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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Dear Jayne

Follow up from CYPE Committee General Scrutiny session

Thank you for your letter of 6 March, following my attendance at the Children, Young People and Education Committee on 28 February 2024. I am pleased to provide the additional information requested by you and Committee Members below.

<u>Provide further information on the attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils, including why you believe the data published by the Welsh Government cannot be used to make comparisons between years</u>

Annexes 1 and 2 provide further detail on changes since 2015 which make historical comparisons between years difficult.

<u>Look further at the Seren Network data in relation to those pupils who may not continue on the programme, to identify if there are any trends in relation to their subsequent performance and engagement with their learning</u>

In 2016, the Seren Network started to work with schools in pockets of Wales to provide information and guidance to its most able learners on applying for Oxbridge. The programme has evolved to cover the whole of Wales, providing support on a national, regional and area basis to all learners identified by their schools as the most able, regardless of socioeconomic background. The Seren Academy has approx. 32,000 learners from Y8-13 fulfilling their potential by progressing to, and succeeding at, the most selective universities in the UK and internationally.

An online portal was launched in 2022 to register our learners to understand demographics, engage and track progress. We are now scoping membership with the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) which will provide the data to analyse any trends and long-term impacts of The Seren Academy.

Provide further information on how take up of Welsh A-Level can be encouraged and increased, in particular in relation to the teaching and the content of the syllabus

Welsh Government has been working with schools, colleges, universities, the education consortia, Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, Qualifications Wales, the WJEC, CYDAG and the Urdd to address the challenge of increasing the number of learners studying Welsh at A Level, in order to feed university Welsh departments and the workforce of the future.

A total of £145k has been made available annually since 2019, with £125k allocated to Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol to lead on various projects and £20k retained by Welsh Government to fund marketing campaigns.

The key projects that have been implemented by the Coleg are:

- grants to support the provision of Welsh at AS/A level in secondary schools and further education colleges;
- an internship scheme in Welsh departments in universities to help promote the subject;
- creating digital materials to support the teaching of Welsh; and
- a mentoring scheme with learners in years 9 and 10.

In order to understand the impact of these projects, the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol commissioned an independent evaluation and the final report will be published by the Coleg in due course.

In addition to the promotional work, the Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) are central to the growth of Welsh-medium education, and one of the key factors in achieving our ambition of reaching a million Welsh speakers.

Outcome 4 of the WESPs requires local authorities to set a target and outline how they will increase the number and percentage of learners in Year 10 and above in its maintained secondary schools who are studying for qualifications in Welsh as a subject and other subjects through the medium of Welsh. As part of this outcome local authorities should set out how they are working with schools to ensure that the Welsh language is offered as an A level subject, and how they are supporting schools to maintain smaller class sizes if required in order to secure the subject.

We have received WESPs annual review reports from all local authorities. The number and percentage of learners studying Welsh as a first language is mixed across Wales, however, the reports show us that decisive action has been taken by the majority of local authorities to lay firm foundations for progress during the lifespan of the WESPs.

When designing new Made-for-Wales GCSEs, Qualifications Wales carefully considered progression to the current range of AS and A levels. Qualifications Wales will be commencing a review of A levels this year, in light of the introduction of new GCSEs. Any changes resulting from the review will be in place for first teaching from 2027. One of the considerations they will be making relates to the range of Welsh language qualifications that will be made available to support the teaching and learning of Welsh for learners aged 16 and above. This will include consideration, for example, of the appropriate titling and

structure of Welsh language A levels. They will also maintain a focus on incorporating engaging and relevant content and assessment, as they have already done for new GCSEs. Throughout the review Qualifications Wales will continue to work closely with both Welsh Government and WJEC, as well as a range of stakeholders and experts.

Provide information on the research undertaken, and guidance issued, regarding how schools could provide digital, remote teaching and learning should the need for this arise again in the future

Since October 2020, The Welsh Government has undertaken a systematic assessment of the impact of lockdowns and recovery programmes on learners. The findings so far published, provide evidence of the impact of our approaches and reinforce the need to provide ongoing, additional support to those in greatest need.

