

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

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Ymateb gan: Estyn

Response from: Estyn

Background information about Estyn

Estyn is the Office of His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. As a Crown body, we are independent of the Welsh Government.

Our principal aim is to raise the standards and quality education and training in Wales. This is primarily set out in the Learning and Skills Act 2000¹ and the Education Act 2005. In exercising its functions, we must give regard to the:

- Quality of education and training in Wales;
- Extent to which education and training meets the needs of learners;
- Educational standards achieved by those receiving education and training in Wales;
- Quality of leadership and management of those education and training providers, including whether the financial resources made available to those providing education and training are managed efficiently and used in a way which provides value for money;
- Spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of learners; and,
- Contribution made to the well-being of learners.

Our remit includes (but is not exclusive to) nurseries and non-maintained settings, primary, secondary, special and all age schools, independent schools, pupil referrals units, further education, adult community learning, local government education services, work-based learning, and initial teacher training.

We may give advice to the Welsh Parliament on any matter connected to education and training in Wales. To achieve excellence for learners, we have set three strategic objectives:

- Provide accountability to service users on the quality and standards of education and training in Wales;
- Inform the development of national policy by the Welsh Government;
- Build capacity for improvement of the education and training system in Wales.

¹ This act to be replaced by the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 when the quality provisions are commenced.

This response is not confidential.

Purpose of the consultation

The [Children, Young People and Education Committee](#) is conducting an inquiry into Routes into post-16 education and training.

The Committee would welcome written evidence on all or as many of the points below from professionals, individuals and organisations.

Terms of Reference

The inquiry will focus on:

- 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)
 - Quality and nature of information provided to learners within schools and those educated other than at school (EOTAS).
 - Quality and nature of information provided directly to learners by Careers Wales.
 - The extent to which further education colleges are able to engage directly with learners in schools.
 - The extent to which learners in schools are made aware of the options available to them in school sixth forms and local further education colleges, and how closely schools engage with local colleges. Are there any conflicts of interest between sixth forms and further education colleges and is this more prevalent in some areas of Wales more than others?
 - The extent to which employers are able to engage directly with learners in schools, for example at careers events.
 - Who else influences learners future career choices (e.g. parents, teachers, peers), and how well are those people supported to do this.
- 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.
- 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?
- 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.

- Equity of access
 - Are some groups of learners disadvantaged by the current system (e.g. pupils from low-income households, learners with travel needs)?
 - What support is available for learners to improve access (financial or otherwise)?
 - 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?
- 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?
- 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?
 - Are learners, their families and schools aware of available Wales-wide support and programmes, such as the Young Person's Guarantee?
 - Outcomes from Dr Hefin David MS's 'Transitions to Employment' report.

Response from Estyn

Summary

Our response highlights inconsistencies and challenges in the quality and accessibility of information, advice, and guidance available to learners about post-16 options in Wales. We have previously reported the lack of a cohesive national strategy for 16-19 education and training in Wales, and this makes for challenging context in which to provide learners with impartial information, advice and guidance.

Although the majority secondary schools (including all-age schools) provide strong support and guidance, impartiality is often compromised, particularly in schools with sixth forms, where alternative pathways like further education colleges and apprenticeships are underpromoted. A sense of competition has a negative impact on collaborative efforts between schools and colleges to support learners with post-16 options.

Learners' understanding of available post-16 options varies greatly, with too many learners lacking awareness of vocational and work-based learning opportunities. Impartial careers guidance by Careers Wales has been effective in many cases, but gaps remain in addressing learners' needs, especially those with additional learning needs (ALN) or Welsh language preferences. Limited Welsh-medium vocational options and challenges in recruiting skilled Welsh-speaking staff exacerbate inequalities.

Transport and financial barriers further hinder equitable access to post-16 education, disproportionately affecting learners from low-income households and those with ALN. There are issues with the quality and usefulness of post-16 destination data, limiting effective evaluation of outcomes.

Estyn has previously given recommendations that cover improving impartial guidance, fostering collaboration between schools and colleges, addressing transport and financial challenges, and enhancing data collection to better monitor and support learner outcomes.

