



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION

Support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing: government response

Our response to Estyn's report and recommendations on support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing.

First published: 30 March 2021

Last updated: 30 March 2021

This document was downloaded from GOV.WALES and may not be the latest version.

Go to <https://gov.wales/support-learners-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing-government-response.html> for the latest version.

Get [information on copyright](#).

Contents

Report title

Report details

Summary of main findings

Publication details

Report title

Support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing in the post-16 sectors

Report details

The report provides an overview of how further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships have supported learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing during the COVID-19 period between March 2020 and January 2021. This includes the periods of lockdown as well as when providers reopened. It captures how further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships have adapted their support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing in response to the challenges resulting from COVID-19.

Summary of main findings

The impact of lockdowns and the pandemic on learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing is influenced by their personal circumstances. Key

This document was downloaded from GOV.WALES and may not be the latest version.

Go to <https://gov.wales/support-learners-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing-government-response-html> for the latest version.

Get [information on copyright](#).

contributing factors include bereavement, social isolation, uncertainties over qualification assessment arrangements, worries about future prospects, pressures of working long hours in front-line occupations such as health and social care, and the impact of being furloughed or made redundant.

The switch to remote and blended learning has been easier for some learners than others. Learners who had readily available access to technology and reliable broadband internet connectivity generally found it easiest to adapt to new ways of working. Disadvantaged learners, such as young carers and many traineeship learners, have often faced considerable additional pressure in trying to keep up with their learning given their difficult personal circumstances.

Since the initial lockdown period starting in March 2020, all providers have made substantial changes to the ways in which they support learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing. Although there have been short periods when a minority of providers have made a limited return to some forms of in-person support due to relaxation of lockdown restrictions, most support has continued to be delivered remotely. Over the whole pandemic period, nearly all providers have made the wellbeing of learners and staff their overriding priority and have worked hard to maintain continuity of support as well as of teaching, learning and assessment.

What has evolved so far over the course of the pandemic could be described as a 'blended support' model in which support is provided in a variety of ways. These ways include remote telephone call or text messaging support, online video calls and, in a few cases, online chat facilities, as well as more traditional in-person support.

The overall effectiveness of support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing varies substantially between providers and sectors. In the best cases, providers have maintained or introduced careful and well-thought-out triaging approaches to identify and prioritise learners who are either at risk or most in need of support. Where support is less effective, providers do not identify and maintain regular contact with those most at risk of disengaging from learning or experiencing difficulties with their mental health and emotional wellbeing, help is mainly provided on a 'first-come, first served' approach and learners often face lengthy waiting lists for specialist support such as internal or

external counselling provision.

Support is also provided more efficiently and effectively when providers work closely with internal and external partners and specialist agencies. Multi-agency support arrangements are most effective where learners are given a single point of contact. However, arrangements for those learners studying with partner providers and subcontractors to access specialist support for mental health and emotional wellbeing are not always made clear in information made available by lead providers.

As well as providing targeted direct support to learners identified as needing specific support with their mental health and emotional wellbeing, providers are also promoting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing, for example by holding wellbeing weeks and offering a range of wellbeing-related activities. All providers need to focus more on developing learners' resilience to overcome challenges and prepare them for the world of work following the pandemic.

Many providers have made a wide array of resources available online to learners and staff. In the best cases, resources are chosen carefully and reviewed rather than simply being added to online webpages. This avoids overloading users with too much information that is then difficult to navigate.

Most providers have raised staff awareness of mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. Providers report that this has resulted in staff being better placed to identify and support learners who are struggling, as well as helping the staff themselves in maintaining their own emotional wellbeing. Many providers, especially further education colleges and work-based learning providers, have also invested in additional front-line support roles such as wellbeing officers, resilience and learning coaches, active wellbeing staff and learner engagement officers as part of their learner support provision. There has also been a substantial growth in the training and use of mental health first aiders, especially in further education colleges and work-based learning providers.

Providers have reported a mixed picture in terms of the number of safeguarding reports and referrals since the outbreak of the pandemic. A majority of providers have experienced increases in the number of learners who have sought support for complex issues such as self-harm and suicidal thoughts and feelings. Most

providers have also strengthened their approaches to promoting and ensuring online safety as far as they can, within the challenging context of nearly all learners spending more time online at home often via their own equipment and home Wi-Fi networks.

Most providers have reported a surge in demand for learner counselling services during the pandemic. Most of this support is now delivered remotely. Although a minority of counselling staff have undertaken specific training in how to provide remote counselling effectively, this is not always the case. Similarly while nearly all counselling staff receive regular clinical supervision to support their own development and emotional wellbeing, similar support is not made available to many staff in other front line support roles who may also be dealing with complex and distressing cases as part of their work.

Most providers have accessed additional funds to assist learners with technology requirements for home study and remote support. A few providers do not make enough use of other categories of support funding which could help their learners access other types of support for additional learning needs.

