

Evidence paper for the Children, Young People & Education Committee general scrutiny session of the Minister for Education & Welsh Language

Background

1. In March 2023 the Welsh Government published its new road map for education —[High Standards and Aspirations for All](#). This is a coherent and cohesive road map which covers the breadth of our priorities for education in this Senedd term, from early years to post-16 and beyond.
2. Our systemic reform of education in Wales has introduced a new curriculum and a new system to ensure those learners with additional learning needs (ALN) have their needs properly planned for and protected. Through this we will tackle the impact of poverty on educational attainment and will ensure that we support every learner.
3. We know however, that the education system is facing a shared challenge of improving educational performance and raising standards. On 31 January I met education partners and we discussed the need for clearer focus on national priorities with a clearer national role in leading improvement. We must improve performance through stretching our learners but also by continuing to reduce the equity gap. To do this we need a sharper focus on attendance, behaviour and well-being; excellent teaching; curriculum reform - with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy; and additional learning needs support.

Attendance

4. Attendance rates remain lower than they were before the pandemic, providing a stark reminder of the continuing impact on our children and young people. While we are seeing some improvement in attendance rates, this is happening slowly, and we continue to see significantly lower attendance levels amongst pupils from lower income households and those with additional learning needs. We have established a National Attendance Taskforce to provide strategic direction, set priorities and identify further tangible actions to drive improvements in attendance and re-engage our learners. The Taskforce has met on two occasions and is considering a range of information and evidence and potential actions to address low attendance.

Children missing education

5. We are [consulting](#) on regulations that will require local authorities to establish a database of children who are potentially missing education; that is, they are not on roll at school, provision other than at school (EOTAS), or known to be in receipt of a suitable education at home (EHE). The consultation will close on 25 April, and following evaluation and consideration of the responses, the database proposals will be piloted across six local authorities in Spring 2025.

Literacy and Numeracy

6. We know that before the pandemic, Wales was making positive progress in numeracy and literacy. However, it is clear that the impacts of the pandemic have undone some of these gains.
7. Last March, we published our [oracy and reading toolkit](#), co-developed with practitioners, providing a package of support to schools to develop and embed their own whole school approach to achieving high standards of oracy and reading. This was followed in November with an update to the toolkit, reinforcing our commitment to the systematic and consistent teaching of phonics as set out in our High Standards and Aspirations for All Action Plan. We will continue to work with partners to inform how we can further support the teaching of literacy skills within the Curriculum for Wales and increase the package of support to help schools and settings achieve high standards.

Tackling the impact of poverty on attainment

8. Tackling the impacts of poverty on attainment is at the heart of our national mission in education. Our Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS) funding programme was launched in 2020 in response to the challenges created by the pandemic. It provides all schools and settings delivering funded nursery education with additional staffing capacity to ensure the impacts of the pandemic on the learning and well-being outcomes of children and young people could be identified early and appropriate mitigating actions put in place.
9. Since 2020 £165.5million of RRRS funding has been distributed to schools and early years settings - £59.1million in 2020-21, £68.9million in 2021-22 and £37.5million in 2022-23. In this financial year (2023-24) £37.5 million will be distributed to schools and settings delivering funded nursery education and in 2024-25 a further £28.5million will be made available.
10. Pupil Development Grant (PDG) funding aims to raise the attainment of children and young people from low-income households. It does this by reducing the barriers that they often face to achieving their full potential. Year on year we have extended the PDG to reflect any increase in eFSM learners. Funding of around £128m has been allocated to PDG in 2023-24.
11. We continue to work closely with PDG regional representatives to identify the areas where funding can have most impact, particularly in the context of the recommendations from the Review of School Spending in Wales report; prioritising additional funding for schools facing higher levels of deprivation, working with local authorities on ensuring more consistent and transparent school funding formulae.
12. [Updated PDG guidance](#) (published May 2023) emphasises schools spend on high quality learning and teaching and developing Community Focused Schools, in recognition of the crucial role parents and families play in their children's learning and development, and the impact of the home learning environment on outcomes.
13. Our developing partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation will play an important role in ensuring that our schools have access to powerful international evidence which points to the most effective learning and teaching strategies.

14. Working with the National Academy of Educational Leadership we have identified a group of Attainment Champions to work with partner schools to develop strategies and practices to reduce the impact of poverty on educational attainment.
15. Our School Essentials Grant (formerly PDG Access) has made a significant difference to many lower income families across Wales, helping to reduce the worry surrounding the purchase of school uniform and equipment, enabling children to attend school and take part in activities at the same level as their peers. The grant was extended in 2021-22 to eligible learners in all compulsory school years. In 2023-24, funding of £13.6m has been made available for the grant
16. Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is available to eligible learners, aged 16-18 in sixth forms or further education institutions. Access to EMA is based on a means-test of household income. Since April 2023 eligible earners can receive the increased rate of EMA at £40 per week for attendance on courses to help with the costs of full-time further education such as transport, meals, books and equipment.
17. Eligible learners aged 19 and over at a further education institution or learning centre could qualify for the Welsh Government Learning Grant (WGLG). Access to WGLG (FE) is based on a means-test of household income. Full-time learners can be awarded up to £1,500, and part-time learners up to £750, to help with study costs per academic year of their course.
18. The Financial Contingency Fund can help eligible learners in a further education institution who are facing financial difficulties. FCF can help with costs such as fees, course related costs, transport meals and childcare costs.
19. All Young people living and studying in Wales aged between 16- 21 are eligible for a "MyTravelPass", which entitles them for up to 1/ 3 off fares on local bus services across Wales.