We will now respond to the inquiry's focus areas.

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)

The majority of secondary schools provide strong support and guidance for future learning and careers, with a few beneficially reintroducing work experience placements for learners in Years 10 and 12. However, only a minority of secondary schools take full advantage of opportunities to work with local colleges to enhance their curricular offer. In addition, secondary schools do not always provide pupils with impartial guidance regarding their future choices. For example, pupils in Year 10 and 11 at secondary schools with sixth forms, and their parents, are not always informed of open evenings at local colleges. These findings are based on a summary of the 31 secondary schools Estyn inspected during 2023/2024.

In the autumn and spring terms of 2021-2022, inspectors undertook online visits to a sample of providers across eight local authority areas in Wales to evaluate the current 16-19 curriculum arrangements in Wales. These included secondary and all age schools with sixth forms, further education colleges, work-based learning providers and local authorities. These meetings took place online rather than in person due to the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspectors spoke to learners, teachers, leaders, and other key stakeholders as well as looking at a wide range of documents relating to existing curriculum arrangements for 16-19 learners in Wales. This formed the basis for Estyn's thematic report, '16-19 Curriculum: A review of the current 16-19 curriculum in Wales' (published October 2022). The main findings of the report noted the following.

Estyn found that learners' awareness and understanding of the choices available to them varied considerably depending on the quality of information and advice provided to them. Too many learners lacked awareness of work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships.

Estyn found substantial differences in the options available to learners within their local area after they completed Year 11. The available options were strongly influenced by a learner's preferred language choice and educational attainment.

Overall, current arrangements for curriculum planning and delivery are not working well enough. There is no clear national strategy for 16-19 learning and too much inconsistency between, and within, areas and providers.

Despite the lack of coherent direction from the Welsh Government for learners aged 16-19, providers and local authorities in a few local areas work well strategically to overcome some of the barriers and provide a broad and relevant curriculum offer that meets the needs of learners at all levels and responds to employers' skills needs.

What learners choose to learn at age 16, and with what provider, is influenced by the quality and impartiality of information, advice and guidance they receive about the options in their local area and the pathways these provide for future education, training or employment. Many learners also told us that they also took information from friends and family members into account when deciding on where and what to study after completing their Year 11 studies.

In addition, the main findings of the Estyn thematic 'Post-16 partnerships Shared planning and provision between schools, and between schools and colleges' (published in January 2021) noted the following.

A majority of senior leaders in schools with sixth forms report that the relationship with their local colleges is generally not as strong as with other schools. Senior leaders within colleges also acknowledge that this is an issue between colleges and a minority of schools across Wales. They report a sense of competition and lack of transparency and trust between the two sectors. In a few cases, similar tensions exist between schools.

Many schools provide learners with suitable information about the options available to them once they complete Year 11. In a few schools, learners benefit from a comprehensive range of activities to help them learn about, and decide between, their post-16 options at all local providers. This includes opportunities to meet representatives from other local post-16 providers, including work-based learning providers as well as schools and colleges.

Many learners value the advice and guidance they receive whilst at school. A minority feel that advice from schools does not address alternative pathways to A level study sufficiently, and that staff members often focus on encouraging learners to progress to the school's own sixth form. Learners feel that post-16 providers, including schools and colleges, do not share enough information about the quality of their provision and the outcomes achieved by their learners.

Many school sixth forms and colleges see the number of learner enrolments as a high priority. Leaders of small sixth forms often feel under financial pressure to ensure that Year 11 learners progress to their sixth form. In a minority of cases, this leads senior and middle leaders to limit the promotion of alternatives. In a few cases, school leaders do not invite other providers to discuss their post-16 provision with Year 11 learners in a comprehensive way.

Most schools that do not have their own sixth form, provide learners with impartial information about the full range of progression options available to them. Learners benefit from regular interaction with local post-16 providers, both schools and colleges, to learn about the courses on offer and to discuss their aspirations. In a minority of cases, these schools ensure that learners also interact with providers of work-based learning provision. Many have effective transition arrangements that are supported by helpful dialogue between school staff members who know individual learners well and representatives of the post-16 providers.

