

# Children, Young People and Education Committee

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## Children, Young People and Education Committee Further questions arising from the evidence you shared

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1. **You noted in your evidence that continuing pressures around teacher recruitment and retention could be eased through improvements in both pupil behaviour and teacher workload. Could you expand on how you believe progress in behaviour management could be accelerated, what specific gains might be achievable in reducing workload, and whether - and in what form - these reflections have already been shared with the Welsh Government?**

Improving teacher recruitment and retention depends, in part, on creating the conditions in which teachers can focus on high-quality teaching and pupil progress. This requires a clear and consistent approach to behaviour across the system, alongside a sustained effort to reduce unnecessary workload. By strengthening expectations, reducing variability and minimising avoidable burdens, the system can improve both staff wellbeing and the attractiveness of the profession as well as the quality of teaching. There is a strong correlation between pupil behaviour, teacher workload and workforce stability. Where behaviour is well managed and expectations are consistently applied, teachers are better able to focus on teaching and learning. Conversely, where behaviour is inconsistent or challenging, workload increases and job satisfaction can be adversely affected.

In our report, 'Fostering mutual respect' – Promoting positive behaviours in secondary schools (May 2025), we made the following recommendations for Welsh Government:

The Welsh Government should:

- R8 Carry out research across primary, secondary and all-age schools to identify trends in behaviour and provide up to date guidance for schools on the most effective support to help improve behaviour
- R9 Develop a national campaign in partnership with schools to promote and explain the importance of good behaviour with parents/carers and pupils
- R10 Ensure that initial teacher education and induction programmes include a more thorough grounding in behaviour management approaches and offer a structured programme of support to newly qualified teachers to ensure that they can manage behaviour effectively in the classroom

A key priority, therefore, is to strengthen consistency in behaviour management across schools and to continue to focus on high quality teaching. Our evidence indicates that the most effective practice is characterised by clear expectations, applied consistently by all staff, and reinforced through strong leadership. However, variability remains both within and between schools. This can create uncertainty for staff and contribute to increased workload, particularly where teachers are required to respond repeatedly to low-level disruption.

To accelerate progress, there is a need for greater coherence across the system. This includes clearer alignment between national guidance, local authority support and school-level practice. It also requires a continued focus on high-quality professional learning, particularly in areas such as

behaviour management, de-escalation and trauma-informed practice. Supporting staff—especially those early in their careers—to develop confidence and expertise in managing behaviour is critical. Alongside this, earlier and more effective intervention for pupils with additional behavioural needs is essential. Schools that are able to identify needs early and access appropriate support tend to experience fewer escalations. Strengthening links with specialist services and ensuring timely support can therefore have a direct impact on both behaviour and staff workload. In recent years, schools have found it increasingly challenging to access external support.

Improving behaviour is also closely linked to the quality and relevance of the curriculum and the quality of teaching. Where learning is engaging, purposeful and appropriately challenging, pupils are more likely to participate positively. Continued support for schools in realising the ambitions of Curriculum for Wales alongside strong pedagogical practice should therefore contribute to improvements in behaviour over time.

In terms of workload, there is a need to maintain a clear focus on reducing unnecessary complexity. Teachers' workload is often increased by excessive data collection, duplication of processes and unclear expectations. Providing greater clarity at a national level—particularly in relation to assessment, planning and accountability—can help schools avoid over-elaboration and ensure that effort is directed towards activities that have the greatest impact on learners. Consideration should also be given to the impact on workload of the new 14-16 qualifications, particularly the non-examined assessment (NEA) element.

There is also scope to promote more efficient ways of working. This includes supporting collaborative approaches to planning and resource development and ensuring that digital systems are used effectively to streamline administrative tasks rather than add further burden. Importantly, improvements in behaviour themselves can lead to meaningful reductions in workload by reducing time spent managing disruption and following up on incidents.

While it is difficult to quantify precisely, even incremental improvements in behaviour and reductions in unnecessary workload could have a significant cumulative impact on teachers' day-to-day experience. This, in turn, is likely to support improved retention and make the profession more attractive to prospective entrants.

