

Children, Young People & Education Committee



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

January 2026

September 2025 marked a pivotal moment for education in Wales, as the first cohort of pupils began Year 10 under the reformed Curriculum for Wales, embarking on a journey towards new Made for Wales qualifications. This milestone reflects our ongoing commitment to nurturing an education system where every child and young person can thrive. Central to this vision is ensuring that learners feel supported, safe, and fully engaged and equipped with the skills and confidence to progress into further education and employment.

Our determination to raise standards and close the poverty attainment gap is unwavering. Through targeted policy initiatives and dedicated funding streams, we are working to support children, young people, and their families, enabling all learners to reach their full potential. The decisions underpinning the Draft Budget for 2026–27 are guided by our core government and education priorities, with inflationary uplifts carefully directed to maximise the impact of every resource.

By embracing a social partnership approach, we are strengthening the teaching profession, ensuring that pay, terms, and conditions are tailored to the unique needs of educators in Wales. Furthermore, by increasing participation across all post-16 education and training pathways, we are investing in a higher-skilled workforce that will drive productivity and foster broader economic and social wellbeing.

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1. Curriculum, standards & attainment

In September 2025, the Curriculum for Wales marked another significant milestone as the first pupils taught under our reformed curriculum began Year 10, progressing towards new Made for Wales qualifications.

Evaluation of Progress

The formative evaluation of the Curriculum for Wales reveals that implementation is progressing well across maintained schools, with strong engagement from practitioners, learners, and families. Schools are embedding the curriculum's four purposes and pedagogical principles into their planning, leading to more authentic, learner-centred experiences and improved monitoring of progression. There is notable evidence of increased engagement from learners and parents, with curriculum flexibility supporting equity and diverse needs. Health and well-being are central, fostering good mental health and resilience, while leaders and practitioners are gaining confidence in curriculum design.

Collaboration within schools and communities is strengthening, and curriculum reform is acting as a catalyst for broader school improvement.

To ensure ongoing improvement, the Welsh Government is committed to robust monitoring through multiple approaches, including formative evaluation, personalised assessments, and international benchmarking via PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS. National-level data from personalised assessments indicate encouraging progress in reading and numeracy, with English reading showing particular improvement across all year groups compared to 2022/23. The Education Improvement Team and Curriculum Policy group continue to work closely with local authorities and teaching professionals, ensuring that feedback from the sector shapes national support and direction.

In December 2025 three reports were published as part of the ongoing Formative evaluation of the Curriculum for Wales:

Formative evaluation of the Curriculum for Wales: phase 1 synthesis report	https://www.gov.wales/formative-evaluation-curriculum-wales-phase-1-synthesis-report
Formative evaluation of Curriculum for Wales: survey of senior leaders and practitioners	https://www.gov.wales/formative-evaluation-curriculum-wales-survey-senior-leaders-and-practitioners
Formative evaluation of Curriculum for Wales: survey of learners and their parents and carers	https://www.gov.wales/formative-evaluation-curriculum-wales-survey-learners-and-their-parents-and-carers

Professional Learning through the Grant Support Programme

The Curriculum for Wales grant support programme is a revenue grant scheme designed for education stakeholder organisations, aiming to help realise the Curriculum for Wales for all learners aged 3 to 16 in maintained schools. Offering awards of up to three years, the programme funds a variety of activities and interventions that enhance schools' and settings' capacity to support learner progress, with a long-term focus on our priorities, particularly: curriculum design, literacy, mathematics and numeracy. Grant awards now provide direct support to schools, including professional learning in critical areas such as literacy, numeracy, and curriculum design.

Oversight of these grants is set to formally transfer to Dysgu, the new professional learning and leadership body, from 1 April, with seconded professional advisors for literacy and numeracy already collaborating closely with grant-funded organisations and Dysgu to ensure a seamless transition and coherence in this nationally available support.

Literacy and Numeracy as enablers for raising standards

Literacy and numeracy are essential for accessing the wider curriculum, so we are investing in professional learning and targeted grants to raise standards and support all learners, including those who struggle. National support includes detailed progression resources, age-related expectations, and a strong focus on systematic phonics teaching, with guidance and case studies available on Hwb.

