £68.9million and in 2022-23 £37.5million. Tapering of the RRRS funding was due to commence in the 2023-24 financial year, however, funding has been maintained at the same level for a further year in recognition of the ongoing pressures resulting from the pandemic. Funding, therefore, will continue in 2023-24 at £37.5million and £28.5 million has been allocated for distribution to schools in the 2024-25 financial year.

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 £125K per school. The RRRS funding formula for the 2022-23 financial year is as follows:

- 50% allocation - Total number of pupils in nursery to year 10 as at February 2022
- 50% allocation - Total of:
 - a) Number of pupils in Years 1, 7 or 11
 - b) Number of pupils eligible for free school meals or transitionally protected (reception to year 10)
 - c) Number of pupils with statements of special educational needs or individual development plans (IDPs) (nursery to year 10)
 - d) Number of Black and Minority Ethnic or Gypsy, Roma, Traveller pupils aged 5+ (reception to year 10)
 - e) Number of pupils taught Welsh as a first language (reception to year 10)
 - f) Number of pupils in schools/settings that are defined as rural (nursery to year 10).

An initial evaluation of the RRRS programme has been undertaken by Miller Research and was published in May 2023 - [Evaluation of the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards \(RRRS\) Programme | GOV.WALES](#). It is clear from this evaluation that schools have benefitted significantly from the RRRS funding. Headteachers have welcomed the flexibility to recruit the right staff to support the needs of their individual learners, within the unique context of their school.

The key findings from the evaluation report are as follows:

- An estimated 2,452 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff in schools have been funded by RRRS.
- Decisions around funding allocations have been primarily guided by the needs of learners with the lead element being schools' own knowledge of their learners.
- Local authority advice and support was more prescriptive to childcare settings than to schools.
- Wellbeing support has been the most effective approach. This focus has been a central element in all areas of learning to increase engagement and enable the development of children in early education.
- The effects of COVID-19 on learners, and schools will be persistent in the long-term. The experience of disrupted education will remain with children, and the workforce will face continued disruption from COVID-19 absences.

Community Focused Schools and Attendance

Last year we invested £3.84m in increasing the number of family engagement officers employed by schools, with part of their role to be focused on improving pupil attendance. This increased to £6.5m this financial year.

We have published guidance on Community Focused Schools and Family engagement and are developing further research, guidance and case studies over the coming months.

Mental health and wellbeing

The Welsh Government has 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 end of June 2023 886 schools were engaged with the implementation co-ordinators which equates to 60.5% of all schools in Wales.

To further support the implementation of the Framework we have commissioned a survey of schools, which closed on 28 July. This provided senior school leaders with the opportunity to comment on the impact of our work and further inform activity in the field.

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 £2.1m in 2023-24 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 a three-year period (2022-2025) 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 embedded across all seven health boards, and we have received end of year reports demonstrating activity to date. This is currently being analysed with, initial findings demonstrate, most offer a similar service although there is some flexibility in their delivery methods, which is being monitored. Public Health Wales hold regular national co-ordinator meetings with the most recent held on 12 July 2023.

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 source 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 and parents. 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 for the intended audience.

An initial group of six interventions were identified and have been published on HWB and 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

This work will inform use of £1.1m we have made available in 2023-24 to support the delivery of universal and targeted wellbeing interventions, and training for teachers and other school staff.

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.

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, we provided over £700,000 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.

Evaluations of the Winter of Wellbeing and the Additional Enrichment Session Trials were published, separately, in early 2023 and the findings from both were very positive. The Trials delivered positive impacts for participating learners. This included increased socialisation, improved wellbeing, development of new skills including being physically active and realised improvements in behaviour, school attendance and engagement in the classroom. The evaluations are now being considered in the context of our wider educational policies and reforms.

School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP)

£4.85m was allocated to the programme in 2022-23. A total of 139 schools in 21 council areas delivered to 196.5 cohorts, providing 7860 spaces each day that it ran. Actual attendance figures show that 6884 children attended at least once. A total of £4.85m has once again been allocated in 2023-24, with 176 schemes planned across Wales for this summer, offering nearly 11,000 places to learners each day that schemes run. In addition, this year in response to the cost-of-living crisis, children attending will be offered a 'Bag Bwyd' (a bag containing pantry staples) to take home.

