

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



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Buffy Williams MS
Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee

SeneddPlant@senedd.cymru

26 November 2025

Dear Buffy

Please find below the information that I committed to provide during my appearance at the Committee session on School Improvement and Learner Attainment on 6 November. The information covers the roles and responsibilities of Dysgu and its collaboration with local authorities; a note on the 'Beyond eFSM' project; and information on the work being carried out to tackle the attainment gap. I will share the recommendations of the Welsh Government's expert panel on literacy when they are available.

Dysgu's remit and transition

Dysgu's objectives, set out in its [remit letter](#) for the period from its establishment on 1 September 2025 until summer 2026, cover the following areas:

- Establishing Dysgu as a strategic organisation with a positive and inclusive culture, robust governance, and arrangements for communicating with stakeholders
- Developing quality assurance processes to ensure its professional learning meets the specified-criteria, and robust arrangements to monitor the impact of its activity
- Leading the development of the professional capabilities of leaders, including by reviewing the existing leadership provision, planning future provision, and delivering the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) pilot programme
- Providing a coherent range of high-quality professional development and professional learning opportunities for teaching assistants and teachers
- Working with partners to ensure professional development and professional learning is research-led, practice-focused and responsive to the needs of school practitioners, leaders and improvement advisers and meets the identified national priorities, including key Curriculum for Wales priorities, such as literacy, numeracy, and curriculum and assessment design

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
0300 0604400

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Gohebiaeth.Lynne.Neagle@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Lynne.Neagle@gov.wales

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.

- Maximising access for all school practitioners in Wales, including supply teachers, to professional development and professional learning opportunities on Hwb, ensuring equity of access in both English and Welsh.

Dysgu is already delivering the NPQH pilot programme for its first two cohorts, and reviewing and planning further leadership provision. Dysgu is also supporting delivery of the Calm Classrooms, Thriving Minds professional learning pilot, which promotes inclusion and wellbeing by deepening practitioners' knowledge of child development, neurodiversity, and mental health.

Dysgu is working with the Welsh Government on a transition plan for priority areas which will transfer to Dysgu during its transitional year (the 2025/26 academic year). These include:

- Eight-Curriculum for Wales Support Programme grants to support literacy and numeracy
- Literacy and numeracy staff secondees
- Continued funding of the Diversity and Anti-Racist Professional Learning (DARPL) programme
- Continued funding of the National MA Education (Wales) and National EdD (Wales) Doctor of Education programmes.

In addition, Dysgu will also be developing other professional learning in response to my other key priorities of wellbeing and inclusion alongside support for practitioners to develop their practice and pedagogy along their career pathways. It will also take responsibility for updating and developing professional learning and leadership resources on Hwb.

Responsibility for funding professional learning to develop practitioners' skills in undertaking research and enquiry, delivered by universities, will transfer to Dysgu at a later date.

Dysgu's collaboration with local authorities

Partnership working will be key to the way Dysgu operates, and it will be working with stakeholders (including the Welsh Government, local authorities, MEDR, Estyn, Adnodd and universities) to ensure its provision is research-led, practice-focused and responsive to the needs of school practitioners, leaders and improvement advisers and meets the identified national priorities.

Dysgu's remit and provision is designed to focus on the areas where a coherent and consistent national offer will be more effective and impactful than local provision, so local arrangements should not duplicate Dysgu's national provision.

The Welsh Government's Education Improvement Team (EIT) will lead strategic engagement with local authorities and school collaboratives to develop a better flow of system intelligence, to encourage a culture of self-improvement across all parts of the sector, and to connect the discussion around national and local priorities for improvement. It will also share learning and evidence-informed practice between local authorities and schools across Wales. This will feed into Dysgu's development of its

provision, ensuring that the professional learning and leadership support reflects the needs of the system, and is linked to national priorities.