Collaboration with Estyn and local authorities ensures these resources are practical and effective, while the Literacy Expert Panel is developing evidence-based principles to guide teaching. We are also working with Dysgu and Adnodd to ensure high-quality professional learning and resources and reviewing key frameworks with practitioners and experts to strengthen cross-curricular skills.

Qualifications

Qualifications Wales has reformed 14-16 qualifications to align with the curriculum and support learners' future opportunities, with new GCSEs introduced and more timely information for schools. Welsh Government funding enables WJEC to provide tailored professional learning and resources for teachers, with further support planned for the next wave of GCSEs.

2. Wellbeing, Safeguarding & Inclusion

The physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of children and young people is central to our education system and recent reforms. We are committed to helping all learners thrive and reach their potential by ensuring they feel supported, safe, and ready to learn and prepare them for further education and employment. To support this, we are investing £13.6 million in our Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing in this financial year. In 2026-27 that will be increasing to £14.2 million, with £5.3 million of that directed to Local Health Boards to support the CAMHS in-reach model. We continue to advance the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan, the LGBTQ+ Action Plan, and the Social Model of Disability. Recognising that some learners face additional barriers, we have prioritised investment in equity of access to learning throughout this Senedd term.

We have completed the transition to our Additional Learning Needs system, providing over £150 million in revenue to local authorities and schools since 2020, and more than £170 million in capital funding to improve facilities and infrastructure. Further investment through the Local Authority Education Grant includes nearly £128 million annually in the Pupil Development Grant and almost £18 million for community-focused support and family engagement. These efforts have led to improvements such as increased school attendance, rising to 91.1% in 2024-25, though persistent absence remains a challenge. We continue to invest in evidence-based interventions to improve behaviour, building on the success of the National Behaviour Summit in May 2025

Emotional and Mental Wellbeing

We continue to prioritise support for local authorities, schools, and partners to meet the needs of both learners and the education workforce, recognising that effective learning requires everyone to be engaged and prepared. Building on our Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing Framework and statutory guidance published in March 2021, funding has increased to over £13 million this year from Education and Health Budgets.

This investment has expanded counselling services, trained staff on wellbeing, delivered universal and targeted interventions, and developed CAMHS school in-reach with dedicated mental health practitioners. Working with Public Health Wales, schools assess and plan for their wellbeing needs, and as of December 2025, 93% of schools are actively action planning, with support ongoing for those yet to complete their wellbeing plans

Tackling the Poverty Attainment Gap

The Welsh Government is focused on raising attainment for all learners and closing the poverty attainment gap. To address this, £128 million was provided through the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) in 2025-26, supporting various cohorts, and a policy review is underway to improve its effectiveness. Additional initiatives include the School Essentials Grant, the Poverty Proofing pilot, the Attainment Champions pilot, and the Food and Fun holiday programme, all aimed at supporting disadvantaged learners and their families.

Equalities & Human Rights

We recognise that education leaders and practitioners need some support to help them understand the best way to support learners and help them to feel safe and included in the school environment. In autumn 2025 the Welsh Government hosted a series of four webinars for practitioners which focussed on approaches to embed equality in schools.

Anti-racism in education

The Welsh Government aims to create an anti-racist Wales by 2030, with its Action Plan calling for zero tolerance of racial inequality. Since its launch, progress includes mandatory teaching of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic histories in schools, expanded professional learning, increased ethnic minority representation in teaching, and all Welsh universities achieving the Advance HE Race Equality Charter. Funding supports local authorities and the Ethnic Minority Achievement Services to help children facing barriers to education, with £11 million allocated annually since 2021.

Food in schools

Wales' food-in-schools programme has quickly improved children's wellbeing and learning, especially for those in poverty, by providing Universal Primary Free School Meals. Since launch, 174,000 pupils have become eligible and 57 million meals have been served. With increased funding, updated Healthy Eating Regulations, and targeted support in secondary schools, over two-thirds of Welsh learners now receive a free meal daily. Combined with free breakfasts and school milk, Wales offers the most generous school food provision in the UK.

Safeguarding in Education

Following the "Our Bravery Brought Justice Child Practice Review", immediate steps are being taken to strengthen safeguarding in education, including updating RSE teaching and ensuring consistent application of safeguarding frameworks. A review of safeguarding procedures is underway to assess their effectiveness.

