

This response was submitted to the [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) on the [Routes into post-16 education and training](#)

RET 18

Ymateb gan: Comisiynydd Plant Cymru

Response from: Children's Commissioner for Wales

Part 1: Quality of information given to learners about the full range of post-16 options (vocational and academic routes post 16, i.e. further education, sixth form, apprenticeships and training, and onward to higher education)

We are aware that Careers Wales provides learners with guidance and welcome the launch of [Careers City](#) for pupils in Years 5 and 6. I would encourage the Children, Young People and Education Committee to directly speak to young people about the information that they receive and whether they feel that this has opened up further educational options for them.

Part 2: How effective careers support is at compulsory school age

To what extent careers support at pre-16 is resulting in positive or negative outcomes post-16 e.g. young people finding themselves not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Whether work experience opportunities for learners of compulsory school are operational, effective and meaningful and any barriers in that regard.

From my conversations with Careers Wales, I understand that they had previously run a national work experience programme. However, this is no longer in existence due to funding cuts.

It is now up to schools on how they engage learners in work experience, consequently leading to inconsistencies in practice and variable experiences for pupils. Some schools are unable to offer opportunities at all due to the time it takes to arrange placements and subsequent paperwork and health and safety checks, whilst others rely on parents finding placements which enforce a degree of individual privilege.

Careers Wales shared that learners in year 10 broadly fall into stereotypical gender placements, split by male pupils' interest in engineering and females in health/medical fields.

I would welcome the re-introduction of the national work experience programme to ensure equity of opportunity. As noted by Careers Wales, for young people who face challenging barriers in their lives, the offer of work experience has had real, positive impacts.

Similarly, the Hefen David report on Transitions to Employment references a reinstatement of work experience opportunities.

Article 29 of the UNCRC is about children having an education that develops their personality, talents, and abilities to the full; to be the best that they can be is how we summarise it. A coordinated and equitable work experience offer would ensure that this is the case for all children regardless of their background, as well as opening up jobs and career paths for those who would never have known or considered a particular field without the chance to find out more about the roles through active, participatory learning.

Part 3: Changes in routes post-18

Is there evidence that learners are changing their choices post-18, including a drop in Higher Education enrolments, and if so why?

[UCAS data](#) showed 33.8% of 18-year-olds in Wales had applied for university by the end of June. The UK-wide figure was 41.9%.

As the [Director of Universities Wales states](#), ‘we now have the lowest proportion of 18-year-olds applying for university in the UK, with the gap between Wales and the UK wider than at any point in modern history.’

This concern has been recognised by the Cabinet Secretary for Education in her [statement](#) in September, referencing work with Medr on how to improve post 16 education strategy and I would welcome this work to take into account further research on understanding what barriers young people are facing and how the Welsh Government can increase participation. This should include direct engagement with young people themselves to understand the barriers from their experience/perspectives.

Part 4: Welsh-medium provision

The availability of post-16 options (both academic and vocational) through the medium of Welsh, and how this impacts on young people’s choices.

The Welsh Government's [Cymraeg 2050 Strategy](#) states that 'young people will need to be aware of the benefits of continuing to develop their Welsh language skills for the workplace and the importance of using the language regularly in order to maintain fluency and confidence'. Increasing the numbers studying post-16 qualifications through the medium of Welsh will be vital to ensure effective progression from statutory education to further education and the world of work

As I outline in further detail in part 5 of this response, learner travel is a consistent concern for pupils wanting to engage in academic and vocational education through the medium of Welsh. The Welsh Government's own data shows that [41% of 16 to 24 years olds identified transport as being the number one barrier to getting a new course, training or a job.](#)

The Welsh Language Commissioner has outlined [specific concerns on education through the medium of Welsh](#), including how '*the post-16 and higher education sector has a crucial role in bridging the use of the language from education into employment*'.

Similarly in the Welsh Language Commissioners [Post-compulsory education and the Welsh language: the learners' voice](#), barriers identified include:

- *The lack of Welsh-medium provision, particularly in more vocational areas, is a difficulty that the post-16 sector needs to address. This will include ensuring that there are enough staff with Welsh language skills to teach the whole range of subjects in this educational stage. It is important to recognise that the Cymraeg 2050 strategy and the Further Education and Apprenticeship Welsh-medium Action Plan4 aim to address these issues.'*

In many parts of Wales, the strongest provision for Welsh-medium and bilingual education is found in schools. Crucially, the Welsh Government must consider the role these schools will play in shaping the post-compulsory education landscape. This will require planning and collaboration at a regional level between schools and further education colleges to ensure sufficient provision is available and actively promoted.

With no statutory entitlement to post 16 transport, this further discourages young people's ability to pursue educational options in a language of their choice.