Through our annual reports, thematic reports and meetings we have shared the following advice with Welsh Government:

### **Take a whole system, holistic approach**

Estyn advises that recruitment and retention must be addressed together, not in isolation. Current approaches have been “too narrow” and overly focused on simply finding more trainees rather than improving conditions, exploring different pathways and long-term sustainability.

### **Expand and diversify routes into teaching**

To broaden the pool of candidates—especially in shortage subjects (Welsh, maths, sciences, technology)—Estyn recommends exploring more flexible routes, such as:

- Degree apprenticeships
- Undergraduate secondary programmes
- Assessment only routes
- More flexible / varied ITE pathways

### **Improve incentives and financial attractiveness**

Estyn highlights the need for more attractive incentives, particularly for Welsh medium applicants. Options include:

- Enhanced bursaries

- Reimbursement or abolition of tuition fees for ITE programmes

### **Strengthen working conditions for new teachers**

Working conditions and support for new entrants—especially in secondary schools—must improve if Wales is to retain new teachers. Estyn recommends:

- Exploring retention payments
- Collecting national data on why teachers leave
- Providing rich, differentiated professional learning and mentoring in the first three years of teaching

These steps are essential to keeping early career teachers in the profession.

### **Address behaviour and workload pressures**

Estyn identifies behaviour management and the expansion of schools' responsibilities (due to reductions in services such as CAMHS) as key deterrents to prospective teachers. They stress the need for:

- Strong, consistent behaviour systems
- Reduced unnecessary administrative work
- Support for schools facing increasing levels of pupil need

These are necessary to make teaching a more attractive career.

### **Improve recruitment to Welsh medium education**

There are “exceptionally low” numbers training to teach through the medium of Welsh—posing a major risk to Welsh Government’s Cymraeg 2050 ambitions. In addition to long term planning encouraged by the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025, Estyn advises prioritising:

- Targeted incentives
- Expanded Welsh medium ITE pathways
- Recruitment routes tailored specifically to Welsh medium shortages

### **Collect and use better workforce data**

Estyn highlights the need for:

- Robust national data on recruitment trends
- Clear data on why teachers leave the profession
- Improved labour market intelligence to shape policy

These are essential to develop targeted and effective recruitment/retention strategies.

### **In summary**

Estyn’s overarching message is that our national strategy should:

- Broaden entry pathways
- Enhance financial and professional incentives
- Improve working conditions and school culture
- Strengthen support for early career teachers
- Prioritise Welsh medium recruitment
- Build sustainable leadership pipelines

All of this must be underpinned by better data and long-term planning.

2. **You consistently highlighted strong leadership as the foundation for school improvement and learner progress, including the embedding of literacy and numeracy cultures, the delivery of high-quality teaching, effective self-evaluation, and meaningful engagement with professional learning. Recognising that time is a significant constraint for school leaders, how do you think leaders can best be supported or given the space to be genuinely progressive in their practice?**

Enabling school leaders to be genuinely progressive requires a system that provides clarity, coherence and trust. By reducing unnecessary complexity, focusing on what matters most for learners, and empowering leaders to act with confidence in their own contexts, the system can create the conditions in which strong leadership can have the greatest possible impact on teaching and learning.

Strong and focused leadership is the foundation for improving teaching quality and securing better outcomes for learners. However, the ability of leaders to be genuinely progressive in their practice depends not only on their individual capability, but on the clarity and coherence of the support and guidance provided by the wider system.

A key priority, therefore, is the provision of clear and consistent national leadership that actively supports school leaders. At present, leaders often operate within a complex landscape of overlapping initiatives and competing expectations and priorities. This can create what might be described as “system noise”, which risks diluting focus and limiting the impact of improvement efforts.

To address this, there is a need to reduce unnecessary complexity and establish a shared, consistent approach among all those who support schools. This requires collective discipline across the system to focus on what matters most. It also requires a willingness to be clear—and at times, brave—about prioritisation. In practice, this means not simply reducing activity but ensuring that the system generates the *right* kind of focus: coherent, purposeful and aligned with improving outcomes for learners.

