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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Our ref MA/LN/0527/25

Buffy Williams MS
Chair – Children, Young People and Education Committee

4 March 2025

Dear Buffy

Thank you for the Committee's report on the 2025-26 Welsh Government Draft Budget, published on the 3 February, outlining 12 recommendations for the Welsh Government.

We acknowledge the work undertaken by the Committee on their scrutiny of the Draft Budget and welcome this report. Please find enclosed the Welsh Government response to recommendations, in advance of the vote on the Final Budget on 4 March.

Yours sincerely

Lynne Neagle AS/MS
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg
Cabinet Secretary for Education

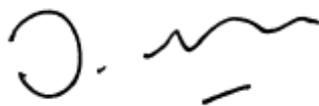
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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.



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Welsh Government response to the Children, Education and Young People Committee (CYPE)

Scrutiny of the Welsh Government Draft Budget 2025-26

Summary

This report sets out the Welsh Government response to the Children, Young People and Education (CYPE) Committee's Report on the Scrutiny of the Welsh Government Draft Budget 2025-26.

It provides responses to the 12 recommendations made in the Committee's Report.

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1. Introduction

The Welsh Government Draft Budget for 2025-26 was published on 10 December 2024. It set out revenue and capital spending plans for the period April 2025 to March 2026.

As part of the budgetary process written evidence was provided by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Minister for Further and Higher Education in relation to budgets within the Education MEG and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Minister for Children and Social Care and Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing in relation to budgets in the Health and Social Care MEG to inform scrutiny of the Draft Budget 2025-26. These papers provided information to the Children, Young People and Education (CYPE) Committee on budget allocations.

An oral evidence session was held on the 9 January and the 16 January where the CYPE Committee took evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education; Minister for Further and Higher Education; Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care; Minister for Children and Social Care; and Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing

The Committee published its report on [Scrutiny of the Welsh Government Draft Budget 2025-26](#) on 3 February. We thank the Committee for the report.

The Welsh Government has considered the Committee's report and responds to the recommendations below. For each recommendation we have provided a written response and either decided to 'accept', 'accept in principle' or 'reject' each recommendation.

2. Recommendation 1

The Welsh Government should trial publishing a Children's Rights Impact Assessment of the Draft Budget allocations within the Health and Social Care Main Expenditure Group, at a strategic level, for the 2026-27 Draft Budget.

Response: Reject

The duty to have due regard to the UNCRC means that Welsh Government Ministers must consider children's rights in everything they do. The impact of the Welsh Government's Draft Budget on Children's Rights is considered as part of the Draft Budget's Integrated Impact Assessment.

Welsh Government officials are currently undertaking a review of the SIIA, the first review since its introduction in 2015-16, to ensure it remains fit for purpose and consider where improvements might be made in the future.

It is anticipated the review will conclude in 2025. Welsh Treasury are leading on this review with input from the Budget Improvement and Impact Advisory Group (BIIAG).

In addition to ongoing discussions with the BIIAG, there is engagement with other Governments including Iceland, Canada, Scotland and Northern Ireland to draw on experience and best practice from around the world. There is also engagement with key groups such as the Women's Equality Network in Wales. This engagement will be accelerated over the next few months along with wider views from across Wales before discussing emerging recommendations with BIIAG members.

For the Health, Social Care & Early Years Group - A Healthier Wales (AHW) is the Welsh Government's 10-year plan for Health and Social Care launched in 2018. The

plan remains relevant and current, and an Integrated Impact Assessment was undertaken in developing AHW including assessment of the plan's impact on Children and Young People.

Children's Rights Impact Assessments are also completed by individual policy areas in delivering on the aims and objectives of AHW.

The Public Health (Wales) Act 2017 places a duty on the Welsh Ministers to make regulations which require certain public bodies to carry out Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) in specified circumstances.

Following a consultation period, officials are in the process of developing regulations (the Regulations) and plan to lay these before the Senedd this summer (2025).

HIAs are a systematic way of taking health into account as part of decision making and planning processes.

A key part of undertaking an HIA process is considering the impacts of decisions on the health of affected population groups. This includes children and young people, where decisions may impact their health outcomes.

Public Bodies subject to the Regulations will be required to publish their HIA.

3. Recommendation 2

In its response to this report, the Welsh Government should provide more information about the forthcoming Quality Statement for children's health and the newly established clinical lead for child health post, including:

- the precise role and responsibilities of the clinical lead for child health, including how they will work with health boards and other key stakeholders to improve child health services;
- the link between the role of clinical lead for child health and the quality statement for children's health, and how these initiatives will drive improvements in health outcomes for children and young people;
- the extent to which the clinical lead and the quality statement will improve transparency of, and accountability for, how the Welsh Government prioritises and allocates funding for children's health; and
- how these structures will enable the Welsh Government to monitor spending, measure healthcare outcomes for children (beyond just outputs), and hold health boards accountable.