For online safety, resources and guidance on Hwb are regularly updated, with expert input and collaboration with Ofcom and other partners. Guidance covers issues like sextortion, AI-generated abuse, social media risks, and generative AI, while schools receive training and support to respond to cyber incidents and promote digital resilience. Young people's views are included through the Keeping Safe Online Youth Group.

Additional Learning Needs (ALN): Progress and Priorities

The transition to the ALN system in Wales has now completed, with over 32,000 Individual Development Plans in place and an ALNCo in every school. Funding for ALN has increased significantly since 2020, and Estyn reports early signs of improvements in ALN provision.

Recent reviews have found strong support for the principles of the reforms, especially inclusion and person-centred planning. However, they also highlight areas where further improvement is required.

A key finding was the inconsistent delivery of the ALN system across Wales, particularly in how the definitions of ALN and additional learning provision (ALP) are interpreted and applied. There also continue to be significant financial and workload pressures, despite substantial investment since 2020, which affect the sustainability and consistency of provision.

In response, five priority areas have been identified

- Provide clarity to the education sector on how to support children and young people with ALN.
- Improve national consistency in delivering the ALN system.
- Ensure children, young people and their families have the right information and support.
- Improve multiagency integration and collaboration to meet the health, social care and educational needs of children and young people with ALN
- Explore a longer-term vision for an inclusive education system.

Action has already been taken on these priorities, driven by a new national delivery board, including:

- Developing supporting guidance to provide clarity on the legislative framework,
- Publication of a new parent's toolkit,
- Commissioning a review of advocacy services,
- A quinquennial review of Welsh language provision,
- Engagement event with Regional Partnership Boards to strengthen integration between health and education to meet the needs of learners,

Attendance

Regular attendance at, and engagement, with education and learning is a critical to achieving our aspiration that every child in Wales has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

In this context, I am pleased that overall attendance in maintained schools in Wales rose to 91.1% in the 2024-25 academic year, up from 90.5% in 2023-24. year. Similarly:

- the percentage of half-day sessions missed by pupils in primary and secondary schools having decreased to 8.9% in 2024/25, from 9.5% the previous year;
- the number of pupils that were persistently absent fell from 30.4% to 27.0% in 2024/25, which shows the progress schools are making; and
- the number of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) who missed half-day sessions decreased to 14.6% in 2024/25.

In spite of this, we remain concerned about attendance for the cohort of learners who are eligible for Free School Meals, which is still some way below that for their peers. Our focus remains on removing barriers so every child can attend regularly and succeed.

However, we also have to recognise that the pandemic had a huge impact on both school attendance and attitudes towards learning. For some families, the idea of regular school attendance has shifted. There is now a greater expectation of flexibility - whether that's remote learning, hybrid models, or home-based education.

It has, therefore, taken a huge effort by our schools, the workforce and families to start to turn this around and to show a year-on-year improvement. I want to commend them for their ongoing commitment and hard work.

It is important then, that we continue to focus on addressing the barriers that prevent children from attending school regularly to ensure every child has the best possible chance to succeed.

To support this, I have committed £7m funding this year to help children re-engage with school. Under this funding package I have provided:

- An extra £3m supporting the work of Family Engagement Officers;
- £2m supporting the provision of enrichment activities;
- £1 million to further embed the role of Community Focussed Schools; and
- £1 million to support our Food and Fun, School Holiday Enrichment Programme.

We are also currently reviewing the school attendance codes to get a more robust understanding of the reasons behind non-attendance, with a consultation to start shortly.

3. School organisation, Leadership & Improvement

The third edition of the School Organisation Code and which is due to come into force in spring, updates statutory guidance for schools in Wales. This edition incorporates recent legislative changes, including Welsh Language Standards, Cymraeg 2050: Welsh Language Strategy, Medr's role in organising school sixth forms, and the ALN and Curriculum Acts. Alongside this, a review of school governing bodies is underway, supported by a sector reference group, to assess the appropriateness of governors' roles and responsibilities, with findings due to be reported to Ministers in the summer.

In January 2026, new school improvement guidance was published to clarify expectations for all stakeholders, following the 'Review of roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales and delivery of school improvement arrangements'. This guidance is grounded in policy objectives agreed through the School Improvement Partnership Programme and aims to deliver the review's recommendations.