Central to this is clarity about expectations for learners’ progress and standards. When expectations are well understood, leaders are better able to align their work, and teachers are better able to focus on what matters most in the classroom. This includes ensuring that all pupils develop strong skills in literacy and numeracy, alongside other key areas of learning. Equally important is ensuring that teachers have the time, skills and resources needed to deliver high-quality teaching that enables learners to meet these expectations.

Within this context, leaders should be supported to focus their self-evaluation and improvement work primarily on the quality of teaching and learning. Where expectations for progress are clear, leaders can more readily evaluate the effectiveness of teaching by examining what learners know, understand and can do. This allows them to identify where teaching is strong, as well as where key knowledge, skills or understanding have not been successfully developed. Such an approach strengthens the link between evaluation and improvement and ensures that leadership activity remains closely connected to classroom practice.

It is also important to empower headteachers to exercise professional judgement within their own contexts. This includes supporting them to be confident in prioritising, and where necessary, choosing not to engage fully with every concurrent initiative. Leaders who are able to maintain a clear focus on a small number of key priorities—based on the needs of their learners and communities—are more likely to secure meaningful and sustained improvement. Where leaders and staff are overstretched, there is a risk that effort becomes fragmented and impact is reduced.

Finally, it is important to recognise that schools operate in very different contexts and do not face the

same challenges. While national programmes and funding streams, such as the Pupil Development Grant, provide important support, they cannot fully account for the variation in need across the system. As such, support for leaders should be sufficiently flexible to reflect local circumstances, enabling leaders to respond effectively to the specific challenges faced by their learners and communities.

**3. During the session, you referred to international systems - such as those in Ireland and Estonia - that offer clearer, more ambitious progression steps and more useful assessment information. While international examples are helpful, we are keen to understand what this would mean in practice for Wales. Could you therefore set out which elements of these international approaches are genuinely comparable to the Welsh context, the evidence base that underpins them, and what specific changes you believe could realistically and effectively be adopted in Wales to improve the consistency and usefulness of assessment information across the system?**

All education systems and indeed societies are different but Estyn believes that all successful systems have some commonalities. Ireland has a strong, nationally coordinated approach to improving pupil outcomes in key priority areas, including literacy and mathematics. High quality professional learning is designed and delivered at national level through the Department of Education, Oide and the National Council for Special Education. This is supported by a strong middle tier, with seconded mathematics specialists leading professional learning across defined geographical areas. The approach draws explicitly on learning from curriculum reform and inspection evidence. Clear and ambitious expectations are set nationally and are required to be reflected in school development plans. We have shared a similar multitiered model with the Welsh Government, comprising national strategic oversight, clearly defined local authority roles, and strong, practice focused professional learning at school level.

Estonia combines ambitious progression steps with aspirational national expectations for all learners. Its national curriculum sets out clear learning outcomes and competence based progression from early childhood through upper secondary education, ensuring coherence and steadily increasing challenge. Whilst the progression steps and assessment methods are clear and largely nationally driven, they are focused on key subjects, avoid unnecessary system pressures associated with high-stakes assessment and retain a high degree of autonomy for schools and teachers to focus on pedagogy.

The detail is set out in the Estonia's Education Strategy 2021–2035 and its overarching aim is to equip all people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to fulfil their potential and contribute to a high quality, sustainable society. The strategy covers all stages of education, including formal, nonformal and adult learning, and guides national priorities and funding decisions. It is underpinned by strategic goals focused on accessible and coherent learning pathways, high quality, learner centred education, and competent, motivated teachers and leaders, with strong emphasis on digital competence, lifelong learning, smooth progression between phases, and equity for all learners.

National education strategies to 2035 explicitly aim for high achievement, equity and resilience, with expectations that all learners develop strong problem solving, mathematical and digital competences. Progress is monitored through regular national and international assessments, including PISA, which Estonia uses to benchmark itself against the world's highest performers and to drive further improvement. This clarity of progression, coupled with systemwide ambition, underpins Estonia's consistently high learner outcomes and strong culture of aspiration.

The key commonalities between these systems is that they are high on ambition, establish clear age-related expectations and robust assessment methods that are used both by teachers in the

classroom and the state to gauge progress. These expectations are then backed up by excellent support for schools to both deal with the quality of teaching and learning but also to support the increasing complexity in the needs of pupils.