Additionally, it is important to reflect on the messages communicated to learners regarding the value of Welsh language skills and how they can fully benefit from available opportunities. Efforts should focus on ensuring that bilingual and Welsh-medium provision effectively enhance the linguistic abilities of all learners. This would also aid promotion of skills needed for future workforce cohorts.

Part 5: Equity of access

Are some groups of learners disadvantaged by the current system (e.g. pupils from low-income households, learners with travel needs)?

With over a third of children in Wales living in poverty, I have been vocal in my ask for more robust, measurable outcomes following the publication of the child poverty strategy and monitoring framework, including several national indicators.

The Welsh Government's Poverty Proofing pilot is a good example of how clusters of schools can work together to train staff on identifying barriers, reduce stigma and promote social inclusion.

Last year I was pleased to see the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) increase with immediate effect, and in doing so, increasing learner well-being by alleviating financial costs for travel, food and equipment.

However, the income above which a student is ineligible for allowance has not risen in line with inflation. As the [Bevan Foundation noted](#), *'the review found unanimous support across the board that the current income threshold is too low. Many people interviewed were highly critical of the fact that the threshold had not been revised upwards to keep pace with rising incomes and inflation.'*

Attendance is another notable issue regarding EMA. Currently if a learner misses a single session, including if this is a cancellation made by the school or college, or if they arrive late and are not registered as present, even through factors outside their control like delayed transport, that learner will lose their week's allowance, which in turn further discourages engagement in further education.

I would welcome review of how EMA is administered to ensure that students are not being significantly disadvantaged, and put off from pursuing further education, by factors outside of their control.

What support is available for learners to improve access (financial or otherwise)?

The Interim Youth Work Board's report, recommendations and subsequent consultation this year will help to strengthen the appeal of engagement in youth work.

Participation in youth work provides an opportunity for young people who are identified as being NEET to actively engage in their community and to be provided with opportunities to build on confidence and skills.

There is a lot of evidence about the role of youth work in providing both practical support, such as sharing information, and emotional support, including youth workers as trusted adults, and the impact this can have on a young person's life.

Therefore, the efforts to increase the sustainability of youth work via the Interim Youth Work board is relevant when discussing post-16 education or training, and I welcome the consultation on strengthening the legislative basis of youth work. However, there must be adequate resourcing.

Is there any regional variation in the information and support provided about post-16 across Wales? Are there any particular challenges facing learners in rural areas?

Are there any other equality issues?

Learner Travel

I have made public my disappointment on the recent Welsh Government review of the Learner Travel Measure as it failed to address long-standing issues with school transport that my office and others have been raising for years, including concerns about the rules governing the minimum distances children must travel to qualify for free transport.

For access to post-16 education, the issue of learner travel is particularly critical. It is frustrating that the review neglected this area, as it can significantly impact a learner's options and choices. Over the years, I've received substantial casework on this topic and have repeatedly called for a full legislative review, alongside the Welsh Language Commissioner.

The Future Generations Commissioner and I have advocated for free public transport for all children, regardless of mileage thresholds, recognising the benefits for the environment and wellbeing as well as access to learning opportunities. Instead, attention has been redirected to the forthcoming Bus Bill.

At a recent meeting with Wales Principal Youth Officers' Group, I heard evidence of young people commenting on travel being a significant barrier to accessing youth work provision.

Public transport more broadly is also a pressing concern. The Welsh Government issued a disappointing response to a Senedd Petitions Committee report calling for steps toward universal free public transport for children. This report was shaped by young people's views, including those from a Youth Parliament report, yet the Government's response to the report was very disappointing.

From my conversations with the Welsh Government I understand that dates for a transport summit are being finalised with the relevant Cabinet Secretaries and that a consultation is expected in the next few months. I would sincerely hope that children's views on transport are included and taken seriously.

The inability to address school transport entitlements is not just a failure in transportation policy - it negatively affects attendance, child poverty, and the broader well-being of young people in Wales. In addition, it risks restricting the options which are realistically available for young people when considering post 16 learning.

Additional Learning Needs (ALN)

Support for ALN learners from [Careers Wales](#) and [ALN Pathfinder](#) are both helpful tools for young people, parents and professionals navigating their way from compulsory education into post 16.

As part of my office's attendance on the ALN Reform National Steering Group, Colegau Cymru noted there has been improved ALN expertise across the 13 colleges, better understanding of FEIs duties, improved partnership working between LAs and FEIs, strengthened by the creation of post 16 officers. There is a strong FEI network which provides opportunities to share practice and improve consistency, and improvement in the transition from school to FEI.