Five core principles underpin the new school improvement arrangements:

- 1. Collective Responsibility:** Raising standards for all learners is a shared endeavour. Schools remain accountable for their own learners but are also expected to support progress across the wider education system, collaborating with other schools and local authorities (LAs) to promote high expectations and equity.
- 2. External Perspectives:** Schools should welcome peer collaboration and external challenge to improve learning. Trusted external input strengthens self-evaluation, professional learning, and openness across the system.
- 3. Focus on Learning:** Sustainable improvement comes from long-term collaboration. Schools and LAs work together to tackle barriers early and develop shared solutions tailored to local needs.
- 4. Building Capacity:** Expertise is developed and shared across sectors—primary, secondary, special schools, PRUs, and LAs—to build a resilient, inclusive education system that meets diverse learner needs.
- 5. Clarity and Coherence:** All partners understand their roles. Welsh Government and national bodies set clear expectations and support improvement and professional learning, while schools and LAs align local efforts with national priorities.

The school improvement model outlined in the guidance provides clarity on roles and responsibilities. Schools are expected to lead their own self-evaluation and improvement planning in an open, iterative way, supported by external perspectives from other schools and the LA. Collaboration is encouraged both vertically (across age ranges) and horizontally (between similar schools), providing additional capacity and expertise for sustainable improvement. School development plans (SDPs) should capture ongoing strategic plans, priorities, and professional learning, with improvement also planned across collaborative partnerships.

Local authorities should use the collaborative improvement model to gain an authentic understanding of local needs, assess schools' capacity for improvement, broker bespoke support, and build a resilient learning system. LAs are encouraged to work together to

refine self-evaluation processes, share improvement priorities, and school-based capacity, using intelligence from their work with schools and other LAs to inform strategic planning.

Finally, the Welsh Government has established a new professional learning and leadership body to deliver consistent support for national priority areas, enhancing system-wide improvement. Further evidence and details can be found in the Welsh Government Evidence Paper for the Children, Young People and Education Committee on school improvement and learner attainment

4. Funding & Investment in Education

Core funding for schools in Wales is primarily provided through the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) as part of the Local Government Settlement, with local authorities determining the allocation to education and schools. For 2026-27, the Welsh Government's final settlement published on 20 January, will deliver £6.6 billion from the RSG and Non-Domestic Rates (NDR) to support key services, including schools- an average increase of 4.5% on a like-for-like basis, with all local authorities receiving increases above 4%. In addition to core funding, schools benefit from Welsh Government grants, mainly through the Education MEG.

The Local Authority Education Grant (LAEG) remains the main grant mechanism for pre-16 education, with £418.3 million invested in 2026-27 - an increase of over 4% from the previous year, following a 5.5% rise in 2025-26. Funding decisions in the Draft Budget for 2026-27 are shaped by government and education priorities, with inflationary uplifts targeted to maximise resources for these aims.

Within the Education MEG, the Welsh Government has prioritised additional funding to support key areas. In the draft budget 2026-27, an extra £5 million is allocated through the LAEG to improve delivery of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) provision, building on last year's £10 million uplift and taking total ALN funding through the LAEG reform strand to £37 million in 2026-27. A further £4.1 million via Medr will support learners with ALN in further education colleges. The Final Budget 2026-27 sees an additional £4.2m allocated for ALN (through the ALN BEL) to further support schools, settings and local authorities. For learners over 16 requiring access to independent specialist colleges, an additional £3 million is provided, bringing the post-16 specialist placements budget to £19.9 million in 2026-27.

Funding through the School Standards, Equity, Reform, and Cymraeg 2050 strands of the LAEG is also prioritised, with £418.3 million invested in 2026-27. This includes an extra £8.9 million (a 5.3% increase) for the School Standards strand, supporting foundation learning, teachers, and support staff, and taking total school standards funding to over £178 million. The Equity strand receives an additional £2.5 million to support attendance and interventions tackling disaffection, family engagement, and learner support, building on last year's £7 million increase. This includes £1 million for Family Engagement Officers, £1 million for enrichment activities, and £0.5 million for embedding Community Focused School approaches.

Further investment includes £2 million for the Curriculum for Wales grant support programme and personalised assessments, building on the £10 million invested from 2025-26 to support literacy and numeracy. The Hwb national programme receives an extra £0.3 million in 2026-27 for essential cloud support services, following a £1.6 million investment in 2025-26, ensuring access to digital tools for all learners and practitioners in maintained schools.

