

# Targeted Funding to Improve Education Outcomes Focus Group Summary

2018

## Background:

As part of the Committee's inquiry, the Assembly's Outreach team has been holding focus groups with a variety of groups across Wales. Contributions were gathered from a mixture of headteachers, governors and teachers from both primary and secondary schools, one of which was a special school. Participants came from areas covered by each of the four Regional Education Consortia.

The Outreach team held 9 sessions, engaging with groups from Gwynedd, Powys, Neath Port Talbot, Swansea, Merthyr Tydfil, Vale of Glamorgan, Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen, along with a National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) Cymru committee representing headteachers from each local authority in Wales. The views of the 117 people who contributed have been summarised into key themes.

The focus group sessions focused on the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) funding as this was relevant to all participants. However, where participants had experienced Schools Challenge Cymru (SCC) funding, views were also gathered about this programme.



## **Summary of key themes and contributions**

### **1. Schools use of PDG**

#### Staff

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**“Enabling teaching staff to focus on Teaching & Learning by funding social/emotional support staff to deal with issues.”**

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Participants in every session, in all locations, listed staffing as one of the main expenses PDG was being used for. PDG was paying for additional staff in the form of teaching assistant support for interventions, intensive literacy and numeracy support, and individual mentoring time. Other support included attendance officers and family liaison officers, ELSA support, ALN support and emotional/social support. Others talked about providing support for more able pupils through additional staff time.

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**“Incentives – encourage attendance, more commitment to learning.”**

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For those participants who received small amounts of PDG funding, staffing sometimes wasn't possible so the majority of their budgets were spent on resources such as IT equipment and school trips for e-FSM pupils.

#### Training

Training was also a common PDG spend for participants. Inset training was arranged on mindfulness and wellbeing in some schools, others trained staff in certain initiatives which could add value such as Forest Schools and Thrive.

#### Equipment

After staffing and training, schools spent PDG on a variety of resources such as iPads, transport costs for extra-curricular clubs, breakfast and after school clubs, school trips, school uniform, revision resources and Language Links software. Enrichment activities such as music lessons and dance and drama workshops were also thought to be valuable.

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**“Intervention could mean catch up programmes in literacy and maths, after school catch up provision, small group withdrawal, self-esteem and pastoral work, counselling, homework clubs.”**

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## 2. Who benefits from the PDG in your schools?

### Wider than e-FSM pupils

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**“It’s impossible to target FSM only without supporting others in need of support in most cases.”**

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The primary theme, which was raised in every session in all parts of the country, was that PDG funding is not only being used to support pupils who are eligible for free school meals (e-FSM).

Although the interventions paid for by the PDG were aimed at e-FSM pupils, every group agreed that they extended these resources to support additional pupils who are in need but may not be eligible for e-FSM.

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**“Vulnerable pupils aren’t always e-FSM.”**

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Some participants were able to do this through including non e-FSM pupils in smaller group interventions targeting e-FSM pupils, or by covering costs of school trips.

The point was made by every group that there were borderline families, who don’t quite qualify for FSM but who are in need of additional support. Depending on the amount of funding the school received, all participants were trying to ensure these pupils received the support they needed. In some cases of course, small numbers of e-FSM pupils meant less funding which would not allow them to stretch the resources far enough.

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**“Compounded pressures on the council budget means we need to spread the PDG further and further.”**

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Overall, participants agreed that the number of e-FSM pupils did not accurately reflect the number of deprived students or of pupils in need of additional support.

### Looked after children, ALN and more able and talented pupils

A number of groups also raised the issue of additional funding for looked after children not being included in the PDG funding which had caused challenges for schools in supporting them.

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**“LAC pupils frequently fall through the gap as they aren’t supported through PDG.”**

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Many felt this had been a mistake and that more pressure was put on existing PDG funding to ensure looked after children’s needs were also being met.

A similar point was made relating to support for ALN. One group said their PDG was spent predominantly on ALN materials as often children will fall into both categories.

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**“PDG is used to prop up ALN funding.”**

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Finally, a number of groups talked about the benefits for more able and talented but felt this group sometimes missed out as the funding was often targeted at lower achieving pupils. Some groups talked about the additional staff time they had allocated to providing support for more able pupils through PDG funding, but most participants felt it was more difficult to target this particular group.

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**“It is a pupil ‘development’ grant – what about high achieving groups?”**

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### **3. Does this type of targeted funding work?**

#### **Method**

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**“One of my main fears when I see announcements from Welsh Government is that we will lose the PDG. The value added to our school is huge.”**

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Following on from discussions around who benefited from the PDG funding, every group strongly agreed that targeted funding works in principle, and that the PDG should be a ring-fenced amount.

However, the majority of groups felt that the method of calculating PDG was outdated.

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**“It is the easiest indicator of need but also the flakiest. It is not a safe indicator.”**

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Although all participants agreed with the principal of targeted funding for deprived pupils as a way of trying to close the poverty gap, they felt that the e-FSM system was a crude way of

working out the funding and mostly left a gap in the middle where there were pupils who were not e-FSM but still vulnerable.

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**“Those just above the threshold are missing out.”**

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Some groups suggested this could be addressed by using the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation as an alternative method of calculation, although groups in other areas felt strongly that this would not be any fairer than using e-FSM numbers.

A number of groups suggested a similar method to the Forever 6 system in England where pupils were funded for a number of years if they had once been identified as eligible for FSM.

