Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

# RENEW AND REFORM

# POST-16 AND TRANSITIONS PLAN

ADDRESSING THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19
ON EDUCATION AND TRAINING

SKILLS, HIGHER EDUCATION
AND LIFELONG LEARNING
MARCH 2022

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**OGL**

# MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

**Over the past three academic years our children, young people and adult learners have experienced challenges to their education, wellbeing and every-day lives that previous generations of learners could only have imagined.**

Following the publication of our overarching Renew and Reform plan[1], this plan sets out the next steps in addressing the challenges facing our post-16 learners and the workforce that supports them. It outlines the support this Government has provided to-date and sets out my ambition to support the sector through a long-term evidence-based approach.

I believe that the post-16 sector in Wales has responded remarkably well to the many challenges of the past three academic years. In addition to the steadfast work, passion and commitment of all those who support the sector, the successes that have emerged from this response have only been possible due to a collaborative, system-wide approach. This plan sets out how we will build on this approach going forward, to shape our continued response to the pandemic and further develop a resilient post-16 education sector, which promotes life-long learning, equality of opportunity, and continuous improvement.

My ambition is that no learner is disadvantaged because of the disruption to education and training that we have seen. The evidence suggests that the impacts of this will come to light over time and will be different for different groups of learners. As such, the priority for the project will be to listen to providers, practitioners and learners to develop a greater understanding of the existing and emerging issues they face. This will enable us to work closely with them to develop a learner focussed, holistic, and sustainable package of support.

As part of our Programme for Government commitment to education reform, it is vital that we successfully support our children, young people and adult learners so that educational inequalities narrow and standards rise[2]. This plan complements and works in conjunction with other key policies, such as the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill[3], to help us achieve this. Our learners are among the most important and powerful assets that we have to contribute towards a prosperous Wales and our wellbeing as a nation beyond the pandemic.

**Jeremy Miles**
Minister for Education
and Welsh Language

# ABOUT
# THIS PLAN

**This plan sets out the way that the Welsh Government, as part of our Renew and Reform programme, will work with providers of post-16 education to support learners and practitioners to progress beyond the COVID-19 pandemic in the best way possible. It focusses on learners in school sixth forms, further education colleges, universities, work-based learning providers and providers of adult learning in the community, as well as learners who are transitioning into, between, or out of these sectors. In collaboration with the dedicated Vulnerable and Disadvantage Learners project within Renew and Reform, this Post-16 and Transitions project will work to help those already disadvantaged groups that have further been disproportionately affected by the disruption to post-16 education and training.**

The aims of the project align with the Programme for Government 2021-2026 commitment to ensure that educational inequalities narrow and standards rise, with nobody in Wales left behind after the coronavirus pandemic[2].  It supports the broader aims of the Children and Young People's Plan that young people should enjoy learning and have the best possible education to help expand their knowledge, develop their creativity and fulfil their potential.  The project is aligned with the long term goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act[4] for a prosperous, resilient, more equal Wales with a healthy population of cohesive communities, which thrive in a globally responsible way and celebrate the vibrant Welsh language and culture.  The project will support the language by contributing toward favourable conditions for the use of Welsh within post-16 education and training in line with the Cymraeg 2050 strategy[5].

Building on the COVID-19 Resilience Plan for the Post-16 Sector[6], this plan defines the collaborative, evidence-based approach that we will use over the next three years to shape and implement support measures. These measures will build on our early pandemic response in a way that providers and learners feel can best help them over the medium to long term.  Our post-16 providers are a diverse range of organisations, some operating with a high degree of independence. This plan recognises the value of that autonomy whilst leveraging opportunities for synergy by bringing providers together, within and across sector boundaries, to share their experiences and collaborate.  This plan does not set in stone the form which support measures will take, but rather it sets out how learners, practitioners and wider stakeholders are having their needs listened to, and how our support going forward will be tailored to meet those needs as they change over time.

Enquiries about this document should be directed to: Post16RenewReform@gov.wales

# UNDERSTANDING THE
# IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

**Wales went into 'lockdown' for the first time at the end of March 2020[7].  In-person teaching was suspended across the education and training sectors for all but a few learners, and wider travel and social mixing restrictions were introduced.**

Between 20 March and Christmas 2020, in-person teaching was suspended for 60-65 days at schools and FE colleges across Wales. Universities also asked students living in term-time accommodation to return home.  A further few days of disruption to in-person teaching and learning were seen across the sectors between January and March 2021.

