

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Senedd Cymru

Bae Caerdydd, Caerdydd, CF99 1SN
SeneddPlant@senedd.cymru
senedd.cymru/SeneddPlant
0300 200 6565

Welsh Parliament

Cardiff Bay, Cardiff, CF99 1SN
SeneddChildren@senedd.wales
senedd.wales/SeneddChildren
0300 200 6565

Lynne Neagle MS
Cabinet Secretary for Education

30 January 2026

School Improvement and Learner Attainment

Dear Lynne,

Thank you for appearing before Committee on 6 November 2025 as part of our focused work looking at school improvement and learner attainment. As you may know, alongside your written and oral evidence, we sought written evidence from a range of stakeholders¹ across specific areas of interest:

- The future of school improvement arrangements and how the Welsh Government, local authorities and relevant partners work together to deliver the highest possible standards of education.
- Educational outcomes of learners and gaps in attainment between groups of pupils.
- Factors impacting on educational progress such as pupil absence, deprivation, funding and workforce capacity.

In addition, we held a private round table event² with representatives from local authorities, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), the Association for Directors for Education in Wales (ADEW), head teachers and regional consortia.

¹ Welsh Parliament, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment', April/May 2025

² Welsh Parliament, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment: Stakeholder Roundtable Event note', September 2025



You may also be aware that the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister held a session with the First Minister on 12 December 2025 on “Education, Young People and Future Generations”, which I thought I should draw your attention to for additional context.

Summary

The evidence gathered highlights some progress in transitioning to a collaborative, school-led improvement model. However, stakeholders are clear that success now depends on achieving clarity, building capacity and ensuring consistency across the system. Persistent systemic pressures – such as attendance, behaviour, socio-economic disadvantage and funding – are constraining the system’s ability to raise standards and narrow attainment gaps, particularly for learners eligible for free school meals. These challenges require urgent and co-ordinated action. Across the evidence received, there was a strong emphasis on the need for a clear national definition of effective school improvement, coherent guidance in one place, and consistent professional learning. Respondents also warned that reform fatigue and uneven local capacity risk inconsistency and inequity.

This letter sets out our collective view as a Committee, summarising the evidence and highlighting cross-cutting themes. It identifies where we welcome measures and improvements already underway, where concerns persist or have been raised by stakeholders, and makes recommendations or requests to the Welsh Government (set out in grey boxes).

Future school improvement arrangements and partnership working

We acknowledge the clear intent behind the School Improvement Partnership Programme (SIPP), which seeks to embed purposeful collaboration at the heart of school improvement. However, evidence suggests that the current understanding of school improvement lacks clarity, leading to confusion and inconsistent practice. Stakeholders told us ‘there needs to be a clearer articulation of what school improvement is and for... This gives rise to confusion and misinterpretation.’³ There was also a call for creating a national definition of ‘what good looks like’ and concise guidance aligned to Estyn’s framework⁴.

We recognise that School Improvement Partnerships remain in a transitional phase, with responsibilities evolving and previous structures being phased out. We are pleased that the evidence received already indicates these measures have begun to strengthen relationships between schools and local authorities⁵, however there remains a lot of confusion about roles and responsibilities.

³ Written Evidence, ‘University of Wales, Trinity St David’, April 2025

⁴ Welsh Parliament, ‘School Improvement and Learner Attainment: Stakeholder Roundtable Event note’, September 2025

⁵ Welsh Parliament, ‘School Improvement and Learner Attainment: Stakeholder Roundtable Event note’, September 2025

While the establishment of the Education Improvement Team within the Welsh Government and the creation of Dysgu as a national professional learning and leadership body are considered positive steps, WLGA/ADEW warn that details remain under development and “without the central team in place yet schools, school leaders and local authorities must mitigate some of the gaps in the short and medium term”.⁶ Additionally, one local authority “remains unconvinced on how a new national body will add value because it is in incredibly initial stages of development”.⁷

It should not be forgotten that school improvement changes are occurring during a period of significant system-wide reform. WLGA/ADEW report that the pace of reform is proving overwhelming for schools and local authorities, contributing to system-wide reform fatigue. They also highlighted that regulators must be cognisant of this context [for schools] and need to be integrated into the reform journey to ensure accountability frameworks reflects the system’s transitional pressures.⁸

Further concerns relate to the variation in local capacity and the risk of inconsistency across Wales as regional consortia dissolve and new local models emerge. Estyn told us that if Wales “end[s] up with 22 different approaches to evaluation ... numeracy ... literacy, it would be a disaster” and that “what we absolutely must avoid is going back to a model where we have 22 groups delivering the same thing”.⁹

We note that school improvement structures have to an extent gone full circle. Regional consortia were established in light of concerns about the ability of local authorities to meet their statutory responsibility to drive school improvement. You have said that ‘we are not in the same place’ as over a decade ago when a number of local authorities’ education services themselves were under special measures, and that the new arrangements are not simply a return to a position where local authorities each operate in isolation.