In autumn 2021, Estyn HMI (His Majesty's Inspectors) visited a sample of secondary schools, special schools, pupil referral units (PRU) and education other than at school (EOTAS) across Wales to observe one-to-one guidance sessions between Careers Wales advisers and young people. HMI spoke to young people receiving guidance, teachers, careers advisers and Careers Wales leaders and managers. They also looked at a wide range of documents related to careers information advice and guidance provided by Careers Wales. The main findings of the Estyn thematic report, 'Impartial careers support and guidance to young people aged 14-16 by Careers Wales advisers' (published in May 2022), were as follows.

Most of the young people eligible for a guidance session at the schools and settings made good progress from their differing starting points when creating their plans for the future. Where young people began their guidance session with unrealistic plans and ideas, this usually stemmed from a lack of support from their school or setting. Following guidance, these young people made very good progress towards understanding the post-16 routes

available to them. Most careers advisers were well-prepared for their guidance sessions, particularly where they had well established relationships with providers, and they shared key information. Advisers were effective and provided clear and appropriate advice for next steps for young people to carry out. Specialist additional learning needs (ALN) advisers supported young people with ALN in their transition planning and had a comprehensive understanding of education, employment and training opportunities.

In a few cases, advisers were unaware that the learners spoke Welsh and, therefore, did not encourage them to consider the potential impact of this on their plans.

In September 2023, Estyn's thematic report of the new ALN system recommended that local authorities develop and publish their strategy for post-16 learners with ALN. The interim findings of a current thematic review of independent living skills provision in FE colleges is evidencing that colleges across Wales vary significantly in the complexity of learning needs that they can meet. This highlights the importance of local authorities providing clear and accessible information on further education and training options for all learners with ALN including those whose additional learning provision (ALP) is not their local FE college.

How effective careers support is at compulsory school age

Based on annual destination surveys conducted, Careers Wales data shows that at age 16, a very high proportion of learners in Wales continue in education (86.7%, 2023), with a very few learners starting work-based learning or going directly into employment (5.8%, 2023). Only 2% of learners are known not to be in education, employment or training (NEET) in the first few months after finishing Year 11 at school (2023). This is a similar figure to the proportion who were NEET pre-pandemic (1.8%, 2019). However, the figure for the proportion of learners who are NEET at 16 years old does not tell a full story. For example, in 2023, there was no response to the survey for 1.2% of learners, and as these learners were not in a local school, college or training provider, there's a risk that they are also NEET. Furthermore, we know that a considerable number of learners do not sustain their initial destination. It may be that the initial advice and guidance these learners received was not as helpful as it could have been. Some of these learners transfer to a new course or provider mid-year but not all do. This means that, as the year progresses, an increasing proportion of learners are NEET. Welsh Government estimated that the NEET rate for people aged 16 to 18 in Wales was 5.4% in the year ending June 2024, and the NEET rate for people aged 19 to 24 in Wales was 14.1% for the same year.

Estyn's thematic report, 'Impartial careers support and guidance to young people aged 14-16 by Careers Wales advisers', published in May 2022, recommended that Careers Wales, 'Develops systems and appropriate criteria to evaluate the impact that services have on the effectiveness and resilience of young people's career planning and decision-making'.

In addition, Estyn's thematic report, '16-19 Curriculum A review of the current 16-19 curriculum in Wales' (published October 2022) identified the following:

There remains too much variation in the quality of careers and work-related education and impartial advice and guidance to support all learners in schools fully in making choices about their education and training options post-16. A minority of learners that responded to our survey and who studied at schools with their sixth forms do not feel that the advice and guidance they received about post-16 options was comprehensive enough or sufficiently impartial. A majority of learners also feel that they are not given enough information about work-based learning pathways, including apprenticeships. Although

online advice and guidance succeeded to an extent during the pandemic, learners did not have access the same range of work-related experiences, taster sessions or guest speakers to help them understand the full range of post-16 options.

Changes in routes post-18

During recent Estyn link inspector engagement visits to further education colleges, a minority of senior leaders reported that fewer learners are choosing to progress to higher education. In addition, of those who choose to progress to higher education programmes, an increased proportion of these learners choose providers closer to home. The main reason cited for these changes is the impact of the cost of living crisis.