Local authorities' input will be especially important to Dysgu's development of professional learning for school improvement advisors. Dysgu will work directly with local authorities on delivery in a number of areas:

- Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) Induction: The delivery of professional learning to NQTs is a local authority statutory requirement. Dysgu will co-ordinate and develop the programme to ensure that delivery is consistent and coherent across Wales to support all NQTs.
- Teaching Assistants Learning Pathway (TALP): Funding to deliver the TALP will continue to be allocated to local authorities. Dysgu will co-ordinate and develop the programme to ensure that delivery is consistent and coherent across Wales to support all TAs.
- Welsh language and Welsh-medium provision: Dysgu will work with local authorities, the National Centre for Learning Welsh, Cydag and others to plan and deliver its Welsh language provision. Dysgu will co-ordinate and develop the support for practitioners to teach Welsh in English-medium schools, which will continue to be delivered by local authorities, based on developing the knowledge and understanding of effective pedagogy to support learners to consolidate and build on existing language skills. Provision to support practitioners to develop their Welsh language skills will continue to be provided by the National Centre for Learning Welsh, and the National Institute for Learning Welsh in due course. Dysgu will offer specific professional learning for Welsh-medium schools, such as training and networking to develop subject specialism, and effective pedagogy in teaching through the medium of Welsh or bilingually.

'Beyond eFSM' project

The Welsh Government is committed to addressing inequality and supporting children and young people facing socio-economic disadvantage (SED). To do so, it requires robust and valid data on those that are impacted by SED. Currently, eligibility for free school meals (eFSM) is the most widely used identifier of SED at a learner level, as it is a means-tested benefit, thereby reflecting household income. The government and other organisations commonly use and rely on this information as a proxy SED indicator to inform a wide range of activity, including:

Supporting learners: identifying the individual needs of learners and those more vulnerable to the impact of SED circumstances;

Policy development, delivery and monitoring: understanding the level of barriers facing our learners relating to SED and evaluating the impact of intervention, through publicly available statistics and research;

Funding and support: supporting learners and schools based on the number of learners who are eFSM, targeting resource and support where it is needed;

Limitations of the eFSM data as a SED indicator.

Several factors have caused a growing concern that eFSM data is subject to limitations, including that it underestimates levels of poverty, due to application barriers, and that it

does not fully account for a range of other relevant factors for disadvantage than income alone. Other recent factors that have grown in impact include:

UK government policy changes: eligibility rules changed when Universal Credit was introduced, replacing a range of legacy benefits, meaning some learners were no longer eligible. The Welsh Government supported these learners in continuing to provide free meals through introducing [transitional protection](#), but they were not included in the eFSM SED proxy data if they no longer met the new means-tested eligibility criteria. An income threshold was introduced to the eligibility criteria from 1 April 2019.

Welsh government policy changes: The introduction of Universal Primary Free School Meals (UPFSM), means that parents of primary school-aged children no longer need to apply for eligibility for their child to get a free meal. To support learners, we established a national 'Get Help with School Costs' communication campaign, in collaboration with all Welsh local authorities, to encourage parents to continue to check their eligibility and register for free school meals to access additional sources of support.

Cost of living, wages rises and static income threshold criterion: The overall number of learners eFSM have decreased every year since 2021/22, during a period of an increase in the cost of living and where relative poverty has remained stable.

Therefore, it is likely that the eFSM SED proxy is not reflecting the same range of income-related challenges facing the group of learners captured within the data, which reduces our understanding of who is in most need of our support and our ability to evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of our delivery.

In response to these voiced concerns, and recommendations of previous reports, WG is reconsidering how SED is measured amongst learners and embarked on the 'Beyond eFSM' research project.

The three main aims of this research are to:

Understand stakeholder needs – Find out what stakeholder's need from data on socio-economic disadvantage and how they currently use eFSM data and/or other SED data sources

Explore a range of data sources that could meet identified SED data needs – Identify possible improvements to existing data sources and explore potential alternative data sources for measuring socio-economic disadvantage, including any statistical modelling to understand relationships with educational outcomes.

Provide recommendations for a way forward – consider the most appropriate indicator/s or improved methods to overcome the current limitations of eFSM to meet the range of WG and stakeholder needs for learner SED data.

Current position

A report is scheduled to be published on the 10 December 2025, outlining the progress to date and findings from the initial phase of the project. Through a contracted independent research organisation, this phase involved gathering information from a range of stakeholders such as Welsh Government officials and local authorities. The focus was understanding current practices around SED data, what their needs are, for what purposes and what data is used. This includes various dynamics of the data needs

and the features that are required (such as timeliness, frequency, individual or geographical level). There was focus on how the eFSM data is used within that and limitations relating to this and further considerations of alternative data or different methods.

