



Ein cyf/Our ref: FM/PO/00438/25

David Rees MS
Chair
Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
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17 September 2025

Dear David,

I am writing in response to your letter dated the 29 July 2025 following the Scrutiny Committee held on the 11 July 2025.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss progress against my priorities, and I am pleased you found the session useful.

I note the areas of interest, and the Committee's requests for clarification on Priority areas which is provided in Annex A.

In Annex B my Cabinet Secretaries have provided a supplementary response reflecting those broader questions asked which were outside the scope of the session.

I look forward to our next session.

Yours sincerely,

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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.

Annex A – Additional details relating to each of the four priorities:

Your Four Priorities / Delivery:

You referred during the meeting to revising the wording of your four priorities and the motion tabled for the Plenary debate on 15 July appears to reinforce that. In light of this, could you please clarify what your four priorities actually are now and whether changes in wording reflect simply a desire to make them “as easy as possible for people to understand”, as you suggested, or if they represent a more substantial change in focus, for example a lessening of priority placed on educational standards?

The Committee would welcome information on the progress being made by the Cabinet Office Delivery Unit, including the number of people working in the Unit.

Does the Welsh Government intend to publish ‘public dashboards’ of performance data that is being used by Ministers to make their decisions?

The Welsh Government remains focussed on those things that have the biggest impact – delivering Better Health and Better Transport, More Homes and More Jobs. These priorities ensure we give extra attention to making change happen on the things that the people of Wales have told me matter the most. The priorities are about focussing our efforts in the time left to this government on actions we can really monitor and transform. It is about identifying tangible change and devoting additional effort to ensure it happens. We continue to deliver the Programme for Government, and our longer-term ambitions to raise educational standards, mitigate the impact of climate change, deliver on major infrastructure projects and grow our economy.

The formation of our Cabinet Office and Delivery Unit demonstrates our ‘whole government’ view to delivering against the priorities and the Programme for Government. The Delivery Unit is a small team that works within the wider Cabinet Office. The Office has nine FTE staff, including five focussed on Delivery.

Delivery of the priorities remains the responsibility of Ministerial departments and the teams within these.

The Delivery Unit plays a distinct role, representing the First Minister’s ongoing oversight, challenge and support rather than supplementing resource within departments and therefore operates with a limited number of staff by design.

Working directly with the Minister for Delivery, the Delivery Unit coordinates work across government to support Cabinet Secretaries to deliver in a joined up and integrated way.

There are currently no plans to produce additional Delivery Unit dashboards as the Official Statistics used by the team will already be published via existing channels and policy areas.

Boosting educational standards:

To what extent, does evidence suggest that educational standards have improved in schools and colleges over the past year, or in this Senedd term to date?

AS and A level results for 2024/25 were released on 14 August 2025 showing the education system is moving in the right direction with notable improvements on 2019 results. Similarly, our GCSE results released on 21 August 2025 show improvements across all key grade ranges compared to last year, with top grades up on last year, and notably higher than 2019.

Our third annual statistical release on attainment in reading and numeracy for Years 2 to 9 highlights meaningful improvements and English Reading attainment in Year 3 has reached its highest recorded level marking a sustained upward trend.

Medr has recently published information on apprenticeship outcomes for the period August 2023 to July 2024 clearly demonstrating the overall success rate of apprenticeships increased in the 2023/24 academic year to 74%

We will continue to work collaboratively and transparently across the education sector and Local Government via the Strategic Partnership Agreement to reinforce our ongoing commitment to literacy, numeracy, attendance, and learner wellbeing.

The Committee is interested to understand whether the return of operational school improvement functions to local authorities, and away from the regional education consortia, through the School Partnership Programme, indicates that regional working over the past decade or so has not had the desired effect.

The 'Review of roles and responsibilities of education partners in Wales and delivery of school improvement arrangements' published in 2024 identified the majority of Local Authorities were in favour of exploring a range of options for managing regional School Improvement support.

As part of that review, school leaders and Local Authorities have expressed their strong support for collaboration across schools, clusters, and local authorities – moving school improvements to a more local level.

While the historic Regional Consortia model offered support to our school improvements - the review recognised that more recent education reforms have resulted in new, and significant changes across the sector.

The School Improvement Partnership Programme demonstrates our ability to listen and evolve our approach to meet the needs of the sector.

