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Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

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Committee National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay  
CF99 1NA

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Dear Lynne,

Thank you for your letter dated 25 November requesting information to support the Committee's scrutiny of school improvement and raising standards. I have addressed each of the areas raised by the Committee below and look forward to discussing them further with the Committee on 13 February.

### **Welsh Government approach to school improvement**

We remain committed to building a collaborative, self-improving school system in Wales. Central to this, as set out in our national mission, is developing robust assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements that align with the Curriculum for Wales.

Regional consortia continue to work, on behalf of local authorities, to lead, orchestrate and co-ordinate improvement in schools across the region. They have also been instrumental in helping to drive forward wider reform and improvements over the last few years. In addition to playing a key role in the design, planning and roll-out of the new curriculum they have: guided and supported schools through reforms to GCSEs; driven an increase in the number of teachers doing an NPQH; and, implemented a national approach to professional learning.

Local authorities retain statutory responsibility for promoting high standards in their schools. They exercise this responsibility by delegating school improvement activities to regional consortia, who benefit from the greater capacity and efficiencies they can draw upon by working across a region; this has been crucial in supporting the delivery of curriculum reform. At the same time, having themselves established the regional consortia, local authorities have the responsibility to ensure that regions are delivering a high quality service to their schools. Regional consortia do have slightly different governance and delivery models; ERW, in particular, is notable for the fact that challenge advisers remain employed by its constituent local authorities, with ERW playing a co-ordinating role.

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

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

In 2016, the OECD confirmed to us that the system was working, highlighting a positive shift towards a regional approach to school improvement. The OECD, Estyn and schools have all told us that we are building capacity, giving our school leaders opportunities to lead and improve their own schools. The evidence of improvement in the system supports this. For example, in 2014, 33% of primary schools were in need of the highest levels of support; by 2018, this had reduced to 12%. For secondaries, the proportion of schools fell from 43% to 31%.

Regional consortia have helped build schools' capacity to self-improve, and therefore to improve pupil outcomes, in a relatively short amount of time. Through a range of school networks, funded by Welsh Government grants and co-ordinated by consortia, school leaders and teachers are increasingly able to access professional development and school improvement support from their peers, helping to build a culture of a collaboration rather than competition in the system. The evidence you received from the consortia gave an indication of the breadth of school-led improvement activity that is now underway across Wales. This represents a dramatic change since the start of regional working.

Monitoring the performance of all schools in their area, and brokering and providing support for those schools that need it, remains a core part of the consortia role. This would include those schools that were part of Schools Challenge Cymru; but the level of support provided to any individual school will ultimately come down to a professional judgement of their performance and capacity to improve, taking into account a broad range of data and information.

Termly Evaluation and Improvement meetings between Welsh Government, regions and local authorities give me and my officials the opportunity to scrutinise how consortia are fulfilling this role. In addition, *A Learning Inspectorate* – Graham Donaldson's independent review of Estyn – made clear that our success in moving towards a self-improving system will depend heavily on the performance of the middle tier in adding value to the performance of schools. Estyn inspections of both local authorities and regional consortia will therefore continue and include a focus on how they are contributing to the realisation of reforms.

## **Evaluation and improvement arrangements**

I published draft evaluation and improvement arrangements in February 2019. These new arrangements are designed to create the significant system and culture changes necessary for the Curriculum for Wales to succeed. Fundamental to the new arrangements will be robust and continuous self-evaluation, complemented by professional dialogue between schools, local authorities and regional consortia, to agree on schools' improvement priorities and support. Underpinning the arrangements will be a broad range of high quality information about schools, and other parts of the system, which will need to be used in a more timely, intelligent and supportive way.

As well as being a positive move towards a more collaborative, appropriate and high-performing system, these changes also respond to some of the negative, unintended consequences of our previous evaluation and accountability arrangements, and related performance measures. These included:

- a narrowing choice of the curriculum at both primary and secondary sectors;
- an excessive focus on the GCSE C/D boundary (not recognising the achievements of learners either below or above that threshold);
- the way in which the use of benchmarking data has driven competition between schools and local authorities rather than encouraging collaboration; and
- increased and unnecessary workload for teachers and others in the system, without the necessary impact or benefit for learners.