Play opportunities during school holidays

In our response to the cost-of-living crisis, we funded a Summer of Fun programme in 2022, which provided free activities and access to healthy snacks for children and young people aged 0-25 during school holidays. Over 300,000 children and young people and their families benefitted from attending activities. There is no allocated funding for a further Summer of Fun in 2023.

The £1m Playworks Holiday Project funding has been awarded to local authorities for 2023-24 which complements the SHEP Food and Fun provision by providing healthy snacks at staffed Playworks provision during school holiday periods.

Post-16 and transition plan

The [Renew and Reform: post-16 and transition plan](#), published in March 2022, outlines how the Welsh Government will work with providers of post-16 education to support learners and practitioners across Wales to progress from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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. 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 July 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 are working with Reaching Wider North and Mid Wales Partnership to deliver an online mentoring program to a number of schools and some colleges across Wales. The mentoring programme will be delivered by HE students between February and May/June 2023. Between December 2022 and March 2023 390 learners signed up to the project, 232 of these learners registered on the Brightside platform and were able to connect with mentors. Mentees have been recruited from eight colleges and 16 Reaching Wider priority schools with

sixth forms across Wales. 132 mentors were recruited from six universities, two colleges and through Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. 97 mentors have engaged with mentees through the platform. A final evaluation report is due October 2023.

- b) **Alumni** – In 2022-23 Careers Wales have supported all schools in Wales to establish and maintain alumni networks. Officials have now received the final project evaluation report. Over 800 alumni from 80 secondary schools have offered support to their former school. Careers Wales concluded they could build on the success of the alumni project by incorporating the model into their core delivery. In the 2023-24 financial year, each Business Engagement Advisor will support one school in the area to establish an alumni network.
- c) **Tailored work experience** – Following a pilot with Y10 learners Careers Wales have received £500K to engage further with employers and provide up to 500 targeted work experience placements in 2023/24. These work experience placements will support mainly Y11 learners who have struggled to re-engage with their education, following the disruption caused by the pandemic. Schools from across all 22 LAs will be invited to take part in the project. Careers Wales have employed 8.5 Business Engagement Advisers (BEA) to manage the placements.
- d) **University Ready** – The Open University and all universities in Wales have received funding for 2022-2025 to work collaboratively to develop [The University Ready hub](#). In 2023-24 The Open University and HEIs across Wales will continue to develop and expand the range of resources on the UniReady Hub which gives support and advice to a wide range of learners who are transitioning to Higher Education. HEIs are currently creating a series of bilingual podcasts where students will be discussing a range of topics including concerns around student life and money and barriers around applying to university and transition to 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. In 2022/23 the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol developed and piloted a series of subject seminars for 16–19-year-old learners undertaking vocational courses. The pilot brought together Welsh speaking vocational learners from across FE colleges in Wales, who were studying predominantly through the medium of English, for a series of virtual seminars under the guidance of Welsh speaking subject specialist tutors in **Business** and **Performing Arts**. This project has now completed, and the final evaluation report will be received shortly.
- f) **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. An additional £21m was awarded for learner recovery and progression in 2022/23. This funding has enabled FE colleges and school sixth forms to provide additional learning hours for learners in years 12, 13, College Y1, Y2 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 to meet the demands of their course, access specific pastoral support, including resilience and confidence building and develop their practical skills. In 2023/24 a further £10.563m Learner Recovery and Progression Funding has been allocated to FE colleges and school sixth forms.

- g) **Transition Funding** – FE colleges and school sixth forms received £12m of transition funding in 2021/22. A further £3m of Transition Funding has been allocated to FE Colleges and school sixth forms for the 2022/23 academic year to raise learners' awareness of the broad range of options in education and training post-16. Guidance has been reviewed based on case studies and monitoring feedback and recommends that providers deliver college taster days, masterclasses or interactive workshops and summer programmes to Y10 and Y11 learners to enable them to make an informed decision about the next step in their educational, training or employment pathway.

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.