However, there are key challenges in this area that must be addressed. These include:

- Funding and workforce capacity is a major issue – the cost of ALN within the FEI sector is predicted to reach between £2M and £6M in 2025/26.
- Information sharing – the quality and timeliness of learner information passed to colleges causes delays in setting up support.
- IDP Platform – we have identified discrepancies between the specification provided to developers and the requirements of the ALN Code.
- LAs have significant concerns over cost implications of managing applications to specialist colleges.

Transport, and particularly transport for ALN learners, continues to be of significant concern to my office's casework. Some examples of barriers faced include:

- A parent got in touch with my office during November to say that the young person concerned had still not received their local authority Independent Development Plan (IDP) despite having started college in September.
- A local authority had not given an outcome in relation to a transport request for a post 16 college course, nor had the authority issued the Independent Development Plan (IDP) in readiness for college. The young person had autism, ADHD, learning difficulties and developmental delay and was due to start college. The parent understood there is no mandatory responsibility to provide transport for post 16 but their educational statement clearly stated that the young person would put themselves in danger and could not follow routes as they struggled with change in routines. As an extremely vulnerable young person, with a reading age of 7yrs 9 months, they already could not travel independently to school, and so current arrangements would need to continue at college.

Diversity in Teaching

As part of my office's report ['Take it Seriously': Children's experiences of Racism within Secondary Schools](#), the issue of diversity in the workforce came through strongly. As part of my recent attendance at committee for the scrutiny of my annual report by the Children, Young People and Education committee, I encouraged the committee to analyse the success of the bursaries for individuals with disabilities and/or from Black and Majority Ethnic backgrounds to teach.

Housing

Housing and environmental concerns rank highly amongst children and young people. In my Wales-wide Survey, [Ambitions for Wales](#), which received over 10,000 responses from children, young people and adults, we asked children and adults about their concerns.

For ages 12-18, 51.3% of children worried about their family having enough money whilst 24.9% worried about having somewhere to live.

Unsuitable housing can have a detrimental effect on a young person's ability to thrive in both compulsory and post-16 education. Examples of this include:

- Uncertainty of eviction or move on from temporary accommodation effecting mental health and attendance
- Space to study to fully thrive and achieve academic performance
- Poor housing conditions leading to poor health, such as mold and respiratory issues

Below is an example from our casework on how housing uncertainty can disrupt a young person's post 16 educational attainment.

An advocate for a care-experienced young person contacted my office to share this case:

- The young person was moved from Cardiff to Neath by social services as a looked after child. They were placed into a 3-bed house and told by the social work assistant that they could stay until they finished college. The social work assistant then left. The young person was then told they had until the 27th of September 2024 to vacate the premises, when they were told last year that they could stay until they finished college in June 2025.

The young person was told to either:

- Move 38 miles to a non-neighboring local authority.
- Find private accommodation. The young person has no money for rent or deposit and as a non-working student, landlords will not rent to them.
- Stay in their current local authority, where their course and support network is, but report to housing options as homeless where there is no guarantee of where they will be placed.

Last year I responded to the consultation on the White Paper on Ending Homelessness in Wales and I include below some points of relevance:

- I would support the prioritisation of accommodation for children, young people and care experienced.
- As key safeguarding partners, school staff are in a unique position of consistent interaction with pupils where they can identify issues concerning homelessness. A possible referral pathway or template would be welcome to streamline this.

- Article 21 of UNCRC states a child has the right to live in the best place if they can't live with their parents. This would be inclusive of the educational and medical facilities should a child be housed elsewhere from their parents.
- Care experienced young people are significantly overrepresented within homelessness. Public Health Wales estimates around one quarter of young homeless people are care-experienced and many do not feel well-equipped to live independently as they feel they face a 'care cliff'.

My office is aware of the current Welsh Government work on children's experiences of homelessness and that the Welsh Government Housing Research team are currently appointing an external researcher.

As part of a housing project my team are currently undertaking, colleagues have been in regular contact with the team and have shared a literature review commissioned by my office.

I would welcome a clearer focus on young people's voices on housing issues, particularly from those who are care experienced. It is crucial to understand how housing issues affect young people's engagement, enthusiasm and attainment within post 16 learning.

Part 6: Post-16 destination data

Is there sufficient post-16 destination data collected to understand trends and inform what education institutions deliver? If not, what data is required to fully understand the post-16 landscape?

Part 7: Welsh Government's role

How effective is the Welsh Government's approach to support participation in the full range of post-16 education and training options?

The role of Medr is a positive step forward for tertiary education in Wales, inclusive of taking a more holistic approach to consider learner's financial situations, travel barriers, additional learning needs and mental health.

I would also encourage greater parity between academic and vocational provision.

Are learners, their families and schools aware of available Wales-wide support and programmes, such as the Young Person's Guarantee?

It would be difficult to understand the level of awareness of such support and programmes. I would therefore welcome work to hear from learners and families on this point, as well as a drive to make greater use of new technologies to aid promotion.