The new arrangements will bring about a culture where self-evaluation and improvement considers the whole learning experience, raising standards for all our learners, whatever their starting point or individual needs. The focus will be on supporting learner progress, rather than reaching judgements. This new approach will, for example, ensure the performance of FSM pupils across the system, and in individual schools, is sufficiently recognised. School performance will be considered in its widest sense, with schools evaluated in their own context, supported by bespoke improvement planning, target setting and support.

There is no trade-off between these evaluation and improvement arrangements, the development of a self-improving system, and a robust approach to accountability that contributes to raising standards. Democratic accountability and inspection will remain an important feature of school system, informed by better information about schools' overall performance, not less; and by better use of information than is currently observed in places. My officials, supported by ADEW and working closely with the WLGA, the regions and Estyn, have already started work with local authority members and chairs of scrutiny to look at how effective scrutiny may look under the new arrangements. We have held initial sessions in each of the four regions, which were very well attended and received by Cabinet members across Wales. Through this work, we will both strengthen and improve ways in which schools are held to account, in line with the principles I have set out above.

Similarly, Estyn's role also continues to develop to support our reformed system. Following their planned transition year in 2020-21, school inspections will resume from September 2021 under a new framework that reflects the new curriculum and arrangements for self-evaluation. The intention then is that Estyn visit schools every 3-4 years, rather than the current seven year cycle, to provide an independent view, supporting schools' own improvement processes. This will also provide parents with more up-to-date information about schools.

This evolving approach will involve culture change at all levels, as we move from a system which has developed into one based primarily on compliance to a model of evaluation and improvement more in line with high performing education systems across the world. It was within this context that Welsh Government, Estyn and WLGA wrote jointly to regional consortia and local authorities in July 2019, to provide a strong signal of the new direction. The purpose of the joint communication was to reinforce the message, ahead of the publication of examination results and local scrutiny processes in the autumn term, that there needs to be a move away from a disproportionate emphasis on a small number of isolated performance measures, which don't always have the best interests of the learner at heart. This followed on from my Written Statement of 19 February 2019.

Local authorities and regional consortia were advised instead to use a broad range of un-aggregated data and information when reporting on school performance and evaluating the performance of individual schools, and to use this analysis as the basis for local scrutiny and for agreeing the schools' improvement priorities and levels of support. This is to avoid the risk that by focussing on aggregated data at a local authority and regional level, schools are held to account solely on the basis of how their data compares to local authority and regional averages, with insufficient consideration of their wider data and context. It is not about reducing the level of challenge or rigour in the school system. Rather, it is about the need for ever more intelligent, appropriate and considered use of information.

It is important to recognise the important role local authorities will play, working collaboratively with the regions, to make sure approaches to school improvement are sustainable. Continuing to build capacity across the system is therefore critical. In this context, a number of recent Estyn inspections of local authority education services have been disappointing. My officials are therefore exploring how we model the approaches and

principles of the evaluation and improvement arrangements at local authority and regional level, including effective self-evaluation using appropriate data, to ensure the culture shift is embedded in all tiers of our system.

### ***Evidence, data and wider intelligence***

The underlying principles of our new draft evaluation and improvement arrangements are that the reformed system will be: fair, coherent, proportionate and transparent. So while we want to move away from a system with an excessive focus on single high-stakes threshold measures, this important and necessary culture change will not be at the expense of transparency, democratic accountability and public confidence.

I want to be clear it is not my intention to hide away data, but to make sure all parts of the system, from headteachers to parents, have access to the most appropriate and useful data for the purposes they need it. That will include information used: by schools to drive improvement in their performance; by governing bodies, local authorities and Estyn to facilitate accountability and democratic scrutiny; and by parents, children and communities to help them understand their schools, instilling public confidence.

