



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION

How schools and colleges used the RRRS and catch-up grants for post-16 learners: government response

Our response to Estyn's report and recommendations.

First published: 7 April 2022

Last updated: 7 April 2022

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The report focuses on the support for post-16 learners since September 2020 through the 'Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards: Accelerating Learning Programme' grant (the RRRS grant) in schools and the catch-up grant in further education (FE) colleges. Both grants were part of the Welsh Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The report is written in response to a request for a rapid review in the Minister for Education's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2021 to 2022. Key messages and recommendations will inform future guidance and monitoring for similar funding in future.

The report draws on the evidence from remote meetings with senior and middle leaders and groups of learners in schools and colleges, as well as leaders and challenge advisers in local authorities and regional consortia. A review of relevant literature, including Welsh Government policies and updates and grant letters to providers was also conducted. Further information from Estyn's regular engagement with schools, colleges, local authorities and regional consortia was also drawn upon.

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Summary of main findings

Nearly all schools and colleges planned carefully to make good use of the RRRS or catch-up grants. In these providers, most learners have appreciated the additional provision, care and guidance they have received. In a few cases, leaders have not planned their spending strategically and just added the additional funds to their main budget.

There is a high degree of variability in the approaches leaders have taken in spending the RRRS or catch-up grants. In schools, the most common approaches were appointing additional staff to:

- cover teaching in key stage 3 to free up time for extra lessons for learners in key stage 4 and post 16 or greater pastoral support in the sixth-form
- teach specific subjects
- focus mainly on learners' wellbeing

Colleges have a high number of learners following vocational courses and took a different approach from schools. Most commonly they:

- provided additional 'catch-up' sessions
- created capacity for additional sessions for practical assessments
- provided additional capacity to track and support learners' wellbeing

Appointing high quality additional staff at short notice has been challenging for providers, especially in rural areas, Welsh-medium or bilingual schools, and areas of high deprivation. Instead, most leaders in schools and colleges have extended hours for part-time staff, paid current staff overtime or retained the services of staff who were about to retire.

A few Welsh-medium or bilingual schools and colleges have used the grant strategically to ensure that learners maintained their Welsh speaking skills during periods where they could not attend school in person. However, in many cases this has not been a strong aspect of providers' work and learners' ability and confidence to use Welsh has declined during lockdown.

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In many cases, courses run in partnership with other providers that normally involve learners travelling between centres have operated smoothly by streaming lessons. A few of these courses have not been delivered successfully and learners have dropped out. Mostly, this is because learners embarking on new partnership courses found remote learning in this context frustrating and ineffective.

All schools and colleges report close working with a range of external services including social services, health boards, the police and counselling services. All of these services have seen increases in demand during the pandemic. Leaders in a few schools have worked creatively with other providers, for example to evaluate each other's work or to identify and address gaps in learners' studies. Colegau Cymru has provided useful networks for college leaders to discuss issues and share practice during the pandemic.

Many school leaders have been in regular contact with representatives from regional consortia and local authorities. In the most useful cases, these representatives have offered leaders valuable guidance on catch up approaches based on research.

Many leaders in schools and colleges continually evaluated and refined their approach to grant spending during the pandemic. In the best examples, leaders have a vision for what they would like to achieve and set a range of criteria against which they can track and evaluate the success of initiatives. In a few cases, leaders have not considered the impact of additional spending.

In the case of future similar grants, leaders in schools and colleges should:

Recommendation 1

Ensure they have a clear vision for the outcomes they desire from additional spending.

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Recommendation 2

Work with a wide range of partners to develop strategies to support learners' progress and wellbeing.

Recommendation 3

Regularly track and evaluate the impact of additional spending in order to adjust current plans and inform future planning.

Recommendation 4

Consider building on successful changes to practice made during the pandemic.

Recommendation 5

Ensure that learners' progress in Welsh is priority, irrespective of the linguistic backgrounds of learners.

Response to recommendation 1 and recommendation 3

The Welsh Government supports these recommendations for leaders in schools and colleges as set out in the Estyn thematic review report.