Response: Accept

The Integrated Quality Statement on Children's Health will set out our clear expectations about the high-quality services health boards are expected to deliver. The Quality Statement will be developed with the support of the National Strategic Clinical Network for Child Health. The Welsh Government will monitor the progress against the quality statement through the usual health board quarterly reporting mechanisms and additionally through IQPD meetings.

The role of the Children's Health Clinical Lead within the NHS Executive is to provide clinical leadership within the National Strategic Clinical Network for Child Health, driving improvements in clinical outcomes and service quality. The Clinical

Lead collaborates with various stakeholders, including health boards and other clinical networks, to develop and implement best practices and standards across Wales. This role will help to ensure that children's health services in Wales are effective, equitable, and aligned with national priorities and standards.

The National Strategic Clinical Network for Child Health, under the leadership of the Clinical Lead will develop the NHS response to the Quality Statement.

4. Recommendation 3

The Welsh Government should clarify why the eligibility link between the Pupil Development Grant and free school meal entitlement is a barrier to extending free school meals in secondary schools, given similar concerns have been overcome in the case of the roll out of universal free school meals in primary schools.

Response: Accept

The evidence presented on this issue was in response to a question about priority areas should further funding become available. It was in this context the Cabinet Secretary spoke of her interest in exploring an inflationary uplift to the free school meal income threshold that would increase the number of learners eligible for a meal.

Such a move would be in direct response to perceptions that the current threshold excludes some families that are receiving benefits, and who are living in socio-economic disadvantage, from being able to access much needed additional support.

It therefore stands to reason that, were additional families to be formally identified and recognised as living in socio-economic disadvantage and needing a free school meal, they should be able to benefit from the same level of additional support as other families who are currently eligible under existing arrangements. This support includes School Essentials Grant funding which goes directly to families and Pupil Development Grant funding which is allocated to schools (both of which are key enablers for tackling the impact of poverty and which sit alongside the offer of a meal).

It is feasible to just offer a meal to additional children through a grant, as was evidenced through the rollout of universal primary free school meals. However, it is important to note that the universal commitment did not seek to redefine

measures of socio-economic disadvantage by changing the eligibility criteria for benefit-related free school meals. In fact, a key policy aim during rollout was to preserve the eFSM data set. A 'meal only' offer contrasts with the scenario put forth by the Cabinet Secretary which would provide equity to low-income families by extending the benefit-related eligibility criteria for free school meals, the data set associated with it, and therefore the way in which additional support is targeted to address inequalities.

The Welsh Government remains committed to exploring the benefits and feasibility of increasing the income threshold for free school meals (and passporting the full range of entitlements conferred through that status) as part of the planned spending review.

5. Recommendation 4

The Welsh Government should urgently complete its assessment of the impact of the increased employer National Insurance Contributions on all organisations providing services for children and young people in Wales.

Recommendation 4: Accept in Principle

National Insurance is not devolved. The UK Government has confirmed it will provide funding to public sector employers to cover the increased costs of employer National Insurance contributions. It will use the official ONS definition of a public sector employer. The UK Government has also confirmed the Welsh Government will be provided with our share of that funding to support the costs to the devolved public sector, but we have not yet had confirmation of how much additional funding Wales will receive.

We expect to receive the additional funding in late spring and are working with HM Treasury to clarify the details and the level of support that will be provided.

We recognise third sector organisations and businesses are concerned about increases to Employer National Insurance contributions. However, this will be fully or partially offset by increased Employer Allowance.

We will of course be in contact with our grant recipients in the third sector and others (that fall outside of the ONS definition of public sector) who deliver health and care services in the normal course of business; to understand any pressures they are facing that might impede delivery of agreed objectives.

11. Recommendation

The Welsh Government should clarify what support, if any, it will be providing to third sector organisations that provide services for children in Wales (or to the public bodies that commission those services) to ensure that critical frontline interventions for children and young people are not adversely affected as a consequence of increased employer National Insurance Contributions.

Recommendation 5: Reject

As set out in the response to recommendation 4, National Insurance is not devolved. The UK Government has confirmed it will provide funding to public sector employers to cover the increased costs of employer National Insurance contributions. It will use the official ONS definition of a public sector employer. The UK Government has also confirmed the Welsh Government will be provided with our share of that funding to support the costs to the devolved public sector, but we have not yet had confirmation of how much additional funding Wales will receive.