The information that is used under existing arrangements often has multiple purposes attached to a single set of measures (e.g. being used for assessing individual learner progress, self-evaluation processes, local authority scrutiny, and publication). Measures have also been used at different levels of the system, aggregated up at regional and national level. The use of the same indicators for these multiple purposes has resulted in some unintended consequences where the benefit of individual learners has not always been placed at the heart of decision-making around curriculum offer, the distribution of support and improvement planning. This has to change if we're determined to see the best outcomes for our learners.

Whilst future arrangements for evaluation and improvement continue to be developed, over the past few years a number of 'enabling steps' have been taken as part of the transition:

- i. Ceasing the routine publication of data from teacher assessments at a school and local authority level, and their use in school performance measures, has ensured the integrity of their intended purpose.
- ii. The interim Key Stage 4 performance indicators have been implemented this year, to help address some of the most pressing unintended consequences of previous measures, whilst the longer-term arrangements are considered.
- iii. Amendments to Key Stage 4 target setting requirements have aligned to these changes and signified a move away from a disproportionate emphasis on a small number of performance measures to a wider range of information which better captures the whole learning experience, learner progress and our ambitions for the new curriculum, whilst enabling all schools to be considered within their own context.
- iv. Changes to the All Wales Core Data Sets for local authorities have removed comparisons of local authority aggregate performance information, to better align with latest policy developments, with regards to the type of behaviours we want to promote.

Key to the next phase of this work is to initiate a research project to consider future information needs to support self-evaluation and continuous improvement at all levels in the school system. This is wider than defining standardised performance measures and it is right that an 'evidence-based' approach to this issue is taken. The aim will be to help identify the information needed for different purposes in each part of the school system. At the same time, it is important that information does not adversely impact on another part of the system.

I also want this research to identify the most effective mechanisms for presenting information, to make it available and accessible for different purposes within the school system (e.g. for use in self-evaluation and improvement planning or for publication to ensure transparency). Officials are currently finalising the research specification; procurement of a research contractor will follow over the coming months, and the work will need to progress in line with the requirements of curriculum reform.

We need to ensure that all stakeholders, especially schools, local authorities and regional consortia, have trust in the system and the arrangements that we implement. We will ensure that the research draws on the relevant knowledge and expertise across Wales, and beyond where appropriate; and that stakeholders feed into a co-designed, reformed approach to using information for evaluation, improvement and accountability. It is important that we get this right as it will shape and support much of what we do going forward.

### ***Testing of evaluation and improvement arrangements***

I would also like to take this opportunity to update the Committee on work that Welsh Government is leading to test other elements of the draft evaluation and improvement arrangements.

The first aspect of this work is being led by my officials, Estyn and regional consortia, supported by 22 schools (one from each local authority). They are testing several elements of the new arrangements, with a focus on self-evaluation, improvement and support. The work is considering:

- the impact of the new arrangements on workload reduction and bureaucracy;
- the evidence and/or indicators that can help facilitate effective self-evaluation processes; and
- the roles, responsibilities and behaviours needed from all partners in the system to enable professional autonomy and appropriate support for improvement.

They are also developing a 'National Evaluation and Improvement Resource' which will be crucial in supporting schools to put in place effective self-evaluation arrangements. It will play a role in building capacity across the system by focusing on strengthening leadership, leadership of teaching, wellbeing of learners and staff, encouraging innovative practice, and supporting professional learning. By the end of the summer term, I want this work to guide us on how this resource can be rolled out more widely to schools in Wales, as well as providing assurance that it will support the realisation of the new Curriculum for Wales.

The second aspect is testing a multi-agency approach to supporting schools, particularly those causing, or at risk of causing, concern. Categorisation has undoubtedly increased local authorities' and regions' knowledge of individual schools' strengths and areas for improvement. Despite the improvements we have seen across the school system as a whole, however, I remain concerned about those schools, particularly secondaries, who continue to require the highest levels of support.

The issues behind these schools are often complex, including: financial difficulties; reorganisation; and, behaviour and attendance issues. Consortia and schools alone, therefore, will not be able to improve matters. These cases are likely to require strong partnerships across the middle tier, including from the local authorities who have statutory powers to intervene.