There does however remain a clear expectation that our local authorities should not return to 22 different ways of working. We fully expect all parties to work collaboratively and in partnership to respond to the current needs and opportunities facing the education sector in Wales.

To what extent are challenges around pupil attendance and behaviour hindering efforts to improve standards and educational outcomes, and what is the Welsh Government doing to address these issues?

We recognise the strong link between school attendance and attainment and the importance of children being in school, engaging with their learning and the wider opportunities available to them.

However, like other parts of the UK and indeed internationally, Wales has seen changes in attitudes amongst some families towards the importance of regular school attendance.

In May, Estyn published an update to their January 2024 thematic report on Attendance. Updated information includes references to current attendance levels, information on the number of inspections this year to date where a recommendation to improve attendance has been made, and updates to the case studies. We will be responding to that updated report in the Autumn term.

The most recent data shows that average attendance across the 2024/25 academic year was up to 90.9%, from 90.2% the year before. While this improvement is a positive indicator, we remain conscious attendance rates remain below pre-pandemic levels.

Between 2024 and 2026 £8.8m will be invested to improve engagement and attendance. In 25/26 we will also invest nearly £11m in Community Focused Schools to support and make available Family Engagement Officers to develop positive partnerships, offer tailored support, and to provide a single point of contact for families, school and partner agencies seeking to improve attendance.

To what extent is the Welsh Government delivering on its Programme for Government objective of ensuring educational inequalities narrow - and the First Minister's own priority of ensuring every family (and presumably child) has the chance to succeed?

The gap in educational attainment between pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM) and their peers remains a significant concern. This issue existed prior to the pandemic and has increased in severity since. Tackling it remains crucial to our commitment to ensuring high standards in schools - while supporting the aspirations of all learners.

The legacy of austerity, the pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis continue to affect families and schools. Many schools are dealing with increased demands and stretched resources, while families are facing daily financial pressures that can impact on learners' ability to engage fully with education. Therefore, we have responded at pace to successfully deliver universal primary free school meals. This is having an immediate impact in keeping much needed money in families' pockets, while longer term it will reduce health inequalities, improve educational inequalities.

Equity remains at the heart of our approach. We are using all available powers and resources to support disadvantaged learners and reduce attainment gaps.

We have continued to prioritise Curriculum reform funding to support improved standards and aspirations.

The Pupil Development Grant remains a key mechanism for supporting disadvantaged pupils. In 2025–26 we committed £128 million to support disadvantaged learners and address the impact of poverty on education.

The School Essentials Grant has supported more than 88,000 families with up to £200 per learner to help with those costs associated with school uniforms and essential equipment.

In addition to financial support, we are piloting several initiatives aimed at understanding and addressing barriers in schools including:

- **Poverty Proofing:** A pilot involving six school clusters and delivered by Children North East is supporting schools to identify and address poverty-related stigma and inclusion issues. It involves training, community audits, and learner-informed action plans.
- **Attainment Champions:** This pilot facilitates the sharing of effective strategies between school leaders through peer mentoring, helping to identify which approaches have the strongest impact on disadvantaged learners.

Through targeted funding and focused programmes, we are delivering support to help mitigate the impact of poverty on attainment. However, we recognise that the challenges are complex and ongoing, and we remain committed to continuing this work in partnership with schools and local authorities.

Research commissioned to review the way in which we consider socio-economic factors amongst learners and their impact on outcomes will be used in the future for targeted funding and support.

To what extent do you consider that the new Additional Learning Needs (ALN) system has been delivered successfully to date, given the apparent inconsistencies in how schools and local authorities are interpreting the 2018 Act and Code, and the 44% reduction in the number of pupils identified with ALN since the new system was introduced?

The 1st of September 2025 will mark the culmination of a four-year implementation period of the ALN system, designed to create a more inclusive, learner-focused approach to supporting children and young people with additional learning needs in Wales.

Local authorities and schools have made significant progress to implement the ALN system. Over 30,000 statutory Individual Development Plans (IDPs) have been created through person-centred processes, and practitioners continue to work closely with learners and families to understand needs and ensure appropriate provision.

Since 2020 we have significantly increased investment in ALN with over £150 million of revenue grant funding to local authorities, schools and settings to support implementation, increase resources in schools and lead whole-school strategies to embed inclusive education. There are some excellent examples of good practice in schools across Wales.