We expect to receive the additional funding in late spring and are working with HM Treasury to clarify the details and the level of support that will be provided. We recognise third sector organisations and businesses are concerned about increases to Employer National Insurance contributions. However, this will be fully or partially offset by increased Employer Allowance.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance has stated that as soon as we know the amount of money that will come to Wales to help with public sector employer contributions, that money will be made known to those services and that money will be passed to them immediately. What we cannot do is divert money away from our budget for this Senedd to make up for deficits in budgets that are not our responsibility at all. That is the principle we intend to adhere to for this budget for Wales.

7. Recommendation 6

The Welsh Government should set out clearly:

- the specific evidence and data that has been used to develop and evaluate the Healthy Weight Healthy Wales strategy;
- the specific evidence and data underpinning the decision to shift towards a greater focus on children within that strategy; and
- how success is being measured in the Healthy Weight Healthy Wales programme for children, including what specific outcomes the Welsh Government is seeking to achieve and when.

Response: Accept

Development of an obesity strategy is a statutory duty under the Public Health (Wales) Act 2017. The Healthy Weight Healthy Wales Strategy is a ten-year plan to prevent and reduce obesity in Wales. In Wales, over 60% of the adult population are affected by overweight or obesity and around a quarter of children in Wales are living with overweight or obesity by the time that they are five years old, with the levels higher in the most deprived areas.

In developing the Healthy Weight Healthy Wales Strategy, Public Health Wales reviewed the international evidence base for action to address obesity. A range of indicators are currently used to evaluate the strategy. Both can be found here.

These include the Child Measurement Programme which measures the height and weight of children in Reception class. Childhood obesity is a strong predictor of adult obesity. While prevention is needed across all the life course, effective prevention of adult obesity will require the prevention and management of childhood obesity, and the habits and behaviours formed. A key finding from Public Health Wales' review of international perspectives on action to prevent and reduce obesity is that no country internationally has been successful in lowering

obesity rates at a national level. There are, however, examples of long-term programmes to address childhood obesity that, after a period of sustained intervention through a whole system approach, had managed to halt and reverse the rise. These experiences in the United States, Australia, Amsterdam and across Europe were used to inform the development of Healthy Weight Healthy Wales adapted appropriately to a Welsh context.

Delivery is supported through 2-year delivery plans. A new delivery plan for 2025-27 will be launched in April. Welsh Government have commissioned Public Health Wales to develop an outcome framework to evaluate Healthy Weight Healthy Wales, which will set out goals to provide a focus on the things we want to work towards, across the whole of society, to address the factors that lead to a healthy weight, and indicators to further measure progress.

Financial Implications: The budget allocated for delivery of Healthy Weight Healthy Wales for 2025/26 is £4.042m.

8. Recommendation 7

The Welsh Government should set out clearly:

- how the Draft Budget 2025-26 provides funding to support families waiting for neurodivergent assessments, and to help them once they have received their diagnoses; and
- how the Welsh Government ensures that this support is consistent between local authorities and health boards, and available to families across the whole of Wales.

Response: Accept

In my Written Statement of 3 February I confirmed £13.7M funding to deliver our neurodivergence priorities up to March 2027. Funding for services will be directed through Regional Partnership Boards to ensure consistency across local authorities and health boards and across regions. We will deliver:

- An extension to the National ND improvement programme will create a new collaborative ND service delivery model for children's ND services, providing early help and support. Partners include health, social care and education all of whom expressed support for developing a whole system needs-led response.
- Alongside the service delivery model, an ND assessment waiting list recovery plan to be developed with health boards building on the additional £3m waiting list reduction activity already underway.
- To measure improvement and focus on accountability, a new national Neurodivergence data set for children and young people and reporting system.
- Publication of National Neurodivergence Team Annual Workplan with measurable deliverables to support improvement and an annual outcome report.

- Delivery of the draft Statutory Code of Practice on the Delivery of Neurodivergence Services by March 2026.

Financial Implications: £6.89 Million per year in 2025-26 and 2026-27

9. Recommendation 8

The Welsh Government should set out an up-to-date timeline for the full rollout of phase 3 of Flying Start childcare, clearly setting out the costs of each stage of implementation, the extent to which those costs are met by the Draft Budget 2025-26 or anticipated to be met by future budgets, key implementation milestones, and any barriers to rollout (financial or otherwise).

Response: Accept in principle

We remain committed to our Programme for Government commitment to "Deliver a phased expansion of early years provision to include all 2-year-olds, with a particular emphasis on strengthening Welsh medium provision".

All local authorities have prepared and submitted their delivery plans for the next phase (Phase 3) of the Flying Start Childcare Expansion Programme.