- 4. You've identified that the system needs a narrower set of priorities, alongside clearer national direction and more defined roles and responsibilities for Dysgu, local authorities and national bodies. Could you set out, in concrete terms, what you believe the initial three priorities should be, which areas require national leadership rather than local variation, and what changes would most quickly bring coherence to the system without adding new layers? And given the scale of change you've described, what would be a realistic timescale for achieving that coherence?**

Systems succeed where there are clear and understood priorities. For priorities to succeed they ideally should be limited to around 3 areas to ensure sufficient focus can be placed on these areas. These areas can then be revised once there is traction and positive progress. Currently we would advise that the most significant areas of weakness would be:

- Improving educational standards in reading and mathematics
- Improving the quality of teaching and leadership overall
- Mitigating the impact of poverty

We believe there is a role for national leadership across all these areas. In addition to establishing clear age-related expectations and assessment, a practical example, for mathematics would be a three-tier model: an All-Wales mathematics leadership group to set direction and quality assure impact; supralocal permanent mathematics advisory teams to lead priorities and professional learning; and local advisory teachers to provide targeted, school-level support. Together, these structures would strengthen teaching quality, leadership capacity, and pupil outcomes through coordinated, high-quality support.

#### **Questions we were unable to cover during the session**

- 5. Your annual report notes that the financial position facing the FE sector in particular has become more challenging this year. Could you expand on what has made it more challenging and where are the pressure points within the sector?**

Two key factors:

- i. A notable increase in learners in colleges that brings associated additional costs. We note that Medr provided additional funding in January 2026 in response to this: <https://www.medr.cymru/en/News/medr-2026-02-additional-funding-to-support-increased-participation-in-further-education-institutions-and-local-authorities-2025-26>.
- ii. Increasing support needs of learners. With Year 11 attendance being the lowest of all year groups and the proportion of Year 11 EOTAS and EHE being at their highest rates ever, more learners are arriving at colleges out of the habit of engaging effectively in their learning every day, and often learners have associated well-being needs. This places a strain on college support services.

- 6. Several schools and FE colleges are now facing serious budget constraints. What evidence has Estyn gathered on how financial pressures are affecting curriculum breadth, support services and staffing stability?**

We have not reported any notable negative impact on curriculum breadth or staffing stability, but, as mentioned in the first point above, support services are facing increasing demand.

**7. What steps are being taken to reflect trauma-informed practice from PRUs and special schools in mainstream schools, and how can this link back to professional learning opportunities for education staff?**

Our inspection evidence indicates that effective trauma-informed practice in mainstream schools is increasingly informed by approaches developed in PRUs and maintained special schools.

In many maintained special schools and PRUs, inspectors consistently see strong relational approaches, a focus on well-being, and environments that support pupils to regulate their emotions and re-engage in learning. Staff are supported through targeted professional learning, coaching and multi-agency collaboration, including work with health and social services.

There is evidence that aspects of this practice are beginning to transfer into mainstream schools. In the strongest examples, schools adopt more graduated and relational approaches to behaviour, strengthen partnership working, and develop therapeutic and preventative support for vulnerable learners ( e.g. [A whole school approach to well-being using a scientific model - Estyn](#)).

Local authorities play an important role in this process. Where practice is most effective, they use the expertise of special schools and specialist provision to build capacity in mainstream settings and provide access to relevant professional learning.

Inspection evidence also shows that the most effective professional learning is collaborative, sustained and closely linked to school improvement priorities. This includes coaching, peer learning, and opportunities to observe effective practice.

Overall, our findings are beginning to suggest that trauma-informed practice is most successfully embedded in mainstream schools when it is supported by structured, ongoing professional learning that draws on specialist expertise and is integrated into whole-school approaches to inclusion, behaviour and well-being.

We are also increasingly seeing these approaches being mainstreamed in FE colleges too in response to the growing support needs of learners. See our example from Coleg Cambria - [The Impact of Being Trauma Informed - Estyn](#).