In addition, in 2022/23, £700,000 was provided to support the health and wellbeing of apprenticeship learners, staff and organisations. This will help learners stay on programme to complete their apprenticeship, continuing our focus on maintaining and further developing quality provision and delivering successful outcomes. In 2023/24 a further £1m has been allocated to support this area.

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. As well as the baseline annual allocation of £2m, an additional £4m was allocated in 2022/23 and an additional £2m in 2023/24, to help combat the mental health and wellbeing impacts of the pandemic.

Feedback from colleges indicates that they are continuing to see adverse effects on learner wellbeing, including increased anxiety and behavioural problems. The additional investment is being used to 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. Extensive work is being undertaken with colleges to embed trauma-informed practice, as well as the introduction of staff wellbeing representatives across the sector.

Further education digital learning

In December 2022 I launched a digital "call to action" for the FE sector. I asked all institutions to prepare digital strategic plans, showing how they will build on the experiences of the pandemic to establish a sustainable approach to digital learning. I have asked institutions to show how they will:

1. Work collaboratively to widen access to learning opportunities
2. Develop learners' and staff digital capabilities and confidence for learning, life and work
3. Maximise the potential of technology to empower, enthuse and inspire learners
4. Embed agile, resilient and sustainable approaches to delivery

The delivery of the plans is supported by an allocation of £8m capital funding over three years for digital infrastructure and innovation. We have also commissioned [research](#) from Jisc, drawing on experiences during the pandemic, to help identify where the use of digital learning can have maximum impact and benefit.

Research and evidence

Early Years Research and Evidence

The Children, Families and Childcare Evidence team have commissioned several pieces of work to better understand the childcare and play sectors post COVID-19. These include the recently published Review of the Childminders and ongoing research relating to Childcare Sufficiency Assessments and the childcare and play workforce. These pieces of work combined provide us with updated evidence about the sector currently, and its future needs.

Evaluation of the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards Programme

This evaluation report was published on 3rd May 2023. [Evaluation of the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards \(RRRS\) Programme | GOV.WALES](#)

Findings:

- An estimated 2,452 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff in schools have been funded by RRRS.
- Decisions around funding allocations have been primarily guided by the needs of learners with the lead element being schools' own knowledge of their learners.
- Local authority advice and support was more prescriptive to childcare settings than to schools.
- Wellbeing support has been the most effective approach. This focus has been a central element in all areas of learning to increase engagement and enable the development of children in early education.

Recommendations:

- Continue to focus on addressing need, as defined at a school and childcare setting level in combination with national level priorities.
- Explore the possibility of establishing a minimum grant allocation.
- Consider additional weighting on grant calculations for the rurality of settings.
- Continue to adopt holistic approaches and maximising use of multi-agency approaches to fully meet the needs of 3–7-year-olds.
- Continue support for early education and childcare outside of schools, including non-funded, non-maintained childcare settings
- Specify any training provided by the grants is to increase staff capacity with learners, not just upskill the existing workforce
- Link more closely with other initiatives to increase staff numbers. For example, programmes that support entry into the workforces of the childcare and school sectors.
- WG and LA to encourage collaboration and cluster working at school and childcare levels.
- Establish a national tool for consistent measurement of local needs outside of the priority cohorts so that grant allocations can support all needs effectively.
- Ensure robust data collection by introducing universal monitoring for schools and childcare settings of the amount of additional capacity, recorded as FTE, number of staff, and area of learning they are deployed to.

School Health Research Network (SHRN) Student Health and Wellbeing Survey

The National Report of the 2021/22 School Health Research Network (SHRN) Student Health and Wellbeing Survey is now available. [Children's Health & Wellbeing Dashboard \(shinyapps.io\)](#)

The SHRN dashboard is live for health and wellbeing data from the 2017, 2019, and 2021 SHRN survey at the national and LA/Health Board level. The data can be interacted with in the dashboard or downloaded for analysis. Undertaken every two years, the survey provides a regular snapshot of 11-to-16-year olds' health behaviours and

wellbeing. This enables ongoing assessment of young people in Wales, both nationally and regionally, and opportunities for international comparisons of trends in adolescent health and wellbeing.