Regional consortia were very much seen by the Welsh Government as the solution to the long-standing imperative of raising standards and these latest developments indicate that policy has not fully succeeded. However, it is important that where there has been good practice, that this is retained, adopted and taken forward to avoid the proverbial ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’.

⁶ Written Evidence, ‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’, May 2025

⁷ Written Evidence, ‘Swansea Council’, April 2025

⁸ Written Evidence, ‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’, May 2025

⁹ CYPE Committee, 5 March 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 129

Stakeholders have also highlighted the potential loss of subject-specialist expertise and uneven access to support, particularly for Welsh-medium and specialist provision, with one stakeholder citing that “no school, teacher or learner, should be disadvantaged by geography”¹⁰.

Recommendation 1: We recommend the Welsh Government closely monitors the ability and capacity of local authorities to lead the necessary school improvement and raising of standards, continually reviewing the impact of these latest changes to the way school improvement functions and services are structured and delivered. We also recommend that elements of good practice that have emerged and being built up through regional working over the past decade are incorporated into the new arrangements.

Recommendation 2: We urge the Welsh Government to ensure that new school improvement guidance can support the raising of standards and promote a common, consistent understanding of what is meant by effective school improvement. This consolidated guidance should be available in one accessible location and be aligned with Estyn’s inspection framework.

Request 1: We also ask for a clear plan setting out Dysgu’s professional learning offer and confirm mechanisms to prevent inconsistent local models including how specialist capacity will be safeguarded. Noting what has already been provided in the Cabinet Secretary’s letter dated 26 November, we request further detail on how exactly Dysgu is operating during its transitional year, the role of the Welsh Government during this period and the process for Dysgu fully taking up its functions in September 2026.

Learner outcomes

The evidence presents a complex picture of learner attainment in Wales. Whilst some indicators suggest recovery from the pandemic, systemic challenges remain.

Key Stage 4

Key Stage 4 performance in core subjects has largely returned to pre-pandemic levels, with the Capped 9 score at 354.3 in 2024/25 compared to 254.4 in 2018/19. However, the Skills Challenge Certificate has seen a notable decline, from 36.4 in 2018/19 to 29.0 in 2024/25. Grade patterns reinforce this mixed picture: A*-A grades remain stable at around 20 per cent, but A*-C grades have fallen from 71.9 per cent in 2015/16 to 63.9 per cent in 2024/25, suggesting ongoing challenges in raising overall attainment.

¹⁰ Written Evidence, ‘University of Wales, Trinity St David’, April 2025

In contrast, A level performance shows encouraging improvement. A*-A grades rose from 21.2 per cent in 2015/16 to 29.9 per cent in 2024/25, while A*-C grades reached 78.6 per cent, with Wales now outperforming England overall at A level, and particularly when compared with state funded education in England.

International Benchmarking

The latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 results indicate that Wales continues to face significant challenges in educational attainment. Performance in reading, mathematics and science was below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average and ranked lowest amongst UK nations. These findings reinforce the importance of robust international benchmarking to inform policy decisions and drive improvement. As Swansea Council observed “it may help to have better national expectations on reading and writing. We know that outcomes for reading in Wales, by international comparison, show Wales in decline”.¹¹

Whilst PISA provides invaluable insights into the performance of 15 year olds, it does not capture the earlier stages of learners where foundational skills are developed. For this reason, we welcome the Welsh Government’s commitment to participating in PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) in 2026 and TIMSS (Trends in Mathematics and Science Study) in 2027 as part of an evidence based approach to improving numeracy and literacy, ensuring Wales remains aligned with global best practice across all phases of education.

Personalised Assessments

Personalised assessment data reveals a mixed picture, with attainment falling sharply during the pandemic and only partially recovering. For English reading, levels were at their lowest in 2022/23, but Year 3 pupils in 2023/24 now outperform previous cohorts, suggesting strongest recovery is in early years. In contrast, Years 6 and 9 remain below 2020/21 levels, indicating that older cohorts have not regained lost ground.¹² Welsh reading follows a similar trajectory, with Year 9 performance of more concern than other age groups..