With in-person teaching suspended, post-16 providers responded by moving learning online and supporting learners remotely. Providers revised their schemes of learning to focus on theoretical elements during periods of remote learning, whilst delivering practical elements when restrictions were eased and learners could physically attend.  Learners undertaking license to practice qualifications, together with vulnerable learners, were prioritised for on-site delivery[8].

Overall, the long term harms to physical health caused directly by the COVID-19 virus to young people, appear to be low[9][10]. However, the wider effects of the pandemic have had an impact on the physical, as well as the mental, health and wellbeing of learners. Decreased physical activity, changes to nutritional intake, and increased risk of domestic abuse, add to the pandemic's broader negative effects on mental health[9].

Early indications are that pandemic related disruption has exacerbated underlying inequalities that are determinants of mental health and wellbeing[11].  In a January 2021 survey of young people who had sought help with their mental health, 67% of respondents between 13 – 25 years of age believed that the pandemic would have a long-term negative effect on their mental health[12].  Concerns about the pandemic's impact on: school/college/university work, loneliness, others becoming ill, access to mental health support, relationships at home, and employment opportunities, were identified as the leading causes among this group[12][13]. These concerns were echoed across the broader population of learners, with some of those engaged in workplace activity also suffering from the pressures of working long hours in front-line occupations[14]. In general, disabled people suffered greater anxiety related to the pandemic than non-disabled people[15]. The Children's Commissioner for Wales found that disabled young people were more likely to report that the pandemic was negatively affecting their mental health and that they felt sad[16].  Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic young people were more likely than White Welsh or British young people to say they were worried about falling behind with their learning, and about how their exam results could be affected[17].

The spring 2021 National Education Workforce Survey indicated that many practitioners across Wales had concerns related to the pandemic's impact on their teaching or working practices, as well as their feelings of wellbeing and safety at work[18].

# INITIAL RESPONSE
## TO THE PANDEMIC

So far, around £310 million of additional funding has been allocated to support post-16 providers in Wales to respond to the pandemic. In May 2020, the Welsh Government published its COVID-19 Resilience Plan for the Post-16 Sector[6] setting out the way it would work with stakeholders to build resilience so that learning providers could adapt, disruption to learning could be effectively managed, and learner and staff wellbeing could be supported.

Prior to the pandemic, many providers were utilising blended learning to help deliver rich learning experiences and support. Remote learning technology was increasingly enabling learners to come together to engage in a range of subject specialist lessons through the medium of Welsh[19]. During periods where in-person teaching was suspended in response to the pandemic, providers in Wales expanded their online learning provision. As well as securing continuity in learning, this enabled providers to manage the number of learners and staff members present on-site at any given time. The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol developed Welsh-medium online learning resources for a range of vocational courses that, together with existing resources, enabled learning to continue bilingually. In addition, a good practice guide and online community were established for practitioners to share best practice and discuss the challenges of remote delivery.

The Welsh Government provided over £12 million to support remote learning; this funding was prioritised to address digital exclusion and led to 26,600 new devices being distributed to enable learners to study from home. A working group of provider representatives and key stakeholders helped to develop blended learning guidance[20] for FE colleges, work-based learning and adult learning providers, and to signpost relevant professional development information for practitioners in those sectors[21]. Universities in Wales also came together to share their approaches to teaching, learning and student support during the pandemic[22 23 24].

In response to an increasing need identified prior, and during the pandemic, the Welsh Government has made significant additional resources available to support mental health and wellbeing. In 2020/21, £4.5m of dedicated funding was allocated to the FE sector for this purpose, with providers also able to use their recovery and progression funding to support learner mental health and wellbeing.



For universities in 2020/21, a total of £50m was allocated to help provide additional support for students and staff members impacted by the pandemic. This included an initial £10m to provide increased support to students facing financial, emotional or mental health difficulties, and a further £40m in January 2021 to support student financial hardship[25].

Because of the pandemic related disruption, some learners required further support to successfully transition to the next stage of learning, into apprenticeships, training, or directly into work. In 2020/21, £8.8m was allocated to FE colleges and local authorities to provide dedicated transition support for those who were moving to the next stage in their educational journey.

Many work-based learners at greatest risk of losing their jobs because of the pandemic had their employment secured thanks to the job retention (furlough) scheme that remained active until September 2021. Via the apprenticeship employer incentive scheme that ran until February 2022, employers were able to access further pandemic related support of up to £4,000 for each new apprentice under 25 years of age that they recruited[26]. To reflect the increased costs of operating during the pandemic, the Welsh Government allocated £6m of dedicated funding to apprenticeship providers for the 2020-2021 financial year. This helped providers address challenges such as the increased need for learner support, the need for remote or socially distanced working as well as the need for adaptations to assessment arrangements.