The dashboard has been created in collaboration with Cardiff University's DECIPHer team. The aim of the collaboration was to help users view some of the School Health Research Network (SHRN) survey data at a lower geographical level than ever before. The dashboard contains 32 different topics for three years of the survey (2017, 2019 and 2021), with views available for gender, age, family affluence and different geographic levels. DECIPHer have also released a National Report covering a wider variety of the most recent 2021 SHRN survey data at a Wales level. Together, the two products provide a detailed look at the health and wellbeing of students in secondary schools in Wales.

The SHRN categories covered are:

- Food and physical activity
- Wellbeing and emotional health
- Substance use and misuse
- Sex and relationships
- School life
- Friendships and bullying

SHRN will provide a key data source for informing a new long-term study aimed to monitor and track newly emerging and ongoing impacts of the Covid pandemic on children and young people in Wales. Finding will be used to inform effective mitigations and ensure learning continuity.

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). Unpinning this was a focus on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways in which these can be mitigated. Following a bidding process, a total of 18 projects across five leading institutions received the funding.

Recent updates:

- The third seminar of a six-seminar series took place on 04/05/23. This seminar disseminated the findings of the three projects that focussed on **language, literacy and literature**. This included research on how literacy and reading provision was affected by the pandemic, an examination of how the pandemic and concurrent events have affected the teaching of literatures and an overview of a new resource on 'translanguaging' to help educators working with children who use or are learning more than one language. Since the last update a further three CEN reports have been published on Hwb. These are:
- **Impact of COVID-19 on refugee learners in Wales**. Available: [Impact of Covid-19 on refugee learners in Wales \(gov.wales\)](#)

- **Supporting young quiet, shy and anxious children in school.** Available: [Supporting young quiet, shy and anxious children in school. \(gov.wales\)](#)
- **COVID–19, Education and Learning: Amplifying Young Children’s Voices.** Available: [COVID–19, Education and Learning: Amplifying Young Children’s Voices \(gov.wales\)](#)
- The fourth seminar of a six-seminar series took place on 03/07/23. This seminar disseminated the findings of the three projects that focussed on **changing classroom approaches**. This included research on pupil voice; teaching and learning in the outdoors; and grouping practices for learning support. These reports will be published on Hwb in the coming weeks.

Next Steps:

A further two studies are still to come into KAS for review. The remaining two seminars are themed around:

- Transition to post-16 and beyond
- School learning and engagement

These are all scheduled to take place by the end of 2023.

Are the kids alright? The early careers of education leavers since the COVID-19 pandemic

Focus of the Study:

- In this report, evidence is presented on how the cohorts of young people who entered the labour market during the pandemic have fared up to now. Discussion is focussed on:
- How labour market outcomes evolved over the pandemic and comparing trends with the 2008 recession to demonstrate the magnitude of the COVID-19 shock for young people.
- The experiences of cohorts of young people who entered the labour market during the COVID-19 years, or just before. Comparing their employment rates and multiple measures of job quality with those of earlier cohorts to assess the extent to which they are likely to experience long-term scarring as result of the pandemic.
- The prospects for future cohorts due to enter the labour market.

Key Findings:

- Evidence from previous recessions tells us that **young people who enter the labour market during downturns tend to experience worse career outcomes** that take several years to recover from.
- **The cohort that graduated in 2020, particularly individuals with university degrees, initially saw worse outcomes on some measures.**
- It appears that **the rapid economic recovery and the boom in new job vacancies since 2021 allowed new entrants to quickly recover lost ground.**
- Apart from the 2020 cohort, **other cohorts who entered the labour market during or just before the pandemic did not see slower occupational progression or have worse job quality**, with one exception: those from

disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to be in the same job that they held at school or university. However, there is, as yet no indication that this has affected other measures of their job quality.

- **It may be that some negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are yet to materialise.**
- Perhaps more concerning are the prospects for the next two cohorts of graduates. They will have suffered an incredibly **unfortunate double whammy, with disruption during a key phase of their education due to the pandemic, followed by an economy in recession** upon entry into the jobs market.