The additional funding provided at final budget will enable us to fund the extension of Flying Start childcare in all local authority areas bringing Wales a step closer to the universal provision of childcare for all two-year-olds.

We are deliberately taking a phased approach to the expansion of Flying Start childcare in Wales. This approach is designed to target resources on the most disadvantaged areas first. We are also committed to working collaboratively with local authorities and the childcare sector to ensure that childcare provision in the expansion programme is both high quality and sustainable.

Continued expansion beyond 2025-26 will depend on further funding being made available in future Welsh Government budgets and the capacity of the sector to respond to the requirements of further expansion.

Financial Implications: £25.2m in 2025-26 (confirmed in Final Budget)

10. Recommendation 9

The Welsh Government should clarify the proposed arrangements for school improvement services, including:

- how additional school-to-school collaborative working will be facilitated by the new arrangements and structure, as opposed to the regional consortia model;
- the rationale for creating the new National Professional Learning and Leadership Support body, what professional learning it will deliver, and how this will support school-to-school collaboration and school improvement; and
- the practical role of the Welsh Government's central Education Improvement Team, and what interactions local authorities and individual schools should expect to have with that team.

Response: Accept

The **review of the future direction and roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales** was clear in its feedback that the majority of schools and Local Authorities wanted a change to the existing arrangements and a new system that created opportunities to lead on school improvement matters through a greater focus on local collaboration and partnership working between school leaders and their Local Authority. School-to-school and cluster working was seen as the most important element of support and school leaders thought this should be the foundation for the School Improvement [SI] system moving forward. They also expressed concerns about the value-added of the Regional Consortia, with a lot of concern about a culture of 'done to' rather than 'done with' in terms of the culture of SI across the system.

Local Authorities are the statutory function holders for SI and want to hold the delivery and support of their SI functions along with their accountability for SI.

They also see these changes as a real opportunity to join up SI support with wider local services allowing a more integrated approach to school improvement.

Our vision is for self-improving local improvement communities of schools in every part of Wales where school leaders and school staff have agency over their own development, working in partnership with other colleagues, schools and the LA, whilst contributing to a shared local and national improvement agenda.

This means schools and school leaders belonging, and contributing to an open, inclusive and supportive environment that enables the improvement of all schools, focused on continuous improvement in educational outcomes for our young people.

All schools will be operating as part of local improvement communities working with other schools, both horizontally and vertically, to undertake effective peer supported evaluation, improvement and professional learning.

The review was also clear around the need for national leadership and providing national support where required to make best use of resources and secure greatest impact. We have considered the evidence gathered as part of the review of education partners in Wales alongside a wider evidence base that explored a range of matters. The evidence concludes that there are too many organisations involved in the development and delivery of professional learning and leadership support that:

- creates an overwhelming offer for practitioners;
- is variable in terms of availability and quality across Wales;
- causes conflict between organisation and as a result can lead to duplication;
- often doesn't meet the needs of the system, practitioners and learners, and
- does not provide the best value for money.

Moving forward, the national arrangements need to deliver a coherent and consistent offer for our practitioners to provide the opportunities they need to

develop, share practice and learn from each other in order to impact positively on educational standards in Wales and provide the best opportunities for our learners to thrive, and provide value for money.

It was therefore decided to bring together the national provision and support for our practitioners currently delivered by our partners into a single national body to significantly simplify the national professional learning and leadership support landscape.

In particular, the national body will:

- Be responsible for designing and delivering professional learning and support on a national level for school leaders and school improvement advisors. This will include the National Professional Qualification for Headship and other leadership programmes. This professional learning will focus on a range of leadership matters and Welsh Government priorities including promoting school-to-school collaboration and school improvement.
- Develop and deliver a range of professional learning for practitioners in our key priority areas e.g. wellbeing, diversity, ALN, digital and for our Welsh-medium schools.
- Develop and deliver coaching and / or mentoring professional learning to enable peer-to-peer support and development.
- Work with local authorities to develop and deliver national professional learning programmes for our teaching assistants and newly qualified teachers and to support the teaching of Welsh in English-medium schools.
- Work with our universities to support professional learning for research and enquiry and education pedagogy alongside the continuation of the delivery of the National Masters and Doctorate in Education.

Local authorities will work with the national body to support delivery on a local level and to continue to deliver the more bespoke school-based professional learning in response to local priorities and needs and our national support

programmes for literacy and numeracy. Local authorities also work closely with officials in the development and delivery of our national support which we are providing on curriculum design, progression, assessment, literacy and numeracy. This will ensure schools have access to this support and that local approaches build on this.