ALN

20. The duties and responsibilities the ALN and Education Tribunal Act and ALN Code for Wales place on schools, local authorities, FE institutions (FEIs) and other agencies are intended to break down barriers so that learners with ALN receive the right additional learning provision at the right time and have their views, wishes and feelings taken into consideration as part of the process.
21. Over £62 million of revenue grant funding has been invested between 2020 and 2023 to support implementation, increase resources in schools to implement the ALN system and lead whole-school strategies to embed inclusive education.
22. Over £56.3 million is protected in the draft budget for 2024-25 to both support ALN reforms and boost support for ALN learners in pre and post 16 mainstream and specialist education. This is in addition to protecting the local authority budgets for education through the Revenue Support Grant.

23. The Welsh Government keeps the Committee [updated](#) on progress being made in relation to ALN reform as part of the Committee's ongoing scrutiny of the implementation of education reforms.

Pupil Wellbeing

24. [The Renew and Reform Plan](#), published in June 2021, outlined our commitment to supporting learners' wellbeing and progression in response to the 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.

25. We are prioritising implementation of the whole-school framework with dedicated funding from Health and Education budgets. Funding includes dedicated practitioners to work with schools and partners to meet the requirements of the framework, supporting them to assess and address their wellbeing needs.

26. Over £5m has been made available to Health Boards to deliver the national CAMHS school in-reach service, which sees dedicated mental health professionals in schools providing consultation, liaison, advice and training.

27. As confirmed in the budget, we will continue to support learners and schools to deal with the impacts of the pandemic moving forward. Funding priorities for this year continue to be aligned to our priorities of supporting learners' well-being and progression.

28. We have also invested significantly in the FE sector to support mental health and wellbeing initiatives for both staff and learners, and to help combat the mental health and wellbeing impacts of the pandemic. Over £21m has been allocated since 2020/21. The investment has helped 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.

Review of the Roles and Responsibilities of Education Partners in Wales & School Improvement arrangements.

29. The "Review of the Roles and Responsibilities of Education Partners in Wales and School Improvement arrangements" was commissioned in July 2023, led by Professor Dylan Jones (UWTSD), supported by ISOS Partnership.

30. In December the review team provided a report on progress and the key emerging themes and findings. The next stage will focus on the detailed design and co-construction of revised school improvement arrangements. A Written Statement was published on 31 January. ([Written Statement: The next stage in the review of school improvement - the roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales \(31 January 2024\) | GOV.WALES](#)).

31. The interim findings of the review team highlighted consistent messages from school leaders and clear views from the majority of local authority partners. Those findings chime with the wider evidence base on the system in Wales from a range

of previous reports, (e.g. the leadership review, OECD's TPL report, the Sibieta Review of School Spending in Wales, Estyn).

32. The feedback was clear on the preferred direction of travel that school leaders and a majority of local authorities want based around the following key elements:

- an opportunity to lead on school improvement matters through a greater focus on local collaboration and partnership working between school leaders and their Local Authority
- partnerships between more than one LA with a move away from a wider regional model of support
- stronger national leadership with clearer national priorities for schools.

CTER

33. In April 2024, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research will commence work on the development of its first strategic plan and start preparations for the introduction of a new tertiary education regulatory system. This essential preparatory work is designed to support a smooth transition towards the Commission becoming operational, ensuring there is no discernible disruption to either learners or providers. This work will continue alongside a phased approach to legislative implementation with the transfer of powers to the Commission now taking place on 1 August 2024.

34. CTER will take on the current responsibilities of HEFCW and corresponding responsibilities for the funding and oversight of further education, school sixth forms, adult learning and apprenticeships. The Commission will have statutory responsibilities to improve the participation, retention and attainment of under-represented groups.

35. CTER is a significant new public body in Wales, which will offer great potential and opportunities for driving improvement across the sector. The Welsh Government will work closely with the new body, providing support and expertise aimed at facilitating its success.

Higher Education

36. We have provided substantial financial support in the past two years to help higher education institutions deal with the impact of the pandemic. This funding, together with our student support system, provides a good foundation for maintaining the sustainability of Welsh higher education. Whilst HEFCW has confirmed that there are currently no immediate financial concerns, institutions continue to face inflationary and cost of living pressures, increasing construction and maintenance costs and significant pressure from pay and pensions increases.

37. More than £121m additional funding was allocated in 2020-21, including £50m for Student Support Services and hardship funds. Further allocations totalling more than £54m were provided in 2021-22. The total 2022-23 allocation includes additional funding provided in year to support specific initiatives such as HE mentoring project, mental health and well-being measures to address cost of living impacts.