We are therefore trialling such a multi-agency approach with a small number of secondary schools across Wales: two from each region. For each school, a multi-agency panel will work together to support the school, identifying and agreeing its issues and needs and

formulating a bespoke support plan for the school. This support plan should help facilitate collective agreement on what sustainable improvement for the school looks like.

This approach should mean that once local authorities and regions have identified those schools that need support, they are able to draw on the considerable expertise and resources that exist across our middle tier, with everyone aligned and working towards the same goal. It will also enable Welsh Government and Estyn to assess how the approach will work as part of the wider Evaluation and Improvement arrangements, including the future of categorisation, as well as informing Estyn's actions in response to the recommendations in *A Learning Inspectorate*.

I said in response to the committee's recommendations relating to School Challenge Cymru, in your *On the Money?* report, that in addition to learning from that programme, it is important that we look forwards. The approach I have set out above – both the emphasis on self-evaluation for improvement for all schools, as well as the multi-agency approach for schools most in need of support – does exactly that. Just as you recommended that any future school improvement programme should run for a sufficient period of time to have a durable impact, these arrangements are designed to secure long-term, sustainable improvements in schools, not short-term fixes.

## **PISA 2018**

Following the disappointing 2015 PISA results, I took the advice of OECD on our education reforms. Subsequently, we went on to deliver the biggest ever investment in our teachers, the biggest ever professional learning programme, and we have continued with reforming our curriculum. Our national mission has charted the right course and we can, and must, keep improving, building on the momentum we now have.

As I said in my statement to the Senedd in December, the PISA 2018 results were a testament to the hard work and commitment of our teachers and students. They showed that for the first time, Wales is now in the international mainstream, having caught up with the international average for English, Maths and Science. We have improved in all subjects and seen an improvement in our ranking compared to other countries. We also have more top performers: the number of high performing students in reading rose from 3% in 2015 to 7% in 2018, with a 4% to 7% increase in maths and a 4% to 5% increase in science.

Crucially, at the same time as these improvements, the attainment gap in reading for those eFSM and non eFSM in Wales fell. The gap was 34 in 2018, down from 41 in 2015, which is narrower than the other UK nations. I am proud that pupils in Wales are relatively more able to overcome disadvantages of their background, compared to pupils in other OECD countries and that we truly partner equity with excellence.

The results provide us with a rich set of information and areas for further investigation and focus. For example, a common concern across all participating countries is the gap in performance for reading between boys and girls. Girls outperform boys in every single country, and in Wales, that is the same story. In Wales, there was a significant difference between the mean reading scores for boys (470) and that for girls (497). While boys performed marginally better than girls in mathematics, the difference was not statistically significant.

The results were positive, but not perfect. For example, while we saw improvements in the proportion of high performers for all subjects, we have not yet reached the OECD average for this group of learners. But we will continue to take forward our reforms, having made clear progress against the three objectives I set in our national mission action plan: to raise

standards; to tackle the attainment gap; and to ensure a system that is a source of national pride and enjoys public confidence. It is important that we celebrate success, but continue steadfast on the path of reform, rather than risk complacency.

## **A/AS level and GCSE attainment in 2019 and previous years**

Results for the 2019 summer examinations series revealed several areas of important progress in the achievements of learners in Wales. In particular, overall achievement of top grades at A level reached a record high, with 9 per cent of grades awarded at A\* and more than a quarter at A\* or A. Wales is now ranked higher than any of the English regions and Northern Ireland for achievement of A\* grades. More than three quarters of grades were awarded at A\* to C, with notable increases across the key STEM subjects of Biology, Chemistry and Physics. This is good news for the learners of Wales, being stable compared with 2018 and remaining high in the context of the historic trend.

With regards to GCSEs, there was an improvement in overall summer results, as well as those for several individual subjects, since 2018. Over the past few years, there have, however, been several important changes within the system that make it difficult to draw similarly meaningful comparisons. These include steps taken to end the inappropriate use of early entry and changes to the exams themselves, which schools have adapted to as they have been phased in over the past few years.

Final results for GCSE and A level attainment for Wales are published in statistical releases as indicators for the relevant age cohorts of learners, available here: <https://gov.wales/examination-results-september-2018-august-2019>. While these releases provide a helpful picture of overall performance, they can also mask some of the overall trends for grades achieved and results for individual subjects.