Next steps

Following publication of the report, officials intend to undertake further analysis to:

- explore the data currently available, including eFSM, and the identified potential improvements.
- Assess the feasibility and appropriateness of alternative indicators.

This will primarily involve desk-based research, focusing on Welsh Government's use of the data and considering implications for other public bodies that also rely on it. Looking ahead, the research may recommend moving away from a universal reliance on eFSM data for all services. It is likely that a range of different sources will best suit different needs to provide the most appropriate evidence, but that this will need to be balanced with the need to retain an aligned approach across different areas for particular purposes. It is also recognised that a critical need for individual-level data will remain for certain purposes.

Whilst this project progresses, the landscape continues to change. Any further changes relating to access to Free School Meal provision would further impact on the usability of the eFSM data. Additionally, ongoing work in other portfolio areas will change and may improve usability of eFSM data as an SED indicator, e.g. [streamlining Welsh benefits](#), and the feasibility of using alternative data sources to support e.g. the [Digital Economy Act](#).

In parallel to this project, Welsh Government is looking again at the way funding available through the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) is allocated. PDG funding is primarily allocated using eFSM data. However, due to the issues outlined above, we are considering alternative options for allocating PDG funding in the future. The PDG and beyond eFSM workstreams will collaborate on how to better identify pupils affected by SED.

Poverty Attainment Gap Policy Summary

The impact of poverty remains one of the most significant and persistent challenges affecting educational attainment in Wales, exacerbated by the compounding impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, austerity and the cost-of-living crisis. That is why the Welsh Government has prioritised creating a fairer and more inclusive education system. Welsh Government is working on a Theory of Change to enhance our understanding of the poverty attainment gap and what works to tackle it. We have identified six principles based on international evidence and priorities in Wales to guide our work:

- Equity and inclusion
- Data-driven decision making
- Long-term thinking and sustainable planning
- Collaboration and community partnership
- High quality teaching and leadership

- Holistic support for the child

These principles, aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, will be used to develop a clear, collaborative and evidence-informed strategy with stakeholders. This will include embedding the principles in existing interventions and identifying further work areas to deliver meaningful and measurable improvements in attainment.

The Pupil Development Grant (PDG) provides schools with extra funding to remove barriers to attainment for pupils who are care experienced or from low-income households. A budget of £128m has been allocated in 2025-26.

Following a two-part review of the PDG in [2023](#) and [2024](#) by Bangor University and Cardiff Metropolitan University, my officials have been looking at how the PDG is funded and allocated, and how we can better understand the way it is used to support learners. We will build on that work to embed the Theory of Change principles and improve the way the funding works.

We are also working in collaboration with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) to develop a suite of supplementary guidance resources, including specific guidance for the PDG for Early Years and Children Looked After. These aim to support schools in the evidence-informed use of the Pupil Development Grant to deliver equitable, high-quality education for all learners. We intend to publish these resources in the new year.

Our partnership with the EEF provides education practitioners with access to high-quality international evidence to improve education policy and practice. This includes Cymraeg versions of their education toolkits to help them identify and implement interventions to break the link between family income and educational achievement.

We have made £13.1m available for the School Essentials Grant for 2025-26 to continue funding the grant at the level of £125/£200 per learner, as in 2024-25. Over 89,000 (94%) eligible learners benefited from SEG in 2024-25. The grant helps reduce the worry for families surrounding the purchase of school uniform and equipment and helps children to attend school and take part in activities in the same way as their peers.

We are also working with Children North East to run a series of “poverty proofing” pilots across six clusters in Wales. These pilots work with schools, learners and families to understand the true impact of poverty on day-to-day educational experiences; and to tackle poverty stigma and its impact on attainment.

The Attainment Champions pilot, which concluded in August 2025, facilitated peer-to-peer mentoring among school leaders to tackle the attainment gap. A joint external evaluation of the Attainment Champions and Poverty Proofing pilots is underway. Internal findings will be available from spring 2025 and will be used to inform our overarching strategy to tackle the impact of poverty on attainment. We anticipate the final evaluation findings being ready for publication in Summer 2025.

I hope that this information is helpful, and I would like to take the opportunity to once again thank you for your ongoing work and support on this matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lynne Neagle". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Lynne Neagle AS/MS

Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Addysg
Cabinet Secretary for Education