- o Effect of COVID-19 on learners survey: results summary | GOV.WALES
- o Evaluation of the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS) Programme | GOV.WALES
- o Evaluation of the Childcare Offer for Wales: year 5 | GOV.WALES
- o Post-16 COVID-19 recovery funding evaluation: April 2022 to March 2023 | GOV.WALES

Schools continue to operate in a challenging context and are managing the ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. These include persistent and high levels of absenteeism; challenging behaviour in classrooms; and mental health and wellbeing issues. Our successful Covid Recovery programme, 'Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards', was due to be tapered as the post-pandemic effects lessen, however, in acknowledgement of the continuing detrimental impacts to our learners across Wales, we are protecting this funding to continue to support our schools through our new School Standards Grant.

Learning Continuity Guidance was published in November 2022 to provide schools with additional support in planning for any future disruptions to education and to ensure that the impact on the learning and well-being of children and young people is minimised.

Schools in Wales are now well-positioned to implement blended learning strategies in the event of the need for remote learning and teaching via access to the comprehensive tools and support available through the Hwb platform. With access to a wide range of digital teaching and learning resources, collaboration tools, training, and technical support, practitioners and learners can seamlessly transition to digital and remote learning and teaching. Hwb ensures access to digital resources for all learners, promoting inclusive learning environments, enabling schools to effectively deliver blended learning experiences that support learner engagement, outcomes, and well-being in the event of a school closure.

Through Hwb, the digital learning platform for Wales, learners and practitioners from maintained schools and settings can access various online learning tools such as Microsoft Teams in Microsoft Office 365 and Google Meet in Google for Education. These applications through Hwb can offer an interactive experience and a chance to collaborate and engage in a safe and accessible way.

To ensure that our schools are prepared we have published learning continuity guidance to support them with contingency plans to reduce the impact of any disruption by using blended and hybrid methods to support learners. To complement the guidance, we launched a Live lessons area on Hwb. This area, along with the Live-streaming and video-

conferencing: safeguarding principles and practice, helps with delivering live lessons that are safe and secure.

Confirm when you anticipate issuing the strengthened guidance on Learner Travel

We will shortly open a formal consultation process following the publication in March 2024 of the Learner Travel Recommendations Report. This will involve working closely with key delivery partners and stakeholders to strengthen the Learner Travel guidance.

Consider further how the work of the Attendance Taskforce can be reported back to the Senedd and / or Committee

I will update the Senedd and Committee during the summer term on the progress and future of the National Attendance Taskforce.

Share the e-sgol participation data

e-sgol was launched in Wales in 2018 and is based on the Scottish e-sgoil project.

e-sgol is a blended learning initiative to provide online teaching and learning opportunities using direct, real-time and interactive methods. Using the range of tools and services available through Hwb, the project has enabled students from different schools to access digital teaching opportunities from qualified and experienced teachers.

The e-sgol project offers post-14 and post-16 pupils equal opportunities schools by providing opportunities to study courses that would not otherwise be available to them.

e-sgol was trialled in Ceredigion during 2018-19. The pilot was expanded in the second year (2019-20) to include provision in schools in Powys and in Carmarthenshire.

Participation in the e-sgol project is voluntary, however the scheme has been growing year on year and has now expanded to all regions of Wales. The table below shows the development of the project.

Academic Year	Numbers		
	Schools	Courses	Pupils
2018/19	3	4	43
2019/20	14	20	121
2020/21	24	40	282
2021/22	28	43	358
2022/23	31	52	484
2023/24	42	56	584

Looking towards September 2024, so far six schools have confirmed they will be joining the project.