Consistent with our commitment to co-construct the new approach to the use of information in evaluation and improvement arrangements, any changes to the use or publication of sub-national aggregate data and any other significant changes would require formal consultation, to enable full consideration of the implications for all users, in line with the Code of Practice for Statistics. There are no such changes planned for KS4 examination data.

### ***AS and A Level***

The total number of entries to A and AS level qualifications decreased in summer 2019. There has, however, been a decrease in the population of 17-year-olds and 18-year-olds since 2013, by 8% and 6% respectively, and this is likely to be the main driver of the fall in entries.

AS level results were stable in 2018/19 with some notable increases at grades A\*-C for several subjects. The overall pass rate at AS level for A-E remains stable, at 90%.

The percentage of pupils entering a volume equivalent to two A levels, who achieved three A\*-A grades in 2018/19, is 13.2 per cent, down 0.2 points on last year's historic high. The percentage of pupils entering a volume equivalent to two A levels, who achieved three A\*-C grades is 58.4 per cent, up by 0.4 points which is an improvement on previous years.

For those entering a volume equivalent to two A levels achieving the Level 3 threshold (equivalent of two A levels grades A\*-E), the pass rate is 97.9 per cent, an increase of 0.4 points on last year, showing continuous improvement since 2016/17. The average wider points score is 741.3, an increase of 1.2 points, in line with continuous improvement since 2016/17.

The table below shows the performance of 17 year olds since 2014/15.

Performance of pupils aged 17 at the start of the school year 2015-2019

|         | Number entering equivalent to 2 A levels (1) | Percentage achieving Level 3 threshold. (2) | Number of pupils aged 17 (3) | Average wider points score (4) | Percentage entering at least 2 A levels achieving 3 A*-A | Percentage entering at least 2 A levels achieving 3 A*-C | Percentage who achieved the Skills Challenge Certificate at Advanced Level | Percentage who achieved the Welsh Baccalaureate at Advanced Level |
|---------|--|---|------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| 2014/15 | 11,838                                       | 97.0  | 13,473                       | 799.7                          | ..   | ..   | ..   | ..  |
| 2015/16 | 10,804                                       | 98.0  | 12,066                       | 823.2                          | 6.7  | 38.3   | ..   | ..  |
| 2016/17 | 10,152                                       | 97.1  | 11,434                       | 730.6                          | 10.5   | 54.7   | ..   | ..  |
| 2017/18 | 9,452  | 97.6  | 10,613                       | 740.1                          | 13.4   | 57.9   | 69.2   | 59.7  |
| 2018/19 | 9,148  | 97.9  | 10,232                       | 741.3                          | 13.2   | 58.4   | 71.6   | 61.7  |

1. Number of pupils aged 17 entering a volume equivalent to 2 A levels. Excludes FE colleges.
2. Percentage of 17 year old pupils entering a volume equivalent to 2 A levels who achieved the Level 3 threshold. To achieve the Level 3 threshold a pupil must achieve the equivalent of 2 A levels grades A-E. Excludes pupils from FE colleges.
3. Up to 1999/2000, qualifications gained by 16, 17 and 18 year olds were recorded. From 2000/01, all qualifications gained by pupils aged 17 were recorded, and any examinations taken at an earlier age. Does not include pupils from Further Education College.
4. Average wider points score for pupils aged 17. Includes all qualifications approved for 16-18 year olds in Wales.

## Key Stage 4

This year we are seeing the first results of nine reformed qualifications, aimed at providing pupils with the right skills for the modern world. We can be proud of the way our pupils and teachers have handled the introduction of these new qualifications that are playing a vital role in raising standards.

As part of the ongoing development of new evaluation and improvement arrangements for schools in Wales, to replace parts of the legacy accountability system, several interim Key Stage 4 performance measures have also been introduced for this academic year. In addition, all measures this year are calculated on the basis of a pupil's first entry in a qualification, rather than their best entry as in the past. This makes comparisons over time inappropriate, but is important in helping ensure the focus is firmly on what is in learners' best interests.