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**“There is a gap in the middle between eFSM pupils and families who are better off – these pupils receive no support.”**

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### Low take up and stigma

The majority of the groups also raised low take up of FSM a challenge for the allocation of funding. Many felt there was a stigma attached to claiming FSM which meant there were pupils who were eligible but weren't receiving.

At least half of the groups also talked about the constant fluctuation in numbers of e-FSM pupils due to changing family circumstances and inconsistent working patterns. This increased the numbers of pupils who are in need of interventions but are not eligible for FSM.

### More flexibility

As a result, most groups felt that there needed to be greater flexibility in order to meet the needs of all pupils. Different schools had different priorities and although all participants recognised the importance of accountability attached to the funding, some of the groups did not feel that schools were trusted to distribute the grant how they feel it is needed in their school.

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**“I'd like the accountability to be less bureaucratic and to be based more on professional trust.”**

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The majority felt it was important that the grant remained ring-fenced but that fewer guidelines and entrusting schools to spend the funding on children's welfare would make it easier for the school to spend for impact.

#### **4. Does this funding help to improve education outcomes?**

##### Educational attainment

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**“Absolutely key to pupil attainment. Don’t know where we would be without it. More please.”**

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All participants agreed that PDG helped to improve educational attainment for e-FSM pupils. Individual participants were clear though that the number of e-FSM pupils a school had, and therefore the amount of funding they received, made a big difference to the impact they felt the grant was having.

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**“In a rural setting, the numbers are sometimes not high enough to have the desired impact.”**

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##### Additional measures

A number of the groups also discussed the softer impact the grant had on their pupils and stressed that impact should not only be measured on education attainment but on social and emotional developments too.

This led to discussions in many of the groups about the difficulty in measuring impact over one year only and the majority of participants felt that the funding should be allocated over a longer period of time in order to measure impact and plan ahead.

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**“It doesn’t necessarily close the gap but it stops the gap getting wider which is a big deal.”**

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## 5. Challenges

### Annual grant

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**“Focus on longer term outcomes would be welcome rather than expecting short term outcomes. Deep rooted issues require long term interventions.”**

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One of the main challenges raised in almost every group was the fact that the PDG was an annual grant. Given that the majority of the funding was spent on staff, this presented challenges for employment contracts, achieving consistency for the pupils and getting value from money spent on training.

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**“Long term planning within the parameters of the grant is a challenge. The frequent movement in the numbers and the grant culture makes establishing sustainability in the schools difficult.”**

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Coupled with the challenges around planning ahead and measuring long term impact, participants on the whole felt that the funding should be awarded over a longer period of time.

### Reporting

Following on from this was the challenge of how to report the impact. Most groups felt there was an inconsistency in the information required from different agencies which added to already heavy workload pressures. Almost all had received different requests from Challenge Advisors, LA contacts and Estyn reports.

The special school also felt strongly that comparisons made between them and mainstream schools could be detrimental in demonstrating the value PDG added in special schools.

### Core budget pressures

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**“PDG is masking the inadequacy of the school budget.”**

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In every session, participants mentioned that PDG was propping up core budgets and preventing redundancies.

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**“PDG is no longer an extra resource, it is a re-branded core budget.”**

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Every group agreed that this type of funding can only work when there is sufficient core funding available. All participants

talked about the tension between budgets and that pressure on PDG increased as the core budget was reduced.

Participants dealt with this differently. Some were resisting the pressure from their governors to use PDG for resources usually covered under the core budgets, others felt they had no choice but to use their PDG creatively to support their core budgets.

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**“PDG is filling gaps in core budgets and targeted funding like this can only work if there is sufficient funding in other areas.”**

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## **6. Schools Challenge Cymru**

***The headteacher and chair of governors of an SCC school shared some comments with us at the end of one of the focus group sessions:***

They felt that at the beginning funding was quite sporadic, but it allowed for good targeted interventions. Level 2 attainment increased significantly due to funding, but as soon as the funding stopped it dropped by 42 %.

WG couldn't expect the same level of achievement to be reached when the funding stopped as money allowed for capacity which helped performance. They felt that all schools performances had dipped.

It was noted that the money had to be spent in two years or it would be lost. Schools assumed the funding would continue which influenced the way money was spent. There was no exit strategy when the funding stopped and schools had to handle things such as redundancies themselves.

Overall, they felt money was useful, but they were unsure about how useful the support had been - they felt there were too many advisors.

***Another school was a feeder primary into a SCC school:***

They understood that some of the funding would be used to improve links between the schools primary and secondary schools involved. However, this had not happened here which had been disappointing.



## Annex

During this inquiry, the Outreach team worked with the groups listed below to gather the views of headteachers and governors. We would like to thank all those who contributed.

- Governors Wales
- NAHT Cymru
- Merthyr Tydfil Southern Cluster Governor Improvement Group
- Executive Committee of the Vale School Governors Association
- Gwynedd Governors Association
- Swansea Association of Governing Bodies

## Format

Participants were asked the following questions as part of the focus group sessions:

- How is PDG funding currently spent in your school? Who allocates the budget / who is responsible for the funding?
- What is bought with the funding? Who benefits from these resources?
- Do you think the funding has an impact on education outcomes for pupils receiving free school meals?
- Does this targeted approach to funding work?

- Do you combine PDG funding with other school budgets to finance initiatives for all pupils?
- What are the challenges of the programme? Are there challenges in terms of eligibility of activities/recipients for example?