Although many of the issues associated with the pandemic have presented learners and providers with additional challenges, many providers also recognise that adjustments to the support provision and methods necessitated by lockdown restrictions may present opportunities for improvement in the longer term. For example, providing learners with a greater choice of how they can access support in the future may improve the overall accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness of mental health and emotional wellbeing support.

Recommendation 1

FE colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning partnerships should target resources to promote positive mental health and emotional wellbeing carefully in order to avoid overloading learners and staff with too much information.

Response

Welsh Government is working with the sectors to ensure resources produced are shared to avoid duplication and to ensure funding is maximised.

Welsh Government has provided funding to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff and learners for 2020 to 2021 and 2021 to 2022. Part of this funding is focussed on collaborative working, encouraging the need for institutions and external agencies to work together to develop resources and training and to ensure they are consistent, accessible and are shared to avoid duplication. As a condition of funding, all resources developed are shared on Hwb and accessible to learners, staff and parents and carers.

Recommendation 2

FE colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning partnerships should identify carefully those learners most at risk from disengaging from learning or experiencing mental health and emotional wellbeing issues and monitor their wellbeing on a regular basis.

Response

As part of the collaborative applications for funding in 2020 to 2021, an identification tool for learners most at risk of disengaging has been produced and piloted in two colleges in Wales. Plans to implement across the sector are being discussed following the pilot in early 2021 to 2022. As part of Covid recovery, Welsh Government is also supporting the post-16 sector to work with schools to share information on learners' educational and wellbeing support needs, to help ensure effective transition to their next stage of learning.

Other institutions have also developed a range of surveys and resources which can be shared across sectors on Hwb which can be used to identify learners at risk of disengaging and those requiring mental health and wellbeing support.

Recommendation 3

FE colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning partnerships should prioritise the provision of support according to need to ensure that all learners requiring urgent help with their mental health and emotional wellbeing receive support as quickly as possible.

Response

Welsh Government provide funding to support the mental health and wellbeing of staff and learners and encourage the use of funding to provide support in a number of ways including counselling, recruitment of institutional wellbeing officers, training, raising awareness and through the development of resources for both staff and learners.

Recommendation 4

FE colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning partnerships should work as closely as possible with external agencies to make overall support for mental health and emotional wellbeing as seamless as possible and minimise, or ideally avoid, the need for multiple points of contact.

Response

Welsh Government support and encourage collaboration across the sectors and with external agencies in order to maximise funding and to ensure consistency in messages and delivery. Welsh Government recognise the importance of this and also that further work is required to avoid the need for multiple points of contact. We hope to continue to address this need by supporting collaborative working and working directly with all relevant sectors to reach and maintain a seamless “whole-system” approach. We would also expect the sectors to work closely to support this throughout the learner journey.

Recommendation 5

FE colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning partnerships should make clear how support for mental health and emotional wellbeing can be accessed by all learners, including those studying with subcontractors or partner providers.

Response

Part of the terms and conditions of Welsh Government funding for mental health and wellbeing is for all FEIs to develop and/or revise their wellbeing strategy to support all staff and learners within their institution. A checklist has been provided to ensure strategies contain the necessary requirements which includes details of accessibility and signposting to other services and policies which are relevant to both the staff and learner. Welsh Government also suggest strategies should include contact details of relevant wellbeing staff, details of training available and how to access it and links to other policies and support mechanisms which are relevant to the needs of both staff and learner. Strategies should be revised regularly and updated based on changes to provision and circumstance and should include a version control.

Recommendation 6

FE colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning partnerships should ensure that all counselling staff, and other staff in similar roles, receive appropriate supervision or mentoring and undertake specific professional learning in how to provide remote support effectively.

Response

Professional learning is an eligibility criteria included as part of the funding that has been allocated to mental health and wellbeing to all FEIs, WBL and adult learning partnerships. Funding can also be used to recruit wellbeing officers and to provide counselling for both staff and learners. National projects on Adverse

Childhood Experiences and recognising substance misuse includes training modules for staff and train the trainer modules to ensure relevant staff training is consistent and sustainable.

Recommendation 7

The Welsh Government should ensure that the outcomes of Welsh Government-funded mental health projects are evaluated fully and share the findings across all post-16 sectors.

Response

Welsh Government accepts this recommendation and agrees that all outcomes of mental health and wellbeing projects developed as a result of mental health and wellbeing funding to the post-16 sectors should be fully evaluated with findings shared as appropriate. We are working with the CollegesWales Active Wellbeing Group and via Hwb to support sharing of experiences and good practice. As part of the application process for all funded mental health projects, providers must show how they will evaluate the outcomes of their activities.

Publication details

Estyn propose to publish this review on or after 23 March 2021.

About this document

This document is a copy of the web page [Support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing: government response](https://gov.wales/support-learners-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing-government-response) downloaded.

Go to <https://gov.wales/support-learners-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing-government-response-html> for the latest version.

This document may not be fully accessible, for more information refer to our [accessibility statement](#).

Get [information on copyright](#).

This document was downloaded from GOV.WALES and may not be the latest version.

Go to <https://gov.wales/support-learners-mental-health-and-emotional-wellbeing-government-response-html> for the latest version.

Get [information on copyright](#).