### Legacy performance measures

Data prior to 2016/17 are not directly comparable, due to significant changes in how the indicators are calculated. The percentage of learners achieving the Level 2 inclusive threshold (5 x GCSEs grade A\*-C, including English or Welsh first language and mathematics) in 2019 is **53.8** per cent. For those achieving the Level 1 threshold, the achievement level is **92.8** per cent. The percentage of pupils achieving 5 x A\*-A grades is **18.0** per cent.

| Measure           | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 |
|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| Level 1           | 94.4    | 93.7    | 92.8    |
| Level 2 inclusive | 55.7    | 56.5    | 53.8    |
| 5 x A*- A         | 16.8    | 18.0    | 18.0    |

### New interim Key Stage 4 performance measures for 2019

The interim Key Stage 4 performance measures introduced this year move away from threshold based measures, to those based on points achieved by the whole cohort. This is



intended to provide a more inclusive approach, as schools will be evaluated according to the difference they make to the progress of every pupil. The measures recognise the achievement of higher grades, as well as the efforts of pupils who do not achieve the C grade, and shift the focus from pupils attaining a minimum threshold level, to raising our aspirations more broadly.

Each measure takes a pupil's grade and converts it into a points score. The mean value for the entire cohort is then used as the measure. The Capped 9 score is calculated using the best 9 results for each pupil, with subject specific requirements in Literacy, Numeracy and Science. The measures have been designed to avoid narrowing learner choice, thereby better supporting individual learner needs and achievement.

From autumn 2019 the Welsh Government is reporting on five headline measures:

- The Capped 9 points score
- The Literacy measure
- The Numeracy measure
- The Science measure
- The Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate

In 2019 girls outperformed boys in all of these indicators. The average Capped 9 points score (interim measure version) is 354.4. As noted above, due to significant changes in how the indicators are calculated, performance measures prior to 2016/17 are not directly comparable. In addition to this, a new Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC) was introduced in 2016/17, so comparisons for the SCC measure should only be made this far back. The Capped 9 measure has been changed since last year (the number of subject specific requirements has been reduced), so cannot be compared with previous years. Attainment in other headline measures is shown below.

| <b>Measure</b>       | <b>2016/17</b> | <b>2017/18</b> | <b>2018/19</b> |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Literacy Point Score | 39.1           | 39.4           | 39.0           |
| Numeracy Point Score | 37.9           | 38.3           | 37.2           |
| Science Point Score  | 39.0           | 36.8           | 36.8           |
| SCC Point Score      | 28.6           | 36.5           | 36.4           |

These are interim indicators, however, and it is important that we reflect on how they are being used to support the progress of all learners.

#### *Performance of pupils eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM)*

Across the five headline measures, learners who are not eligible for Free School Meals (non-eFSM) are still outperforming those pupils who are eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM):

| <b>Measure</b>       | <b>eFSM</b> | <b>Non-eFSM</b> | <b>Gap</b> |
|----------------------|-------------|-----------------|------------|
| The Capped 9 measure | 298.9       | 376.2           | 77.3       |
| Literacy Point Score | 32.5        | 41.4            | 8.9        |
| Numeracy Point Score | 29.5        | 39.7            | 10.2       |
| Science Point Score  | 28.3        | 39.8            | 11.5       |
| SCC Point Score      | 29.5        | 39.1            | 9.6        |
| Level 2 inclusive    | 28.4%       | 60.5%           | 32.1       |
| 5 A*-A               | 5.0%        | 21.2%           | 16.2       |

Where legacy Key Stage 4 performance measures have been in existence over a longer period of time, and notwithstanding periodic changes to the calculation of measures, the gap between eFSM and non-eFSM pupils has been relatively consistent. The main exception is the Level 1 threshold (percentage of pupils achieving 5 x GCSEs (or equivalent) at grade A\*-

G), for which the gap has roughly halved from around 18 points in 2006/07 to around 9 points in recent years.

## **Progress to tackle the attainment gap**

### ***eFSM Learners***

It is totally unacceptable for children's success to be determined by their social or economic circumstances. Underpinning all of our work is a belief that someone's ability to benefit from education should not be determined by where they live, their background, or the income of their parents.