In terms of measuring the success of the courses run through e-sgol, the table below shows a comparison of 'A' level results from August 2023

'A' Level results		
August 2023	**e-sgol**	**Wales**
Grade	**%**	**%**
A *	15.2	13.5
A* - A	38.0	34
A* - C	79.4	78.9
A* - E	95.9	97.5

The Carlam Cymru Course revision sessions continue to be offered under the banner of e-sgol. During 2022/23, 151 Carlam sessions were delivered by 50 teachers in 13 GCSE subjects, 9 AS subjects and 8 A Level subjects. Since the Carlam courses started in 2021 the scheme has produced 965 videos of the revision sessions, available on the e-sgol website, and have now received a total of 60,245 *'views*'.

Share, when available, Public Health Wales' work on the whole-school approach

Embedding the whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing is a key priority. We will provide more information on this, and on the work Public Health Wales are doing, as and when this becomes available. It is also something we would be happy to return to in future discussions with the Committee.

You referred to the "granular detail" the Welsh Government has about performance of the school system in Wales and that you had decided to publish this on an annual basis. Could you confirm whether you were referring to the aggregated data you published in November on pupils' personalised assessments and that equivalent versions of this is what will be published annually?

I can confirm I was referring to the more granular detail provided in the statistical release published in November 2023, which showed patterns of attainment in reading and numeracy, based on national-level, anonymised data from the personalised assessments.

Having a common understanding of national trends in Wales is an important foundation to inform our policies and actions to boost learners' achievement in literacy and numeracy, which are key to children's development across the curriculum.

We will also be publishing a fuller report in May which will show demographic differences based on gender, and eligibility for free school meals. This more detailed report will form the basis for future reports published annually.

Of course, while more granular than PISA – given the report is based on years 2 to 9, rather than one year group – it is important to note that this is information on just one aspect of our school system: attainment in reading and numeracy. The reports will eventually form part of a wider range of national-level information on learner achievement covering the breadth of Curriculum for Wales, along with numerous other sources of evidence that provide us with a fuller picture of the school system, including Estyn's reports.

Throughout all our recent work, there have been very clear messages from both schools and local authorities that they do not have capacity to take on any additional work. In this context, we would welcome your views on how any changes to current regional working will take into account these broader capacity and resourcing issues. Also, for those areas where regional working is the preference of schools and local authorities, will they be able to continue with arrangements, if they are shown to be working effectively?
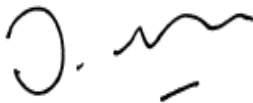
While I recognise the real and pressing capacity issues facing schools, our approach has been shaped by the feedback from schools and local authorities that has emerged from the review process. School-to-school and cluster working is seen as the most important element of support and the majority of school leaders think this should be the foundation for the school improvement system moving forward. School leaders and a majority of LAs also want to see a greater focus on partnership working between school leaders and their local authority and partnerships between more than one LA, and with a move away from a wider regional model of support.

In moving to this next phase of the work I have outlined that we will use this phase to explore how the system can best be supported at three levels: local, supra-local and national. This will include consideration of how we transition to any new arrangements and how we ensure the capacity and capability to support a new way of working is put in place.

I have been clear in the expectation that all local authorities will be in partnership with at least one other, for capacity and capability reasons and to promote system leadership in a self-improving system under any new arrangements. I have also been clear that these partnerships should be voluntary and meet the needs of schools and local authorities. The Welsh Government is not mandating the configuration of future partnerships, but we will be defining the roles and responsibilities to be fulfilled and ensuring proposals match these. The National Coherence Group will oversee the proposals and ensure that they have coherence at a national level.

The review has signalled that a clear majority of LAs themselves are in favour of exploring a move away from current arrangements for regional support or have already moved away from it to partnerships which allow more localised approaches. We are therefore seeking to enable that move to a system which is better fit for the future.

Yours sincerely,

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

Annex 1 - Provide further information on the attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and other pupils, including why you believe the data published by the Welsh Government cannot be used to make comparisons between years

I agreed to respond to you with further detail around the attainment gap and the policy changes that were introduced in the years prior to the pandemic that need to be considered when looking at GCSE outcomes for learners.