For tertiary education, the draft budget allocated an additional £21.5 million through Medr in 2026-27 (excluding the Estyn transfer), supporting ALN, pay parity in FE colleges and sixth forms, Initial Teacher Education placements, Financial Contingency Funds for FE colleges, and expansion of the junior apprenticeship programme. In the Final Budget 2026-27, a further £5m is being made available to support the increase in participation of learners in further education which is managed by Medr.

Finally, an extra £7.1 million in capital funding was allocated in the Draft Budget 2026-27 to support the educational estate, providing environments that encourage higher attendance and attainment and strengthen communities across Wales. In the Final Budget 2026-27, a further £20m capital funding is allocated to the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme to support school and college buildings.

Curriculum

This year, we have invested comprehensively in this vision, with a £44 million support package that includes £20 million specifically directed to literacy and numeracy over the next 3 years - the essential foundations for all learning. This is in addition to an extra £2.5 million this year to aid local authorities to support these crucial gateway skills. The grant package includes:

- £6.6 million for Maths and numeracy
- £13.2 million for literacy, including support for Welsh-medium
- £2 million for curriculum design
- £1.6 million for international languages
- £4.2 million for Relationships and Sexuality Education
- £1.8 million for science
- £1.4 million for digital skills and computer science
- £12 million for the National Music Service
- £780k to support non-maintained nursery settings to realise the curriculum.

5. Teacher workforce: Recruitment & Development

The forthcoming Strategic Education Workforce Plan, has been developed in partnership with local authorities / governors as employers, union partners and school staff, parents / carers, and learners, and informed by the Committee's inquiry into Teacher Recruitment and Retention. It will set out our vision for supporting the school workforce in four key areas: supporting our workforce to deliver quality teaching and learning to improve outcomes for learners; addressing workload issues, building on the work of the Strategic Workload Coordination Group; responding to new challenges for the school workforce and ensuring access to support through a specialist workforce; and ensuring that teaching, leadership and supporting teaching remains an attractive career pathway. The well-being of staff is at the heart of the Plan, underpinned by our whole-school approach.

Wales provides high-quality Initial Teacher Education (ITE), including Salaried and Part-time PGCE routes. Recent improvements include expanding the range of secondary subjects available; doubling the salary contribution grant for Welsh medium secondary and opening access to primary schools and secondary schools within a transitional language category; and new programmes for school-based employees and for specialising in neurodiversity. We offer targeted incentives to attract entrants for priority subjects, for the Welsh-medium sector (as part of a range of measures pursuing our Cymraeg 2025 ambitions) and from ethnic minorities; these are also the focus of our national recruitment campaign Teaching Wales/Addysgu Cymru. Initial teacher education recruitment into the primary sector continues to be buoyant. Recruitment into secondary remains very challenging. Other nations are encountering similar problems.

Supporting teachers' professional learning (PL) from the beginning to the end of their career is critical to fostering high-quality teaching. All newly qualified teachers (NQTs) are now supported during their first year of teaching with a funded mentor and a PL programme. Dysgu, the new PL and leadership body, will review this support as part of developing an early career programme, alongside its wider work on national priorities. Our National Masters in Education and National Doctorate in Education provide an accredited academic pathway. We are consulting on the 6 INSET days currently offered, and continuing to provide the professional learning grant, worth £13.5m per annum.

By taking a social partnership approach, we support the teaching profession by ensuring their pay, terms and conditions are designed to best suit the profession here in Wales and currently provide higher salaries and allowances for both new and more experienced teachers than in England. We have introduced key improvements such as the reintroduction of pay portability and removal of performance-based pay progression; removal of the strict pro-rata principle for TLR allowances and the application process to move from the main to upper pay scale. We are working on a single pay scale for classroom teachers and on moving ALN co-ordinators to the leadership group pay scale.

6. Tertiary Education Participation and Sustainability

We recognise the challenges the sector is currently facing and are taking several actions to address these challenges. The Minister for Further and Higher Education has established a **Ministerial Advisory Group** and launched a **Call for Submissions** to bring together a robust evidence base for tertiary education policy development.