**8. You report that well-being support is generally strong, but demand is rising. What pressures are Estyn seeing most frequently, and how are these shaping inspection findings? How can the system ensure consistent access to counselling, pastoral and mental-health support across all sectors?**

Our inspection evidence indicates that, while well-being support is generally strong across sectors, demand for this support is increasing significantly. The most common pressures identified include rising levels of anxiety and emotional distress among learners, increased complexity of additional learning needs and challenges linked to attendance and disengagement from education.

These pressures are particularly evident in the need for more intensive pastoral support, greater access to specialist services such as counselling and CAMHS and increased staff capacity to respond to pupils' SEMH needs. Schools report delays in accessing external support and prolonged waiting time for services, which can place additional strain on school-based provision.

As a result, inspection findings increasingly focus on how well schools identify and support

vulnerable learners, the effectiveness of their pastoral systems and the extent to which they work with external partners. Inspectors also consider how well schools adapt their curriculum, behaviour approaches and learning environments to support pupils' well-being and engagement.

To ensure consistent access to counselling, pastoral and mental health support, the system should continue to strengthen multi-agency working. They should also improve the availability and timeliness of specialist services to build capacity within schools. This would be strengthened through targeted high-quality professional learning. Effective practice includes using data to identify need early and deploying trained staff strategically. It also involves sharing expertise across schools and sectors, particularly drawing on the strengths of specialist provision.

Overall, a coherent, system-wide approach that aligns education, health and social services, alongside sustained investment in workforce development, is key to ensuring equitable access to well-being support for all learners.

**9. What progress is being made towards addressing the isolated site-security weaknesses Estyn identified through the joint inspection in Gwynedd with Care Inspectorate Wales, following the Neil Foden case, and how is Estyn adjusting its inspection focus as a result?**

The joint inspection in Gwynedd did not focus specifically on site security. Instead, it considered wider safeguarding arrangements, including governance, training, multi-agency working and the effectiveness of safeguarding systems. We have not been able to identify a specific reference within the report to the 'isolated site-security weaknesses' referred to in the question.

However, following the joint inspection in Gwynedd, the local authority has taken important steps to strengthen safeguarding arrangements. These include more consistent safeguarding visits to schools, stronger monitoring of DBS checks and training and improved support for schools through the Safeguarding and Welfare Team.

While systems and structures have improved, there remain inconsistencies in monitoring and evaluating impact and it is too early to demonstrate fully consistent practice across all schools.

Since 2024, we have sharpened our inspection focus on safeguarding, including site security. Where inspectors identify any concerns, these are followed up formally through site management letters to local authorities, ensuring that issues are addressed promptly and systematically. Inspectors are also placing greater emphasis on how well safeguarding arrangements are implemented in practice and evaluated for their impact on keeping learners safe.

Over the last two years, the number of site-management letters has remained relatively consistent, with 43 letters issued across all terms in 2024–25 and 29 letters issued so far in 2025–26, reflecting partial-year data. Analysis for the Autumn and Spring term show similar levels of activity across both years. Most letters continue to be issued within the primary sector, although there has been an increase in the number of letters we have sent to secondary and special settings to date in 2025–26 compared to the previous year. The number of letters issued to local authorities varies between the two periods, which may reflect differences in the number of inspections conducted in each authority each year. Generally, these letters identify issues ranging from unsupervised access to the school site and traffic management issues, through to issues with the condition of the building.

**10. It has been several years since the move away from summative grading toward narrative reporting following inspections. How has this been received in practice? How do you ensure urgency in settings with weak self-evaluation, and what evidence suggests the new model is improving professional dialogue?**

The removal of summative gradings was part of a suite of changes to lower the high stakes nature of inspection and increase the focus on driving sustainable improvements for learners. Other changes included more regular inspection, removal of predictability, discouragement of mini-inspections by school improvement services and an increase in professional dialogue. Although we have removed summative gradings, we have retained one overall judgement in our school inspections – does the provider require follow-up and the statutory categories of special measures and significant improvement remain for maintained schools and PRUs. There were some unhelpful behaviours when we had summative gradings – too much time was spent discussing gradings and schools focused too much on the grade and not enough on the evaluative detail that would drive improvement and also support the improvement in the quality of self-evaluation

The removal of summative gradings has moved the focus of inspection firmly onto what matters most, securing continual improvement. Providers and inspectors report that this change has created more time for professional dialogue on what needs to be improved and the strategies for bringing about the improvement. The approach has helped both inspection teams and providers to take a more holistic view of provider performance, and avoids inspections being ‘bogged down’ in lengthy discussions over ‘borderline’ judgements. In general, providers have welcomed this approach. In a few instances, high-performing providers miss the recognition of their work that used to come from excellent judgements.