Numeracy shows a comparable pattern. Procedural numeracy has improved since its lowest point in 2021/22, but remains below 2018/19 benchmarks. Recovery is most evident in Year 3 and Year 6, while Year 9 continues to lag behind. More concerning is numeracy reasoning, introduced in 2021/22, where Year 9 attainment in 2023/24 is at its lower point since inception although attainment in Years 3 and 6 is at its highest.

¹¹ Written Evidence, ‘Swansea Council’, April 2025

¹² Welsh Government, ‘School Improvement and Learner Attainment Evidence Paper’, November 2025

These trends raise critical questions about progression and curriculum implementation. Estyn's early insights into its 2024/25 annual report reinforce this concern, noting that "planning for the progressive development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills remains underdeveloped in the majority of secondary schools"¹³ and while primary schools are mostly positive, with few requiring follow-up secondary schools face significant challenges. Estyn further reports that "two-thirds of schools show shortcomings in aspects of teaching" and that "leadership is not effective enough in ensuring consistent good quality teaching" with 13 per cent of secondary schools in one of the two statutory categories¹⁴.

This suggests that while younger learners are benefiting from targeted interventions, older cohorts may require more intensive support to bridge gaps exacerbated by the pandemic. It is important to note that the Year 9 cohort of 2023/24 would have been in Year 5 during 2019/20 and Year 6 during 2020/21 - the pandemic years when learning disruption was particularly significant, and may explain why recovery patterns are differing across age groups.

Data

Evidence from local authorities and national bodies highlights significant concerns about the current data landscape for educational outcome in Wales. Under the Curriculum for Wales, schools devise their own tracking systems leaving local authorities "challenged to have an accurate overview of all pupils' achievements due to the lack of standardised information available. This can impact on improvement planning and the effective prioritisation of resources".¹⁵ Additionally, flexibility within the Curriculum for Wales may lead to variation in learning experiences and outcomes¹⁶, something our predecessor Committee warned about in 2020.

Stakeholders agree that indicators rely "too heavily on Key Stage 4 measures and do not adequately capture progression across the school career of a child", calling for "clear, staged progression measures aligned to the Curriculum for Wales"¹⁷. Swansea Council echoes this, noting that "a true picture of end of compulsory schooling attainment has not been available during the last five academic years ... it has been difficult to make useful comparisons between years, over time and between similarly benchmarked schools".¹⁸

¹³ Estyn, Early insights from the Chief Inspector's Annual Report 2024–25, Secondary Schools, October 2025

¹⁴ Information provided on request by Estyn to Senedd Research, December 2025

¹⁵ Written Evidence, 'Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council', April 2025

¹⁶ Written Evidence, 'University of Wales, Trinity St David', April 2025

¹⁷ Welsh Parliament, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment: Stakeholder Roundtable Event note', September 2025

¹⁸ Written Evidence, 'Swansea Council', April 2025

We note the consultation carried out early last year on a 14 to 16 Learner Entitlement Framework to support reporting against that entitlement as set out in the statutory guidance on the curriculum for 14 to 16 year olds. We welcome the Welsh Government's proposals to move away from high-stakes indicators, as this shift enables schools to concentrate on the progress and outcomes of individual learners rather than performance-driven metrics. This approach aligns with the principles of the Curriculum for Wales and supports a culture of continuous improvement rather than compliance.

However, evidence from local authorities and stakeholders highlights the risk of fragmentation and inconsistency in the absence of clear national expectations. The development of new performance measures, due to be introduced in summer 2027 to coincide with the first cohort completing Year 11 under the Curriculum for Wales, will be an important milestone.

Recommendation 3: We recommend that the Welsh Government set out a staged progression approach aligned to the Curriculum for Wales, with clear age-related expectations to enable earlier identification of learners requiring intervention, alongside national standards for literacy and numeracy and a concise nationally agreed data minimum for the 3-16 journey.

Recommendation 4: We further recommend that our successor committee monitors the Welsh Government's commitment to participate in PIRLS (2026) and TIMSS (2027) and ensures that findings from these studies inform targeted interventions in literacy and numeracy from early years onwards.

Request 2: Additionally, the Welsh Government should remain vigilant in monitoring trends in learner outcomes, such as those evident from personalised assessment data, and our successor committee should prioritise scrutiny to ensure continued recovery and improvement across all domains.