During the early stages of the pandemic providers were using additional funding to help them respond to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic. The support needs of learners and practitioners, both in terms of minimising risk to health and maximising the continuity in learning were changing weekly. In May 2020, the Welsh Government published the **COVID-19 Resilience Plan for the Post-16 Sector** that set out the priorities and structure for colleges' work in responding to the changing demands of the pandemic. Guidance for schools, and hence school sixth-forms, fell under the **Stay Safe, Stay Learning** policy

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statement and subsequent **Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards** accelerating learning programme. From the 2021 to 2022 academic year onwards, where appropriate, pandemic related additional funding issued to school sixth forms and colleges has been accompanied by guidance that is consistent between both sectors.

The Welsh Government is in the process of commissioning an evaluation of the pandemic related additional funding issued to post-16 education and training providers. One of the aims of this work is to establish a framework for the evaluation of current and future pandemic related additional spending. The Welsh Government is exploring the options for standardising the monitoring and evaluation requirements associated with additional grants or other specific funds made available to providers. Development of any such arrangements will be mindful of the need to ensure that reporting expectations are reasonable. For the 2022 to 2023 academic year, the Welsh Government intends to pilot a standardised monitoring and self-evaluation approach by colleges and local authorities/school sixth forms, regarding their use of additional pandemic related funding for post-16 education.

Response to recommendation 2 and recommendation 4

The Welsh Government supports these recommendations for leaders in schools and colleges as set out in the Estyn thematic review report. Whilst the report acknowledges the many strengths in the ways that providers worked well with a range of partners to ensure learners received appropriate care, support and guidance during the pandemic, it also usefully identifies areas in which collaboration should improve.

The Welsh Government is working to coordinate a collaborative approach to the design and implementation of support strategies for post-16 and transitions learners and practitioners as part of its **Renew and Reform** programme launched in the summer of 2021. Building on the COVID-19 Resilience Plan for the Post-16 Sector, the Welsh Government's 'Post-16 and Transitions' project as part of the Renew and Reform programme, has adopted a collaborative, evidence-based approach, to shape and implement pandemic related support measures. The project aims to identify and build upon elements of good practice

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developed during the pandemic. It brings stakeholders together from across the post-16 education and training sectors of school sixth forms, further education colleges, universities, work-based learning providers and providers of adult learning in the community. The support measures developed will build on the early pandemic response in a way that providers and learners feel can best help them over the medium to long term. Using the guidance issued, providers across the post-16 sectors are rightly able to continue to individually determine how recovery related funding is utilised. However, a number of broader support measures, that benefit multiple providers, will be developed in collaboration across the sectors and directed via the Post-16 and Transitions project.

One of the aims of the commissioned evaluation of additional funding issued to post-16 education and training providers, is to identify effective practice that has emerged during the pandemic. This will be used to disseminate such practice as well as inform planning, both in terms of normal operation and future emergency measures.

In addition, structural changes are being implemented that will further help to improve cohesion between the post-16 sectors over the medium to long term. In 2023, the Welsh Government will, subject to legislation, establish the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER). It will bring together responsibility for the oversight of the post-16 sectors in Wales into a single, dedicated arm's length body. It will have extensive funding, planning and regulatory powers, enabling it to improve quality, efficiency and efficacy across the TER sector. It will have the interests of learners at its heart, and work collaboratively across the sector to improve individual and national outcomes.

Response to recommendation 5

The Welsh Government supports this recommendation for leaders in schools and colleges as set out in the Estyn thematic review report. The Welsh Government is committed to the continuing development of learners' Welsh language skills, and their use of the language, in line with its Cymraeg 2050 strategy.

Drawing on the recommendations of the Senedd's Culture, Welsh Language and

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Communications Committee report of December 2020 on **the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on the Welsh language**, the Post-16 and Transitions project is exploring the opportunities to identify, share and build upon online Welsh language learning, activities and cultural events that have been developed during the pandemic.