In that time we have also invested more than £170 million of capital funding through the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme on improved facilities for learners with ALN.

There has been a continued reduction in the overall number of learners identified with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or ALN in maintained schools since implementation of the ALN Act began. Much of this decrease is in learners who were previously identified with 'School Action' in the SEN system, which reflected the lowest level of support. This change, alongside the removal of the 'General Learning Difficulties' category from the 2023 census, combined with the funding to support a more inclusive approach to learning in schools, has led to a reassessment of need and a shift in data reporting.

We are actively addressing inconsistencies in the interpretation and implementation of the ALN system, including the identification of children with ALN. A review of the legislative framework has been completed, and the Cabinet Secretary for Education issued a written statement on 10 July outlining key themes for improvement.

Focus now is on developing practical, proportionate solutions with delivery partners. Later this year the Cabinet Secretary will publish a summary of responses and proposed actions to continue to improve delivery.

Estyn continues to monitor support for learners through inspections and thematic reviews. Their findings show that where reforms have been successfully implemented, learners are making progress from their starting points and we remain committed to working with local authorities to understand and address barriers to delivery, ensuring that all learners with ALN receive the support they need to thrive.

Providing more homes for social rent:

What is the likelihood of reaching the 20,000 target for new low carbon social homes for rent during this Senedd term.

Our ambitious target is driving record delivery of homes in Wales. We will never give up on pushing for the 20,000th home until the last day of this government and we remain assured there are thousands of homes in the construction pipeline.

While we recognise the challenge in delivering this target by the end of the Senedd term, we remain confident that our commitment to deliver 20,000 homes can be realised.

Green Jobs:

The Committee would welcome further clarification on the broadening of language around the Welsh Government's priority for creating 'green jobs' to focussing on creating 'more jobs', and whether this suggests a change of emphasis.

My priority is delivery — 'more jobs' reflects my commitment to delivering good jobs for people across Wales, in **ways that support a stronger, fairer and greener economy**, with green jobs remaining a central part of that ambition.

While the priority has not changed in focus, the way in which it is described has naturally evolved to ensure it remains clear and unambiguous.

Connecting Communities:

The Committee would welcome further information on how the UK investment of rail infrastructure in Wales over recent years has impacted the long-term vision of the Welsh Government for 'transforming our railways'.

The previous UK Government failed to deliver the improvements to rail infrastructure in Wales. Challenges included their cancellation of the electrification of lines to Swansea, the lack of funding for the electrification in North Wales and the decline caused due to the reduced funding for Network Rail in Wales.

The current UK Government has recognised that rail infrastructure in Wales has been underfunded. We welcome the recent announcement of £445m for rail infrastructure improvements as a first step towards addressing these issues. The Spending Review means we can now plan properly for the future of rail infrastructure in Wales.

We continue to work in close partnership with the UK Government to develop and deliver the much needed improvements to our railway that will enable more and improved services for passengers across Wales.

Annex B - Supplementary Response

Please note this additional information is provided in response to the Committee's broader areas of interest - outside the scope of the original forum.

Following concerns raised by Committees during scrutiny of the Draft Budget 2025–26 about long-term funding of preventative and palliative care services, the Committee would welcome further information on the assessments made by the Welsh Government to measure the impact this has had on both these services and other NHS services. What is being done to mitigate any negative impacts?

Work is ongoing to develop a new Hospice Commissioning Framework for Wales to create a more sustainable financial model for the longer term.

As part of Phase 1, a new governance and assurance specification has been finalised, and contracts with individual hospices are due to be issued shortly. As work progresses into Phase 2 we will develop and adopt the new Hospice Commissioning Framework producing associated implementation guidance to be in place by April 2026. Work will conclude with a final phase to establish a new Commissioning Framework for specialist palliative care by April 2027.

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has also recently received the third and final report reviewing palliative and end of life care (PEoLC) in Wales. This internal report completes the Welsh Government's request for a comprehensive, data-driven review of funding, need, and strategic planning for PEoLC in Wales.

We will be working closely with NHS Performance and Improvement colleagues to shape the work of the national programme team for PEoLC around the recommendations in the report.

The Committee would welcome an update on the number of hospices and hospice beds in Wales and whether this has changed in recent months and years.