Providers have the opportunity to complete post inspection questionnaires to feedback on their experience of inspection. We analyse this feedback annually. Overall, most providers found the inspection process highly beneficial and welcomed engagement with inspectors. Open response comments highlight the following strengths and themes:

Key strengths	Themes
<b>Professionalism and conduct of inspectors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very common with inspectors described as ‘professional’, ‘courteous’, ‘respectful’, ‘approachable’, ‘supportive’ and ‘empathetic’</li> <li>• Teams created a calm, constructive (and even enjoyable!) inspection week</li> </ul>
<b>Fairness and transparency of process</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open, transparent process with a genuine opportunity to present evidence</li> <li>• Nominees included in discussions and felt part of the team</li> </ul>
<b>Collaboration and constructive dialogue</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff valued that inspectors listened, engaged in professional dialogue and showed interest in the provider’s context</li> <li>• A recurring phrase: felt like it was done ‘with us, not to us’</li> </ul>
<b>Validation of strengths and improvement journey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providers appreciated that inspectors affirmed improvement work already underway</li> <li>• Validation often boosted morale and confidence</li> </ul>
<b>Consideration of well-being</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teams noticed and respected the pressure inspections create</li> <li>• Many leaders reported feeling cared for and supported personally</li> <li>• Schools contrasted the support from teams with that of their local authority, noting Estyn’s empathy</li> </ul>

<b>Positive impact of verbal feedback</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbal feedback often praised for being constructive, detailed and supportive (even where reports later felt briefer)</li> <li>• Staff found verbal feedback particularly helpful for shaping next steps for improvement</li> </ul>
<b>Overall experience framed as positive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The whole inspection described as a ‘positive’, ‘fair’ or ‘supportive’ experience</li> <li>• ‘Best inspection to date’ or significantly more positive than earlier frameworks</li> </ul>

Similar findings are reflected in the annual stakeholder questionnaires that we have done for the last two years, with responders experiencing inspection more recently generally feeling more positive about it.

**11. Looking back on your inspections carried out throughout the course of the Sixth Senedd, what do you feel have been the education system’s key achievements, and what areas do you wish had been explored and addressed further? What would you liked to see addressed as a priority in the Seventh Senedd?**

What has worked well:

- Recovery from the pandemic
- Good progress in addressing increased concerns about well-being
- Some progress on attendance but much more to do, particularly with eFSM
- Increased understanding of teacher workload and the impact of widespread reform
- Curriculum for Wales is showing real promise

Hopes for the next Senedd

- Strengthening of school improvement arrangements to ensure support for schools causing concern is timely and high quality to affect more rapid improvement in these schools.
- Progress on the achievement of children and young people affected by poverty.
- More progress on raising the aspirations of all learners – need for more guidance around age related expectations on the CfW to address the lowering of expectations we’ve seen too many times in this cycle of inspections to date.
- Better national and local assessment data to enable us to measure progress on improving literacy and numeracy and a national PL offer for reading and mathematics
- Focus on providing a consistent PL offer for developing high quality leadership at middle and senior level
- Focus on improving the quality of initial teacher education; review current models of delivery and consider a national approach.
- Improved levels of participation in education at level 3 and higher

**12. During the session, you also committed to providing us with a timeline for the completion and publication of Estyn’s findings from the themed inspection of the National Centre for Learning Welsh.**

We concluded our evidence gathering activities with providers during the spring term 2026. We aim to publish the report before the end of the academic year. The theme this year is the support for the education workforce to develop their Welsh language skills.