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

Within the Estyn thematic report, '16-19 Curriculum A review of the current 16-19 curriculum in Wales' (published October 2022) the main findings highlighted the following:

Learners across Wales have access to a wide range of A level courses through the medium of Welsh, but opportunities to learn through the medium of Welsh on vocational courses and work-based learning are far more limited. Around six in ten Welsh speaking learners that responded to our survey feel that they are able to access course or assessment activities through the medium of Welsh always or most of the time.

The main findings of Estyn's thematic report 'Post-16 partnerships Shared planning and provision between schools, and between schools and colleges' (published in January 2021) identified the following:

The majority of designated Welsh-medium schools share post-16 provision through small partnerships that are led by the providers themselves. In many cases, neighbouring schools maintain strong working relationships. To overcome the long distances between them, a few providers share provision using video links between each other's lessons. Many subject teachers who deliver sixth form lessons through the medium of Welsh collaborate well to develop and share teaching and learning resources written in Welsh. However, colleges and Welsh-medium schools generally find it difficult to collaborate to help learners pursue elements of vocational courses through the medium of Welsh.

The main findings summarised in the Estyn thematic report, 'A Level Welsh First Language' (published June 2020) also identified the following:

Leaders in a minority of bilingual schools face increasing challenges in strengthening Welsh medium teaching in key stage 4 and 5. In order to overcome these challenges, there are successful examples of leaders adapting and tailoring their provision to empower and strengthen Welsh-medium linguistic progression. There are also quantitative targets in these schools' strategic plans to increase the number of learners that study their subjects through the medium of Welsh in key stage 4 and 5.

Most key stage 4 and key stage 5 learners' attitudes towards the Welsh language in Welsh-medium schools and naturally bilingual schools are positive, on the whole. However, the desire and confidence of a minority of learners in using the Welsh language socially, and in a range of situations outside their lessons at school, tends to fade during their secondary education. Most learners are aware of the valuable skills that are gained from being bilingual learners, in terms of employability and appeal to employers. However,

many learners in bilingual school choose to study their courses through the medium of English in key stage 5.

The methods for monitoring the targets that are set in Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) to improve Welsh-medium education in their area vary greatly across local authorities.

Our [Annual Report 2022-2023](#) noted that apprenticeship providers and subcontractors continued to develop a range of bilingual teaching and learning resources and made progress in recognising and increasing the capacity of their staff members to deliver bilingually. However, the number of learners who choose to complete written aspects of their work in Welsh remains low.

In addition to the issue of the availability of Welsh-medium options, our [report](#) on lead workers for young people at risk of becoming NEET (July 2024) found that 'Lead worker support for first language Welsh speakers was limited, a challenge intensified by difficulties in recruiting Welsh speakers.'

We have recently reviewed the work of Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol with colleges and apprenticeship providers to develop the Welsh language skills and bilingual pedagogy of practitioners in the further education and apprenticeships sector. We found some evidence of progress over the last 5 years in terms of the numbers of practitioners who speak Welsh and the number of learning activities that include '*a small amount of Welsh*' has increased significantly during the past five years. However, activities in categories such as *a large proportion of Welsh-medium, bilingual and Welsh-only learning* have not increased during the same period.

Equality of access

The way that data is collected and published for pre-16 and post-16 learners makes it difficult to analyse trends that could highlight issues relating to equality of access. For pre-16 providers, we are able to use the proportion of learners eligible for free school meals as a proxy for learners from low-income households in Welsh Government data sets for attainment. However, we don't have a comparable measure for post-16 learners. In our [review of the 16-19 curriculum](#) (October 2022), we gave this recommendation for Welsh Government and its partners:

'Improve the quality of data collected and shared to enable full analysis of learners' destinations at 16 and beyond and their outcomes, including by a learner's protected characteristics, additional learning needs, preferred language of learning and engagement in key initiatives such as the Seren programme.'