There are 12 commissioned hospices in Wales, and this number has not changed in recent years.

In 2018 Hospice UK reported there were 97 inpatient adult hospice beds in Wales.

Since that report was produced St David's Hospice has announced the temporary closure of its 4-bed inpatient unit at Holyhead from October 2025.

Work is ongoing between St David's Hospice and the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board to mitigate any impact of the temporary closure.

What measures have been taken by the Welsh Government to improve the handover of ambulance patients within its 15 minute target? How effective have those measures been and is there data available to illustrate the current situation?

The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has been clear with health boards about his expectations for improvement in the timeliness of ambulance patient handovers. All health boards are expected to deliver the ambulance patient handover guidance, which has been established as one of five priorities for urgent and emergency care in the NHS planning framework for 2025-26.

To accelerate these improvements, we have recently announced a new National Handover-45 Taskforce to support health boards and the Welsh Ambulance Service. Work will continue over the coming weeks bringing together senior clinical and operational leaders at a health board level to focus on high-impact pathways, emergency department processes, improving patient flow and encouraging clinical ownership of actions.

The taskforce will play a key role in assessing and supporting the readiness of NHS Wales to deliver every ambulance patient handover within 15 minutes as far as practically possible, but always within 45 minutes.

We have seen some encouraging signs of improvement over the last two months as a result of local improvement strategies and actions via the Six Goals for Urgent and Emergency Care programme. Local approaches will be shared with all health boards and the taskforce will also draw on other successful cultures, processes and models from across the UK.

There were fewer ambulance patient handover delays in every health board area in July compared to June 2025 and July 2024. We saw 59.7% of patients handed over from ambulance crews to the care of emergency department staff in less than 45 minutes of arrival. This increased by 6.1% percentage points from June 2025. Last month had the lowest total of 'lost hours' due to ambulance patient handover delays since July 2021.

The Committee would welcome a summary of the latest figures relating to breastfeeding rates, in particular within Flying Start areas, and whether any data is collected once people have left hospital.

The percentage of children living in Flying Start areas who were breastfed at 10 days has continued to increase and is now at its highest recorded level but is below rates observed in non-Flying Start areas.

The comparison of breastfeeding rates at 10 days of age between Flying Start and non-Flying Start areas is published annually as part of the [Flying Start statistical bulletin](#).

Data relating to the percentage of babies receiving any breastmilk at 10 days old (by Local Authority between 2014-23) is also available via [Stats Wales](#).

Breastfeeding data is collected at birth and post-hospital discharge at 10 days, 6 weeks, and 6 months for all babies. The data at 10 days, 6 weeks, and 6 months is typically collected by health visitors in the community or at clinics, assuming the mother and baby have been discharged from hospital.

In light of the announcement by Trydan Gwyrdd Cymru to use wooden poles rather than pylons for grid connectivity, the Committee would welcome further information on whether it believes alternative solutions to pylons should be considered by other developers bringing forward investments.

In practical terms, the nature of any electricity connection will depend on the amount of power transmitted and there is an upper limit to the level of power that can be transmitted using wooden poles.

The choice of technologies for energy network infrastructure is for the developer to decide, whilst considering the Welsh national planning policy. It is within this policy that the Welsh Government sets out its preferred position on new power lines – stating that where possible, powerlines should be laid underground.

A balanced view must however be taken against those costs that could render an otherwise acceptable project 'unviable'. Where undergrounding of lines is not possible or applicable, proactive engagement with energy companies and the public to mitigate the visual impact of any potential new transmission lines should take place.

In Wales we will decide whether any specific proposal is acceptable considering its impact and how proposals comply with our policies and the requirements of people in Wales.

What consideration has the Welsh Government given to encourage active travel to railway stations?

Integrating walking, wheeling and cycling with public transport to allow for convenient and safe door-to-door journeys is essential to enable more people to use these modes and is a priority for this government.

This is reflected in our Active Travel Delivery Plan, with a commitment to improve active travel routes to and facilities at public transport interchanges.

TfW are producing Station Network Plans for a wide range of stations across Wales – working with Local Authorities to develop a programme of active travel routes to railway stations. This programme also includes the installation of new cycle parking and access improvements for people walking and wheeling.

In addition, we are developing a new pilot scheme to install secure cycle hangars at several railway stations across Wales.