An evidence paper has been published, with an invitation for stakeholders to respond to questions around five key challenges facing the sector:

1. Participation and equality of opportunity
2. Demographic change and lifelong learning
3. Competition and collaboration
4. Financial sustainability
5. Delivering for the economy of the future

The Minister will be engaging directly with sector representatives and learners during the call for submissions.

Participation and equality of opportunity

Increasing participation across all post-16 education and training pathways is fundamental to developing a higher-skilled workforce, supporting productivity and wider economic and social wellbeing. Compared to the rest of the UK, Wales has a higher estimated share of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) than other UK nations, and lower qualification levels among younger adults in the workforce.

However, further education (FE) demand is growing rapidly with the proportion of learners progressing to FE colleges at age 16 increasing from 48% in 2017/18 to 56% in 2024/25. School sixth forms are seeing sustained declines in learner numbers. There are also changing trends in pathways through post-16 education and training, with recent growth in level 2 and below vocational courses and a relative decline in the proportion of learners undertaking level 3 courses, particularly AS and A level. In higher education we have participation rates lower than the rest of the UK at age 18, but a greater proportion of students studying part-time in Wales compared to England, and at a later age.

We have increased the household income threshold for Education Maintenance Allowance eligibility to support learners to continue their education. For learners progressing to HE, we continue to provide the most generous living cost support for students in the UK with the highest levels of non-repayable grant support provided to those most in need.

The Welsh Government has recently responded to the recommendations from the Children, Young People and Education Committee's report on 'Routes into Post-16 Education and Training'. Expanding access to a full range of vocational, technical and academic pathways will raise overall qualification levels across the population, improving skills and life outcomes.

Taith, our internationally recognised international learning exchange programme, has delivered significant impact since its launch with over 11,500 mobilities having now taken

place to over 100 countries and territories. Taith places a strong emphasis on inclusion. Around 46% of outbound learners are from underrepresented groups, including individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, ethnic minorities, and those with disabilities or additional learning needs. This ensures that opportunities are accessible to those who can benefit most, reflecting our commitment to fairness and equality of opportunity.

We have continued work to strengthen the Youth Engagement Progression Framework, supporting young people to fulfil their potential by helping them engage in education, employment or training and preventing them from becoming homeless. As well as our ongoing investment in local authority and voluntary sector youth work provision, a cross-sector workforce development programme has been expanded to ensure practitioners continue to have the skills and expertise to serve the needs of young people. This, alongside work to develop a statutory framework for youth work and the development of a national body for youth work, are all aimed at helping achieve a sustainable delivery model for youth work and deliver a rich and diverse youth work offer for young people.

The Junior Apprenticeship programme is a NEET intervention targeted at learners aged 14 to 16 who have disengaged, or are at risk of disengaging, from mainstream education. The programme is highly valued by learners and has a positive impact on their lives, providing them with the opportunity to study for a range of vocational courses in college.

While the programme is now offered in seven colleges across Wales, we want more learners to benefit. We are working with Medr and our FEI partners to make Junior Apprenticeships available to more learners. Our budget for 2026/27 includes £1m for the programme, more than double the programme's budget in 2024/25.

It is important to note that Junior Apprenticeships are not the only intervention targeted at these learners, with many colleges also offering a range of part-time provision for learners aged 14 to 16.

Reaching Wider is a pan-Wales collaborative programme with universities, colleges and schools in three regions, working together to improve social mobility by widening access to all forms of higher education (HE). The combined £2m (programme) + £500k (mentoring) investment directly addresses the participation barriers. Reaching Wider's mission is that every child, young person and adult should have the opportunity to consider HE, regardless of their background. Many learners, especially those from under-represented communities, may feel that university is out of reach due to financial concerns, lack of family experience of HE, or limited exposure to the pathways available and Reaching Wider is there to support these learners

Reaching Wider provides guidance and information, helping learners explore all available pathways, helping learners at key transition points such as primary to secondary, secondary to FE, FE to HE, as well as developing and enhancing skills, and encouraging learners to explore future careers and opportunities.

The Reaching Wider programme aims to work with the same under-represented learners throughout their journey from school to HE. Statistics for engagement therefore include a

combination of young people who may have participated in a few activities alongside others with whom have engaged over a longer period. A snapshot of all-Wales Reaching Wider delivery for 2023-24 demonstrates the large volume of people who benefit from our programme.