The recently established Education Improvement Team (EIT) within Welsh Government intends to meet formally with all local authorities initially once every term. These engagements will focus on national priority areas and are intended to support local authorities as they evolve their local school improvement system. As this work develops, there will be opportunities for less formal and more regular engagement around key issues. The EIT will meet with all local authority Directors of Education, their school improvement leads and their headteacher representatives over the course of this spring term.

11. Recommendation 10

Medr should provide us with information about its proposed budget for 2025-26, and work with us as we establish a pattern of annual scrutiny of both its proposed budgets and its annual report and accounts to ensure that Medr is held to account for how it uses public funding to support tertiary education across Wales.

Response: Accept

The Welsh Government is committed to the principles of transparency and accountability and as such acknowledge the importance and benefit of Medr engaging proactively with the Committee through appropriate scrutiny of its budgets and annual accounts. The Welsh Government notes the early engagement between the Committee and Medr aimed at supporting such proposals.

12. Recommendation 11

The Welsh Government should set out in more detail its plans to redesign the eligibility criteria for the Seren programme to include learners on vocational pathways, a timeline for implementing those plans, and how any anticipated financial costs of the changes are met in the Draft Budget 2025-26 or otherwise.

Response: Accept

Central to The Seren Academy's mission of supporting learners in their pursuit of excellence is the creation of an inclusive environment free of barriers to engagement. To maximize our contribution towards the well-being objective of reducing educational inequalities and raising standards, and in alignment with Programme for Government Commitments, we are exploring ways to increase opportunities for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds to participate in Seren

The 2025-26 Widening Participation Project aims to enhance equity of opportunity, ensure fair access, and improve provision within Seren, prioritizing the needs of learners at its core. The project will:

- develop an equity-based approach, to enable all high-potential learners to develop the ambition, capability and curiosity needed to reach their full potential and excel in their future educational pursuits, ultimately fostering social mobility.
- develop a pathway programme to degree apprenticeships equivalent to the pathway programme to an academic degree, to increase the parity of esteem between both pathways.
- strengthen the support structure around the learners and develop new guidance for schools, teachers, and parents with a professional learning programme to support.

- develop an engagement programme for parents and carers to increase their knowledge on how to support their children in reaching their full potential and the opportunities Seren can provide.

Further details will be provided to the Committee in due course.

13. Recommendation 12

The Welsh Government should clarify why the £20 million pounds earmarked for school repairs and maintenance in 2024-25 has been classified as capital expenditure despite Welsh Government guidance to the contrary set out why this funding was not provided via the Local Government Settlement; and clarify whether this funding for repairs and maintenance has formed part of the capital/revenue baselines for the Draft Budget 2025-26, and whether it is likely to in future Draft Budgets.

Response: Accept

The Capital Repairs and Maintenance Grant is provided to delivery partners to support the wider education building estate. The funding is allocated to Local Authorities for schools based on the proportion of schools and pupils in each area, and Further Education Institutes in line with the mainstream post-16 funding methodology. The grant funds essential capital maintenance beyond the day to day running costs of buildings. For example, small scale works such as roof and window repairs, painting or plastering would not be defined as capital, however introducing new ventilation systems, sustainable energy solutions, boilers or roof replacements, etc., would be acceptable uses of this funding.

Whilst this funding is not provided via the Local Government Settlement, delivery partners are able to prioritise the investment to essential capital works limited to the education estate. The grant allocation is a separate funding stream which sits under the Sustainable Communities for Learning (SCfL) Programme. The SCfL Programme also includes funding streams to support other priority areas across the education estate including ALN, Welsh Language, Community Focused Schools, and ICT Digital.

Since its implementation in 2014, the Programme has grown from its original focus towards simply replacing poor standard buildings to one of a holistic, co-construct and cross-cutting programme that is acknowledged as an exemplar in its approach.

This offers a more joined-up approach for LA's & FEI's, improving strategic planning, procurement and delivery of capital investment.

This £20m has been awarded in-year to support delivery partners with their portfolio of capital works in schools based on budget availability within the Education MEG, in addition to a £30m award at the start of the financial year. For 2025-26 no specific baseline budget allocation has been made for the Capital Repairs and Maintenance grant, but it will continue to be considered as part of the overall programme or if budget becomes available in year. Due to the required flexibility of this funding and the close alignment of strategic goals with the wider SCfL investment programme, the funding has been retained within the Education MEG.

The Welsh Government guidance noted in the report relates to SCfL major project business case submission from delivery partners and is designed to prevent low value projects being put forward through that funding stream. The wording on this guidance note is to assist delivery partners in preparing business cases for new build or substantial renovations within the education estate.