The past ten years have seen a steady stream of changes in both the qualifications space and the way in which we have reported on them, influencing entry patterns amongst our leaners. Added to that, FSM eligibility criteria has been in flux with the rollout of Universal Credit since April 2017 and the subsequent introduction of an earned income threshold in 2019 impacting on some learners' eligibility. This has meant that is has not been simple to make historical comparisons, and that the data needs to be understood within the context of those changes that have taken place across this timeline.

GCSEs and school performance measures

From 2015 to 2019 there were multiple changes to GCSE design and the way in which we report on outcomes for our Key Stage 4 (KS4) learners, following the 2012 *Review of Qualifications for 14-19 year-olds in Wales* and in line with enabling objective 4 of *Education Wales: Our National Mission*. Amongst these were limits to the volume of non-GCSE qualifications that could contribute towards the measures and the specifying of qualifications that could count towards our literacy, numeracy and science components. Alongside this, we introduced the policy to only count the first award of a qualification for a learner to encourage entries only when learners were ready. A fuller summary of these changes can be found at annex 2.

We can see clear changes in entry patterns as these reporting changes were introduced. In particular, we saw a large increase in entries for a science GCSE amongst learners eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM) between 2016 and 2018, which must be noted when reflecting on any year-on-year changes in attainment gap, both for this subject area and overall.

When we look at any data during the pandemic, as well as in this most recent reporting year, we must also consider the varying changes in examination arrangements across the period in response to the pandemic. Summer 2023 signalled the next step on the Welsh qualification system's journey back to pre-pandemic assessment arrangements, whilst also maintaining support for learners, schools and colleges with advance information and a supportive approach to grading. Whilst we continue to interrogate these examination results to understand differences in outcomes across different learner groups, the variation in impact of the pandemic circumstances on individuals, and the variability of this impact across schools must be borne in mind.

As you will be aware, we are seeking to understand educational standards by considering the broader picture of educational outcomes for learners and data that captures the range of achievements of our learners. The move away from threshold

measures to points scores in 2019 was an initial step towards this aim, by removing a disproportionate focus on the grade C/D boundary for GCSE and encouraging a drive to secure better outcomes for all learners. If we consider the patterns in attainment gap across a range of measures then we see differences in trends. For some of these measures, we see a narrowing of the gap prior to the pandemic.

Nonetheless, the gap persists across the range of measures and we continue to address that. Our commitment to invest in the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) is an example of this – a key resource for schools / settings to raise the attainment of children and young people from low-income households aged 3-16. Updated PDG guidance was published in 2023, and despite a reduction in eFSM learners, the budget of £127.8m has been protected for 2024-25.

Attainment gap data

I have included here a range of data to provide you with a fuller picture of differences in levels of attainment for eFSM learners and all other learners prior to the pandemic. I've included Key Stage 3 data for additional context.

Key Stage 3 – Core Subject Indicator (CSI) – Gap in % achieving

Year	CSI
2015	22.2
2016	20.4
2017	20.2
2018	19.5
2019	19.9

Here we see a reduction in the gap between these learner groups at the end of Key Stage 3.

Key Stage 4 legacy headline measures - legacy measures (no longer reported)

KS4 legacy measures (no longer reported) - Gap in % achieving

	Level 1 threshold (5 x GCSEs at grades A*-G or equivalent)	Level 2 threshold (5 x GCSEs at grades A*-C or equivalent) including English/ Welsh and Mathematics
2006/07	18.1	29.6
2007/08	19.5	30.1
2008/09	17.1	31.9
2009/10	15.7	34.0
2010/11	14.9	33.8
2011/12	12.1	33.2
2012/13	10.6	32.7
2013/14	9.5	33.8
2014/15	8.1	32.4

2015/16	6.2	31.3
2016/17	8.9	32.1
2017/18	9.1	32.3
2018/19	9.4	32.2

Here we see a marked decrease since 2006 until 2016, with a subsequent smaller increase towards 2019 for the Level 1 threshold, and relative stability over time for the Level 2 threshold including English/ Welsh and Mathematics.