- 17,570 children, young people & adults took part in Reaching Wider activities of which over nearly 16,000 were children and young people.
- Over 90,000 hours of engagement with children and young people
- 70% of people with which we engaged fell into the Reaching Wider eligibility criteria
- 40% of participants received over 6 hours engagement.

The delivery model being evaluated in 2025-26 to improve outcomes and ensure provision takes account of transition to and through tertiary provision

Demographic change and lifelong learning

We are proud that part-time provision has been a significant success in Wales, with substantial increases in the numbers of part-time higher education students since 2018, and a far greater proportion of students in Wales studying part-time compared to England. Welsh Government has increased the part-time fee loan cap by £250 for the 2026/27 academic year.

We have increased the Welsh Government Learning Grant, which supports learners aged 19 and over with the cost of study in further education. This means that from September 2025, the amount learners can receive has increased from a maximum of £1,500 to £1,919 to help them with the cost of studying a course up to and including Level 3.

This additional support will further help those from the lowest income households to reduce the financial barrier associated with study and demonstrates my continued commitment to ensuring learners at every stage of their lives can access education.

A review of the WGLG will be published this year and Welsh Government will consider its recommendations.

Competition and collaboration

The Minister for Further and Higher Education has established a Ministerial Advisory Group made up of representatives from across the tertiary education and research sector. Its purpose is to focus on the strategic priorities for tertiary education, particularly increasing collaboration across the sector, participation rates and stabilising the current financial challenges.

The Minister for Further and Higher Education tasked Medr and officials with working with the Competition and Markets Authority on potential ways forward to support collaboration between higher education providers. Welsh Government is also working closely with Medr on this in the context of their strategic duty to promote collaboration and coherence in the tertiary sector.

The Minister also commissioned Medr to undertake a mapping exercise looking at subject provision across Wales. This is due to be published shortly, and will provide valuable insight into how Welsh Government, universities and Medr can work together to ensure priority subjects are available across Wales, and form part of the evidence base for future work.

Financial sustainability

Financial pressures in the further education sector are increasing, due to increased staff and non-staff costs. Welsh Government core funding enabled Medr to increase its initial funding allocations for FE colleges by £13.7m this year, and to allocate a further £21.1m in January, to recognise further increases in learner participation – that’s £34m extra for colleges in total. This will mean a total increase in core funding for the FE sector this academic year of 8.5%. The unit-rate for sixth-form funding has also increased at the same rate as colleges in recent years to meet increased costs of teacher pay.

We have also asked Medr to retain pay parity between school sixth-form and FE teachers, and provided an uplift in funding towards the Financial Contingency Fund, and the costs associated with supporting learners with Additional Learning Needs, within the budget for 2026/27.

Welsh universities also face significant financial challenges, with most institutions implementing cost-saving measures and job cuts to mitigate the impact of rising costs, increased competition for domestic students, a sharp decline in international enrolments and the ongoing impact of the loss of EU funding. Much of this is a UK-wide challenge and universities across the UK are facing similar challenges.

We provided an additional £28.5 million in grant support in 2024/25, bringing total HE grant funding to over £200 million. £18.5 million of this was capital investment, directed toward projects aimed at reducing operating costs and improving facilities, with long-term savings expected from energy efficiency and reduced maintenance.

Welsh Government has announced an increase in the tuition fee cap to £9,790 in 2026/27, in line with England, which will generate an estimated £19 million in additional revenue for the sector. We also announced an increase the part-time tuition fee loan by £250.

Welsh Government opted out of the UK Government’s proposed International Student Fee Levy, which would have added increased financial pressure to Welsh universities. Here in Wales, we are not seeking to moderate overseas student demand in this way—we continue to welcome international students and deeply value the contributions they make.

Delivering for the economy of the future

We recognise that the tertiary sector makes a vital contribution to delivering for our future economy through providing skills and qualifications for the future workforce. Welsh Government will publish a Prospectus for the Strategic Direction for Vocational Education and Training (VET) for Wales prior to the pre-election period. This will ensure our VET system plays a central role in growing the economy by equipping learners with the skills

demanded by a rapidly evolving labour market. The Prospectus will complement the call for submissions and form a key subset of the wider review.