Request 3: Finally, the Welsh Government should develop user-friendly, interactive data tools aligned with the Curriculum for Wales and integrate with existing local authority systems, to support effective school improvement planning, early identification of risk, and targeted interventions.

Use of phonics and cueing

Recent changes to Curriculum for Wales guidance clarified that systematic and consistent teaching of phonics must be a key part of schools' approach to reading, and that pictures/cues support comprehension of sentences, not decoding of individual words.

We have followed the debate over the best approach to teaching children to read. We note that you told us on 6 November that systematic synthetic phonics is an "absolutely key part" of teaching children how to read but "should be used with a range of additional approaches to developing wider literacy skills, including fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, especially for learners who have ALN".

We also note the changes made to the guidance on the Languages, Literacy and Communication Area of Learning and Experience in late 2024/early 2025.

You will be aware of recent correspondence between the Committee and Elizabeth Nonweiler, former member of the Welsh Government Expert Literacy Panel. We remain concerned about the continuing lack of clarity regarding the Welsh Government's approach to improving the teaching of literacy in Wales. In particular, the Cabinet Secretary has stated that CAL:ON Cymru draws on the work of the Expert Literacy Panel and will ensure expectations for literacy reflect the latest evidence on how children learn to read; however this assurance appears at odds with the issues raised in the correspondence we have received. This inconsistency raises concerns about the rationale for, and direction of, the decision to allocate funding for the establishment of CAL:ON Cymru.

We intend to revisit this issue as part of our general scrutiny session with you on 4 February 2026, and we look forward to hearing further about the advice you have received from the Expert Literacy Panel.

Attainment Gap

Despite significant policy reforms and investment, socio-economic disadvantage remains the most significant factor driving the attainment gap between groups of learners in Wales. Although overall attainment in Wales has slightly improved in 2024/25 when compared to 2023/24; attainment gaps have widened over the same period, while equity gaps, particularly those linked with poverty and additional needs, remain larger than before the pandemic and as far back as 2015/16.

Those eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM) consistently perform below their peers across almost every measure. Analysis of GCSE outcomes shows that the gap between eFSM pupils and their peers at A*-C grades widened to 29.3 percentage points in 2024/25, compared to 24.9 in 2015/16 and 28.1 in 2018/19. At A*-A grades, the gap persists at around 15 percentage points.¹⁹ This is despite significant investment through the Pupil Development Grant, which allocates £128m annually to support disadvantaged learners.

Whilst eFSM eligibility has long been used as the primary measure of socio-economic disadvantage, stakeholders have raised concerns about its reliability. WLGA/ADEW notes that "one of the unintended consequences of the successful roll out of Universal [Primary] Free School Meals provision is the distortion of deprivation data and eFSM as a reliable proxy for measuring child poverty"²⁰.

¹⁹ Welsh Government, 'School Improvement and Learner Attainment Evidence Paper', November 2025

²⁰ Written Evidence, 'Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales', May 2025

Not all families in need are registering for grants or benefits, making it harder to accurately target support. This means that some vulnerable learners may be overlooked in data-driven interventions, and funding allocations may not fully reflect local realities. As one local authority put it, "Families living in poverty not applying for free school meal eligibility has an adverse impact on families and school funding".²¹

We therefore welcome the Welsh Government's review of the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) announced in December 2025 as a timely opportunity to consider its future role and design, ensuring that funding for this purpose continues to reduce educational inequalities and meet the evolving needs of learners. We note that you said you were "really frustrated" at the level of progress there has been over many years in narrowing the attainment gap.

We also welcome the work being undertaken to consider how social-economic disadvantage is measured and the 'Beyond e-FSM' research project, on which you provided information in your letter of 26 November 2025 and a report was published on 10 December 2025.

We are also mindful that there are attainment gaps affecting other specific groups, for example those with ALN, some minority ethnic groups, and Looked After Children. We have not been able to consider these specifically in this short piece of work.

Recommendation 5: We share the Cabinet Secretary's frustration at the lack of progress and urge that addressing the negative correlation between deprivation and attainment remains a high priority for the Welsh Government.

Recommendation 6: We also recommend that the review of the Pupil Development Grant prioritises demonstrable impact on reducing attainment gaps, not merely improving access to funding, and ensures that resources are targeted where they can make the greatest difference.

Attendance and behaviour

Attendance is a fundamental prerequisite for achievement. Poor attendance and high exclusion rates have a detrimental effect on learner progress.