Recent Estyn link inspector engagement visits to further education colleges in autumn 2024 identified heightened concern among college leaders in relation to recent and proposed changes to student transport arrangements within several local authorities. Specific concerns included the potential impact of changes on groups of learners, such as a few local authorities amending the minimum distance requirement to access funded transport to college and revising restrictions on nearest provider eligibility. Leaders note that such changes may impact negatively on learners from low-income households and those seeking to access specialist provision in courses such as agriculture, where the nearest provider may be a considerable distance away from their home. A few colleges are also considering imposing or increasing charges for college arranged transport due to an increasingly challenging financial environment. Additionally, our engagement with specialist FE colleges has found that some learners with additional learning needs or

disabilities have been unable to take up placements at these colleges because of a lack of transport.

The ALN Code expects most learners with ALN, including those leaving special schools, to have their education and training needs met by their local FE college. Our insights report 'Additional Learning Needs in Further Education Colleges' (October 2024) found that:

Around half of colleges reported that recruiting suitably skilled staff to support learners with ALN was a challenge. In some instances, it was difficult to find Welsh-speaking staff. In others, recruitment was hard as roles were grant funded and so not permanent. Smaller colleges reported that it was particularly challenging to ensure that they had the right range of specialist staff, especially where there is uncertainty about whether a learner will join the college and require certain support. Larger colleges reported staffing created challenges in ensuring an equity of offer for learners with ALN over large geographical areas.

Our report on Equity of curriculum experiences for pupils who are educated other than at school (EOTAS) (June 2023) found that pupils in PRUs are usually supported well with their post-16 transition:

Older secondary-aged pupils feel well supported to help them think about their next steps in preparation for leaving PRUs. Frequent visits with PRU staff to colleges and local employers help them think about what options are available to them when they leave. Nearly all pupils in this age range mention the strong support from Careers Wales advisers, who spend time with pupils in PRUs on a regular basis.

Post-16 destination data

The timeliness, robustness and usefulness of post-16 destination data collected by providers and reported by Welsh Government as part of the post-16 consistent measure data is a cause for concern. For example, the number of young people aged 16 to 18 not in education, employment or training is likely to be underreported due to factors such as those who initially enrolled in school or college at the start of the academic year but withdrew during the first few months of their programme and whose revised destination is not recorded or reported in official data.

Our [Youth Engagement and Progression Lead Work Review](#) (July 2024) recommended that Welsh Government works with partners to 'develop ways to measure the success of work to prevent young people becoming NEET that are based on longer-term evaluations and do not over-emphasise the value of initial destination survey data.'

The review noted that 'leaders ... tended to overly prioritise young people known to be NEET in the Careers Wales destination survey, placing insufficient emphasis on individuals in tier 1, unknown. Referring to the data outlined in the background section of this report, NEET figures for 16 to 18-year-olds in 2022, as per SFR data, amounted to 14,400; APS data reported a figure of 9,300, while the Careers Wales school leaver destination survey indicated there were 1,066 NEET young people. The Careers Wales' destination data can present an overly positive view of success as drop-outs from post-16 provision are not consistently captured. While there has been a shift towards a more holistic approach, there remains a potential risk in this regard as local authorities make use of the Careers Wales destination data more than other sources as it is the only data source that allows for comparisons with other local authority areas.'

The destination data that Careers Wales collects and presents for Year 12 and Year 13 learners only relates to learners who are in a school sixth form. This results in data that is of very limited use, especially at a local authority level as the proportion of schools with a sixth form in each local authority ranges from 0%-100%.

Post-16 destination data for learners with ALN who have attended independent living skills provision at FE colleges is inconsistent and under-developed. This makes it difficult for colleges to evaluate the quality of their provision against learner outcomes.

The role of Welsh Government and Medr

Leaders of post-16 providers recognise and value the Welsh Government's support to date for participation in post-16 education and training options which underpin financial support arrangements, such as the Financial Contingency Funds and the Education Maintenance Allowance. However, the short-term nature of some additional funds for financial and well-being support arrangements is seen as restricting the ability to plan effectively beyond the immediate short-term in relation to decisions regarding issues such as additional funding support and free or subsidised transport arrangements for learners.