KS4 Higher level attainment – Gap in % achieving

	5 x GCSEs at grades A*-A or equivalent
2016/17	14.9
2017/18	15.6
2018/19	16.2

For this higher grade threshold we see an increase in the attainment gap prior to the pandemic.

KS4 Interim measures introduced in 2019 (back calculated for earlier years where possible)

KS4 interim measures - Gap in the average points score

	Literacy Point Score	Numeracy Point Score	Science Point Score	Skills Challenge Certificate Point Score	Capped 9 (interim measure version – 2019 only available)
2016/17	9.1	9.9	8.8	9.8	-
2017/18	8.4	9.7	11.4	9.6	-
2018/19	8.9	10.2	11.6	9.6	77.3

We can see a mix of increases and decreases in the gap across these measures.

GCSEs only at cumulative grades

GCSEs all subjects - Gap in % achieving

	A*-A	A*-C	A*-G
2015/16	14.6	24.9	2.6
2016/17	14.8	27.2	4.4
2017/18	14.6	27.9	5.2
2018/19	14.8	28.1	5.7

Here we see increases in all grade groups, but most pronounced at A*-C.

In addition to these tables above, we are able to see similar variation of trends as we examine attainment gaps at a subject level for GCSEs. I would be happy to provide you with this additional set of data if you require.

Annex 2

2015-2019 timeline on KS4 performance measures

2015
- Individual indicators for mathematics, English and Welsh language introduced.

2016
- A cap introduced to the GCSE equivalence size of qualifications. Non-GCSEs could no longer be equivalent to more than two GCSEs (other than AS and A levels).

- Move from measuring awards attained by all pupils aged 15 at the beginning of the academic year to Year 11 pupils in maintained schools that are recorded on a school's roll in the January annual school census (PLASC).

- Individual indicators for mathematics – numeracy and mathematics introduced

2017
- Parameters for Guided Learning Hours as an indication of a qualification's size were updated, resulting in a reduction of GCSE equivalence for some qualifications.

- Some skills qualifications no longer hold value for KS4 measures.

- Legacy English or Welsh language or literature qualifications no longer hold value for KS4 measures where a pupil has also been entered for a new Wales specification version for the subject.

- Legacy mathematics qualifications no longer hold value for KS4 measures where a pupil has also been entered for a new Wales specification version for the subject.

- CSI no longer reported

- Capped Points Score revised becoming the 'Capped 9', with five subject specific slots out of the nine in total.

- Cap on total volume of non-GCSE qualifications that can contribute is applied to *threshold measures*, i.e. Level 1, Level 2 and Level 2 inclusive. No more than 2 GCSE equivalence of non-GCSE qualifications in total can contribute towards these measures.

- New requirements implemented for literacy indicators and specified literacy components of measures (i.e. the Level 2 inclusive and the Capped 9): only the new Wales specification English language or Welsh language GCSEs could contribute.

- New requirements implemented for numeracy indicators and specified numeracy components of measures (i.e. the Level 2 inclusive and the Capped 9): only the new Wales specification Mathematics - numeracy or Mathematics GCSEs could contribute.

2018
- Welsh Baccalaureate measures introduced

- New requirements implemented for science indicators and specified science components of measures (i.e. the Level 2 inclusive and the Capped 9): only GCSEs in science can contribute.

2019

- Interim KS4 measures introduced with a move towards points scores and a phasing out of legacy threshold measures

- Only the first awarding of a complete qualification will count.

- 'Capped 9' being revised, reduced to three subject specific slots out of the nine in total. See annex B for year on year changes.

- Updated requirements for literacy indicators and specified literacy components of measures with English literature or Welsh literature GCSEs able to contribute.