We undertook an inquiry into pupil absence in 2022, following concerns raised during the annual scrutiny of Estyn in December 2021 about the impact of absence on children and young people's learning and overall well-being. It was highlighted through this inquiry, that everybody has a role to

²¹ Written Evidence, 'Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council', April 2025

play in promoting and supporting sustained attendance, which is why we recommended that: *The Welsh Government runs a national campaign to emphasise the positive impacts of regular school attendance.*

Whilst the Government has not launched a national campaign, we note that its response to the recommendation reflects learner feedback and wider evidence showing that generic national messages are less effective than tailored, local communication. This engagement has also highlighted the crucial role of schools, particularly pastoral and family-engagement staff, in re-engaging learners and supporting families, which chimes with evidence we have gathered as part of this current inquiry.

Nonetheless, stakeholders told us that national-level messaging, aligned with local and school-based work, could strengthen understanding of the importance of attendance and support efforts to reduce persistence absence.

Local authorities report that pupils with higher levels of absence are more likely to show lower engagement when in school. They also emphasise that investing in strategies to promote positive behaviours is essential for improving attendance, learner outcomes and attainment.²²

The scale of the challenge is clear: secondary attendance remains below pre-pandemic levels, and persistent absence (10 per cent or higher), although reduced to 33.0 per cent in 2024/25, is still nearly double the 17.1 per cent recorded in 2018/19.²³

Local authorities stress that “Attendance is a critical issue, with higher absenteeism rates among disadvantaged pupils”.²⁴ This concern is reflected in the deprivation gap: In 2024/25, secondary pupils eligible for FSM attended 81.2 per cent of sessions compared to 91.1 per cent among those not eligible for FSM²⁵, with persistent absence at 58.0 per cent vs 26.8 per cent respectively.²⁶

However, WLGA/ADEW noted that attendance challenges are not solely school-driven; “several societal and cultural changes have had a negative impact on attendance, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic” including parental expectations and transport issues²⁷.

²² Written Evidence, ‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’, May 2025

²³ Welsh Government, ‘School Improvement and Learner Attainment Evidence Paper’, November 2025

²⁴ Written Evidence, ‘Isle of Anglesey Council’, May 2025

²⁵ Welsh Government, ‘Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 2 September 2025 to 2 January 2026’, Table 4, 13 January 2026 (latest available at time of writing)

²⁶ Welsh Government, ‘Absenteeism from secondary schools: September 2024 to August 2025’, Table 11.

²⁷ Written Evidence, ‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’, May 2025

We have heard that that behaviour is often linked to wider factors such as mental health and wellbeing, additional learning needs, inclusion, poverty, disadvantage and inequality, meaning punitive approaches alone are ineffective. This view is reinforced by the recently published Welsh Youth Parliament's Committee on Crime and Behaviour, which drew on the experiences of over 2,000 young people. We very much welcome that the Cabinet Secretary has accepted all eight of its recommendations, and share her view that this report represents an outstanding example of pupil voice.

We note that exclusion rates have increased over recent years, particularly in secondary schools. For example, fixed-term exclusions of five days or less almost doubled from 75 to 144 per 1,000 secondary school pupils between 2018/19 and 2023/24.

As noted in our recently published Teacher Recruitment and Retention Report, the Welsh Government has placed much emphasis on its National Behaviour Summit held in May 2025, however we remain slightly concerned at the lack of real concrete action arising from this Summit on a significant and urgent issue. We look forward to receiving the Government's response to our report, specifically around the recommendation to issue clear coherent guidance on behaviour management.

Request 4: We welcome the Government's commitment to continue promoting attendance nationally and to provide more targeted support for schools and local authorities, and ask that the Government outlines how it plans to assess whether national messaging is supporting awareness, strengthening local interventions, and ultimately whether the approach is working.

Recommendation 7: We urge the Welsh Government to investigate what lies behind the near doubling of fixed short-term exclusions of secondary pupils since before the pandemic and consider if this is appropriate and justified.

Recommendation 8: Alongside all of this, we urge investment in multi-agency support structures that bring together education, health, and social services to provide coordinated support for mental health, safeguarding, and behavioural challenges.

Workforce Capacity

Ensuring sufficient workforce capacity and maintaining high-quality learning experiences in Wales are increasingly challenged by the complex factors shaping teacher recruitment and retention, as outlined in our recently published report. We welcome the Cabinet Secretary's commitment to developing a Strategic Education Workforce Plan, hope that the recommendations relating to this in the teacher recruitment and retention report are accepted and look forward to seeing how this work progresses.