Over 18% of children in Wales are classed as eligible for free school meals and it is imperative that their schools' funding matches our commitment to ensure they achieve the best educational outcomes. Since its introduction in 2012, we have made available more than £475 million through the Pupil Development Grant (PDG), which has supported the equivalent of over 530,000 children and young people to reach their potential. Year on year, we have extended the PDG. It now supports even more of our most vulnerable learners. As well as the free school meals element, the PDG suite now includes looked after children, those in the early years, those in pupil referral units and education other than at school provision.

Following the inception of the PDG in 2012 a three year evaluation (2013/14-2015/16) was undertaken to establish the grant's effectiveness. More recently evaluations of the Looked After Children (LAC) and Early Years (EY) elements have also been undertaken. The aim of all three evaluations was to provide assurance that initial implementation proceeded as planned. The IPSOS Mori PDG evaluation found that many schools consider the funding to be 'invaluable', with good progress being made on identifying and addressing the needs of disadvantaged learners.

The majority of schools now have systems in place to track and monitor the progress of their eFSM and LAC learners. All of which will enable more robust analysis in the future. Consideration will be given as to how we can work with schools to fully utilise the data being collated and strengthen monitoring for future evaluation. This will be factored in to the development of new PDG guidance.

Together with the longer term independent evaluations the Welsh Government has mechanisms in place for regular in-year monitoring. This includes:

- our Raising Attainment Advocate; and
- half termly meetings between officials and the consortia PDG strategic advisers, which focus on implementation, impact monitoring and peer mentoring.

In his capacity as Raising Attainment Advocate, Sir Alasdair Macdonald routinely visits schools across Wales. Sir Alasdair's wealth of knowledge and experience, which includes his time as a Schools Challenge Cymru champion, allows for continuous evaluation and identification of best practice. This provides real-time assessment for schools and PDG Advisers at an operational level, in contrast to the time lag involved with formal evaluation and data collection. I meet with Sir Alasdair twice a year to discuss his findings and how they can be used to improve practice across Wales.

The appointment of PDG strategic advisers has enhanced the role of the regional consortia in driving progress in this area. The advisers are supported and guided by Sir Alasdair. Their focus on the needs of disadvantaged learners will strengthen the support provided to schools. Our aim is to ensure the advisers have access to the necessary tools, including best practice,

research, and data to raise the attainment of our most vulnerable learners. Importantly, they are required to strengthen collaboration across Wales to ensure that good practice is shared and built upon. An example of this is the series of professional learning seminars for the EEF toolkit that PDG advisers are facilitating across Wales to promote awareness and best practice.

We will also continue the dialogue with experts in the field to determine the feasibility of assessing value for money of PDG funding. Similar programmes such as the Pupil Premium have not been able to undertake this, so we will consider what suitable methods may be available for this assessment.

### ***Ethnic minority and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners***

It is a misconception that ethnic minority learners perform less well than learners from a white British background. Attainment statistics from the Pupil Level Annual Schools Census show that the majority of learners from an ethnic minority background outperform their white British peers at all key stages of their education. As a result our focus is not on measuring the attainment gap.

In relation to attainment data for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners we must be cautious as numbers are very small and data about this group fluctuates considerably, so it is not possible to draw any robust conclusions. Nonetheless, the attainment data for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners is amongst the lowest of all groups.

We continue to provide funding to local authorities to provide services to support ethnic minority and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners. £10 million Minority Ethnic and Gypsy Roma Traveller (MEGRT) is being provided this financial year, and £10m has been allocated in the draft budget for next year.

It is for local authorities to decide on how to use the funding to best support the ethnic minority and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners in their local authority area within the terms and conditions of the grant. Local authorities are required to provide support plans setting out how they intend to use the grant to support these learner groups and to identify specific outcomes to improve their attainment, which are approved by the team in Welsh Government before funding is released. However, the following areas give an illustration of how this funding is being used to provide support:

- the development and embedding of expertise and good practice in Welsh schools – both through local authority services and in individual schools;
- language acquisition;
- access to education for both learners and their families; and
- developing an understanding of culture and identity.