Post 16 Evaluation Update

Welsh Government allocated over £294 million to support post-16 providers of education and training across Wales, to facilitate their work in responding to, and recovering from, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Ecorys UK were awarded the contract to undertake the independent evaluation of the effectiveness and early impacts of the utilisation of this funding. The evaluation is in the final write up stage and the first draft of the final report was delivered w/c 05/06. The report has been circulated for review by policy colleagues and is due to be published in September 2023.

Key Findings & Recommendations:

Although there were shared experiences across the sector, the challenges of the pandemic and impact of the funding from WG varied across FE, HE, WBL (Work based learning) and ALC (Adult learning in the community):

- Sector organisations cited multiple, beneficial effects of the groups/forums established to communicate/collaborate more closely with the Welsh Government during the pandemic.
- A common finding across all post-16 settings was a call for greater flexibility in the scope of activities and resources which were eligible for funding support.
- Establish the monitoring requirements attached to any future funding at the outset of the design of funding models and consider data linkage in all future data collection activities.
- Highlight and prioritise the ongoing need for professional training and development in digital skills for staff in the post-16 sector.
- Explore options to collate and share best practice and learning on providing mental health and wellbeing support for staff in post-16 institutions.

Prevention of School Exclusions Update

This research aims to explore practices and approaches used by maintained schools and PRUs that are effective for preventing fixed term exclusions, maintaining contact and engagement with excluded learners and supporting reintegration into mainstream learning. Findings will inform the development of a guide summarising approaches to prevent school exclusions in maintained schools and Pupil Referral Units. The report is due for publication at the end of September 2023.

The Long Term Study

Background:

- We are currently in the scoping phase for the long-term study which is focused on the impact that the COVID–19 pandemic has had, and continues to have, on children and young people in Wales. It is hoped that the work will help to ensure that any ongoing impacts on learning and well-being are identified early, and appropriate mitigating actions put in place to address these impacts.
- At present, we are undertaking literature reviews in three priority areas. These are: wellbeing, attendance and attainment & progression. These are scheduled to be drafted by the end of July.
- In addition to this, we have had initial discussions with policy and KAS colleagues split by policy areas (early years, schools and post 16. Further conversations are planned as a result of this (e.g., WHERA) and ADR/PANDAR teams.
- These conversations are around exploring the evidence needs of policy colleagues. This is leading to the development of a suite of research questions that will form the basis of the long-term study.
- We are in the process of compiling both an evidence audit and a data audit. The evidence and data audits represent an ongoing project requiring regular review and maintenance. The audits will enable us to map existing evidence that can be used to respond to the developed RQ's. They will also help us in identifying gaps that may require newly commissioned work.
- Scoping study is taking place until August and the initial phase of the study will be from September till March 25 when there will be a review by the Learning Continuity Advisory Group

Next Steps:

- We are keen to improve our understanding around the extent of this issue and what this means for practitioners. We also hope to identify data and evidence sources that could be used to support and track this assumption over time, the breakdowns that they enable as well as any challenges and limitations in their use.
- Further discussions and completion of the drafting of literature reviews
- Explore data sources further
- Continue to promote the data audit
- Test research questions with relevant colleagues
- Facilitation of an online collaborative event to launch the long-term study and provide a platform for other research with a focus on pandemic impact.
- Ensure that the CYPE Committee is kept fully updated of all findings as the long-term study progresses

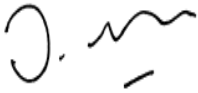
Upcoming items of interest

- Planned Evaluations: Early Years Policies In Wales And A Post-Pandemic Future: Mixed-Methods Research. This research will allow us to begin to understand the extent to which Early Years policies/programmes in Wales need refining, enhancing, or developing to counteract any types of disadvantage and delay experienced by young children and their families as a result of the pandemic

- Cardiff Met/RCT report on Attendance: awaiting publication date
- Link between pupils using food banks and GCSE results [click here](#); Welsh learners in Urban areas and wellbeing [click here](#)
- [COSMOS study wave 1](#): inclusion of briefings on Attainment and Assessment; Mental Health and Wellbeing; Future Plans and Aspirations; Education recovery and catch up and Lockdown Learning.

The next update to Committee will be provided in December 2023.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Miles', with a stylized flourish.

Jeremy Miles AS/MS
Gweinidog y Gymraeg ac Addysg
Minister for Education and Welsh Language