WLGA/ADEW and several local authorities report that rising behavioural challenges and the growing complexity of additional learning needs and mental health needs demand substantial staff time, diverting focus away from teaching and learning. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and Swansea Council highlight that persistent behavioural and wellbeing pressures require significant early intervention work, while Isle of Anglesey Council, noted that trauma-informed practice is becoming essential to support vulnerable learners – yet this too requires time, training and staffing that schools lack.

Stakeholders at the roundtable further emphasised that schools are absorbing wider social issues in the absence of clear multi-agency responsibilities, limiting their ability to prioritise core teaching and learning. At the same time, funding constraints (covered more in the next section) are resulting in reductions to pastoral and attendance roles that are critical to keeping pupils engaged in learning.

Collectively, the evidence shows that when an already limited workforce capacity is increasingly consumed by behaviour management, attendance work and intensive pastoral support, there is less time available for high-quality teaching, targeted support and curriculum development – ultimately hindering pupils' ability to make progress.

Recommendation 9: We ask that the Welsh Government provides clear confirmation that the professional learning offer from Dysgu will include trauma informed practice, behaviour management and leadership .

Funding and prioritisation of education

Stakeholders speak of a challenging fiscal climate, with schools reducing non-statutory but essential roles and local authorities facing 'multiple cost pressures' . Round-table participants cautioned that funding constraints are forcing difficult decisions, often reducing the capacity that supports attendance, wellbeing and attainment.

WLGA/ADEW conclude there is "insufficient funding to support all the new school improvement aims" and that without additional funding, it is difficult to build capacity for the new models.

Stakeholders have consistently raised concerns that "funding is an issue that all schools will cite as an area of high concern" with a "disparity between the increase in the needs of learners and the expectation for schools to enhance their curriculum... against a cut/cash flat position in budgets"²⁸. Others noted that "grant funding terms and conditions can still be overly bureaucratic, restrictive and

²⁸ Written Evidence, 'Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council', May 2025

may not reflect local needs and priorities”²⁹, while the WLGA/ADEW warn that “efficiency savings... impact delivery and restrict a local authority and school’s ability to plan long-term investments.”³⁰

We asked you during our session on 6 November as well as during budget scrutiny on 27 November about the First Minister’s four priorities and the fact that during summer 2025 she revised those she set after coming into office. For the avoidance of doubt, we were referring to the change of the priority set in September 2024, which read *Opportunity for every family: boosting standards in schools and colleges, and providing more homes for social rent, ensuring every family has the chance to succeed*. The First Minister told the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister in July 2025 that she was ‘simplifying’ her priorities and as of summer 2025, this priority now reads “More Homes”.

You pointed to your own education priorities and appeared to indicate that you believed raising standards of education remained one of the First Minister’s priorities, referring to the now replaced ‘Opportunity for every family’ umbrella priority³¹. The Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister asked the First Minister about this on 12 December and she confirmed that education is “absolutely critical” and “absolutely a priority” for her³². However, it is not one of the four headline priorities that she wanted people to measure her on in her two years as First Minister in this Senedd term and that it had not come up much in her listening exercise with the public (which informed her priorities).

Request 5: We would be grateful for your observations on how much of a priority raising standards of education is within the Welsh Government at Cabinet-level, rather than just within your department and your own focus. Further, how this is reflected by decisions made by the First Minister, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Welsh Language and the Welsh Government Cabinet about allocation of funding (with reference to the allocation of education-related Barnett consequentials, as discussed in our report on the Draft Budget 2026-27).

In closing, we wish to reiterate the central themes arising from the evidence gathered throughout this work: the need for greater clarity and consistency around school improvement arrangements; urgent action to support learner progression and address widening attainment gaps; strengthened approaches to attendance and behaviour; and a sustainable strategy to ensure sufficient workforce capacity across all phases of education.

We also emphasise the importance of transparent prioritisation of education at Government level, particularly in relation to funding decisions and the delivery of national expectations. We would be

²⁹ Written Evidence, ‘Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council’, April 2025

³⁰ Written Evidence, ‘Welsh Local Government Association and Association of Directors of Education in Wales’, May 2025

³¹ CYPE Committee, 6 November 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraph 10

³² Committee for Scrutiny of the First Minister, 12 December 2025, Record of Proceedings, paragraphs 12 and 15

grateful to receive your response to the requests set out in this letter by 13 March 2026, so that it can inform our ongoing scrutiny and the work of our successor committee.

Yours sincerely,



Buffy Williams MS

Chair

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