While this funding is being made available, addressing the underachievement of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners is not simply a matter of money. One of the key areas we recognise that needs to improve is for schools to be better able to recognise and understand the culture of these communities, to build trustful relationships and to offer a flexible approach. This can lead to families feeling more confident about sending their children to school.

To support schools with this, we are currently in the process of finalising new guidance, which contains examples of best practice and successful strategies from around Wales on how to improve the engagement and attendance of GRT learners.

## ***Looked after children and adopted children***

Every child in Wales – including those who are looked after and formerly looked after – has the right to expect an excellent education regardless of their circumstances. Many looked after children and formerly looked after children will have experienced trauma and stress before entering care. Many will have suffered abuse and neglect, and all will have been through family upheaval. These circumstances will impact on every aspect of the child's life, including education.

We recognise that good educational attainment can provide the gateway to future stability, security and an independent, fulfilling life. This is why we have supported looked after children and formerly looked after children in education by some £5 million annually through PDG-LAC.

The regional consortia administer this grant in collaboration with local authorities and schools. The funding includes provision for four 'Regional Lead Co-ordinators for Looked after Children': one for each of the consortia. This approach enables consortia, in partnership with schools and local authorities, to determine the most effective, strategic interventions to support care-experienced young people, regardless of care or school placement changes.

We have recently put in place new, strengthened arrangements for PDG-LAC. This was in response to a number of factors – including, the disappointing 2017 GCSE results for looked after children, emergent findings from the now published independent evaluation of the PDG-LAC and the recommendations in the Children Young People and Education Committee's report *On the money?*. (In 2017, only 12% of looked after children achieved the Level 2 inclusive threshold, compared to 23% in 2016 and 20% in 2018.) The new arrangements are intended to enable greater national consistency to deliver the best educational outcomes for these children.

Our three year joint education and social services plan *Raising the ambitions and educational attainment of children who are looked after in Wales*, published in January 2016, has come to an end. We worked closely with partners to deliver the actions in the plan, of which the learning and practices have now been implemented across education and social services. This has included putting in place lead co-ordinators for looked after children in each regional consortia.

We remain committed to improving outcomes for looked after children in education and plan to build on the progress made, by exploring models for an integrated education and social services approach. Welsh Government officials in education and social services have jointly engaged with a range of stakeholders, including representatives from education, social services and care experienced young people, to consider and develop education priorities moving forwards. Subject to agreement of the draft budget, we are allocating £900k in 2020-21 to take forward further exploratory work on an integrated approach to supporting looked after children in education. As part of this we have commissioned a scoping exercise to further explore integrated models, Virtual Schools and whole system approaches, as a basis for a Welsh approach.

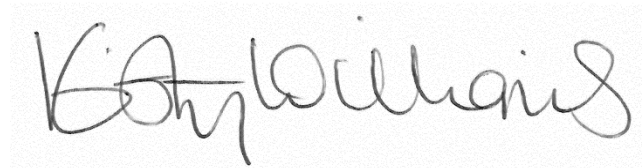
## **Funding for school improvement and raising standards**

Finally, you asked about funding for school improvement. As I set out in my evidence to the Committee as part of budget scrutiny, the 2020-21 budget is based around a commitment to the success and well-being of every learner, regardless of background or personal circumstance and is underpinned by our commitment to children's rights. It includes significant grant funding for school improvement and raising standards, in order to support delivery of

the new curriculum and its four enabling objectives. And it supports the Welsh Government commitment to invest £100million to raise school standards, over this Assembly term, with more than half of this investment being prioritised towards improving teaching and learning, recognising our teachers are our single greatest agents of change and improvement in the classroom.

Alongside this investment, we are implementing a clear, three-year strategic plan, to deliver the robust evaluation, improvement and accountability arrangements described above. It is through the right plan and resources that we will ensure our national mission is a success, raising standards for all children and young people.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams', is centered on a light grey rectangular background.

**Kirsty Williams AM**  
Minister for Education