The Welsh Government's March 2021 survey of **the effects of COVID-19 on learners** in school sixth forms, further education, work-based and adult learning, found that overall, respondents were positive about their experiences of learning through the medium of Welsh during the pandemic. However, respondents were somewhat more negative about opportunities to attend social activities (including online) to speak Welsh with other learners outside of their courses.

In September 2021 the Welsh Government announced £2.4m of funding to help increase Welsh language use following the pandemic. This included £2.2m to fund late immersion, enabling older children who are new to Wales, or those who have lost the opportunity to use their Welsh every day, to benefit from additional intensive teaching and support. In FE colleges, as part of the Winter of Wellbeing programme, additional funds were made available to deliver activities through the medium of Welsh and provide opportunities for Welsh speaking learners to socialise through the medium of Welsh, thereby boosting their language skills and confidence.

In February 2022, the Welsh Government announced arrangements making **Welsh lessons available free of charge** to all 16 to 25 year-olds as well as all teaching staff in Wales. In addition, the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol is working to expand the range of subject specific Welsh medium learning resources available for post-16 learners.

Regional consortia and local authorities should:

Recommendation 6

Track and evaluate the success of different models of providing additional support to learners across their areas, referring to the indicators suggested in this report

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Response to recommendation 6

The Welsh Government supports this recommendation for regional consortia and local authorities as set out in the Estyn thematic review report.

The Welsh Government has been mindful of the need to manage expectations of local authorities and consortia as they continue to work hard to respond to disruptions caused by the pandemic. Over the medium term, plans are in place to evaluate the responses of providers to the pandemic and to learn lessons from this period, so that they can be used to inform improvement efforts. As part of the global evaluation of pandemic related spending across post-16 education and training being commissioned, the Welsh Government aims to help identify the most effective practice in terms of additional support for the wellbeing and progress of learners. An evaluation of the responses of schools, Pupil Referral Units and EOTAS is also underway. These evaluations will involve information from, and discussions with, local authorities and consortia to learn about the challenges they faced and the approaches they took. The findings will be used to inform further reflective and improvement planning activity among consortia, local authorities and providers during the 2022 to 2023 academic year.

The Welsh Government has been using its monitoring data to track the progress of learners during the pandemic. The February 2022 report on **outcomes for learners in post-16 education affected by the pandemic** uses retention, achievement, qualification grade and progression data to analyse the emerging trends seen during the pandemic and compare them to previous cohorts of learners where possible. Over the long term, the Welsh Government will draw on other indicators among those suggested in the thematic review, to track the progress of this generation of young people as they progress through their education, training and their careers.

The Welsh Government should:

Recommendation 7

Ensure that conditions for any future catch up grant spending are flexible and

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are equivalent for schools and colleges.

Response to recommendation 7

The Welsh Government accepts this recommendation as set out in the Estyn thematic review report.

During the early stages of the pandemic, funding was issued to providers on an emergency basis to allow them to respond promptly to the unpredictable pandemic and the fast changing needs of learners and practitioners, both in terms of minimising risk to health and maximising the continuity in learning. The **COVID-19 Resilience Plan for the Post-16 Sector** of May 2020 set out the priorities for colleges and provided structure to their work in responding to the pandemic. Guidance for schools, and hence school sixth-forms, fell under the **Stay Safe, Stay Learning** policy statement of April 2020.

For 2021 to 2022 and 2022 to 2023, pandemic related funding guidance issued to FE colleges and local authorities (for school sixth forms), has been, and will continue to be, consistent for both provider types at post-16. The funding guidance issued during this period has, and will continue to, set out suitably broad objectives for the utilisation of the additional funding. This is to ensure that whilst providers benefit from clarity concerning what constitutes valid spending for each grant/fund, they also have the flexibility to utilise the funding in the most effective ways, using their local knowledge to ascertain the needs of their learners and staff members. Officials are mindful that the broad age ranges catered for by secondary and all-age schools with sixth forms, means that on occasion, guidance for these providers is best aligned with corresponding guidance for younger pupils.

Publication details

The report was published by Estyn on 22 June 2021.

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