For adult learning in the community, between September 2020 and March 2021, the Welsh Government allocated nearly £500k of additional funding. Part of this funding was used to procure digital devices and software, enabling learners to continue with their learning remotely. This distribution of devices supported the development of learners' digital skills and helped to ease learners' feelings of social isolation. A further £100k was dedicated to projects supporting professional learning among practitioners, as well as the mental health and wellbeing of learners and staff members across the sector.

# LEARNING
# FROM THE PANDEMIC

**A rapid review of published literature was conducted in September 2021 to examine what is known about the impact of COVID-19 on learners and educational practitioners across the post-16 sectors in Wales and beyond[27].**

The review focussed on identifying the most effective mitigations against the main harms caused by the disruption. Whilst the availability of evidence was limited, a number of mitigation measures were identified to inform the exploration of future support efforts. These include, but are not limited to:

- measures to support physical activity, improve sleep quality and provide counselling for young people[27];

- additional subject specific tutoring for learners in small groups[27];

- peer led learning support and mentoring[27];

- guaranteed work-based learning and training opportunities for vocational learners[28];

- greater access to the national digital learning platform for providers of adult learning[29];

- course application mentoring and financial support for disadvantaged learners engaging with HE[30];

- broader support for learners within under-represented groups to successfully complete their studies[31];

- targeted careers advice and guidance to enable all learners to choose the most suitable educational pathway[28];

- integration of blended learning programmes to help address the needs of learners with disabilities, those impacted by digital poverty and those with caring responsibilities[31];

- professional learning activities to help practitioners develop their blended learning expertise, and increased access to blended learning resources[29]; and

- improved communication within providers, improved functioning of workplaces and manageable workloads for staff members[32].

Further details of the findings derived from the published literature, together with the mitigating measures that should be explored going forward, are available within the literature review appendix.

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# MOVING ON
# FROM THE PANDEMIC

**The Renew and Reform programme, announced in June 2021 by the Minister for Education and Welsh Language, outlines the Welsh Government's approach to building on the support provided throughout the early stages of the pandemic[1]. It aims to bring together successfully implemented interventions and initiatives with new measures, to support learners and the education workforce. The aim is for the whole system to learn from what has worked during the early stages of the pandemic and to continue to build the capacity to improve.**

Learners need support to develop a secure foundation for learning; their physical and mental health, their emotional wellbeing, confidence and motivation are all key to this. Additionally, learners may face particular barriers to their development or may have missed out on specific learning opportunities that are important to their progression. Practitioners also need support for their own wellbeing; over the course of the pandemic they have adapted their teaching, re-planned learning, and responded to a range of new guidance, expectations and operational requirements.

**The Renew and Reform programme is being delivered through four key projects:**

| Early Years Learners | Disadvantaged and Vulnerable Learners | Post-16 and Transitions | All Learners in Schools |
|---|---|---|---|

As young people re-engage with in-person education and prepare for modified qualification assessments in 2021/22, many are worried about what impact the pandemic will have on their achievements and future progression. The Post-16 and Transitions project, working collaboratively with stakeholders and across the Renew and Reform programme, will need to support those young people to make informed, confident choices about their future education, training or journey into work. No young person should feel that because of the pandemic, they are unable to secure the future to which they aspire. We must help them to be confident in making informed choices about their futures, no matter what the outcome of their formal qualifications. Young people must be supported and motivated to do well and complete their education or training, knowing they will be empowered to explore a future pathway that is right for them.

# MOVING ON
# FROM THE PANDEMIC

**The aim of the Post-16 and Transitions project is to ensure an effective, evidence-based response to the impacts of COVID-19 on the post-16 sectors, including on learner progress, pathways and learning outcomes, as well as learner and staff wellbeing.  The post-16 sectors that the project will support are:**

WORK-BASED LEARNING

FURTHER EDUCATION

SCHOOL SIXTH FORMS

HIGHER EDUCATION

ADULT LEARNING IN THE COMMUNITY

Opportunities will also be taken to enhance the support available to learners transitioning into and between these sectors or into work.  In addition, where opportunities exist, support will be extended to providers of learning in the justice sector in Wales.

## Enabling providers

Local knowledge and decision making are key elements of successful education recovery plans[28][33]. Providers are best placed to identify the needs of their learners and staff members, before proceeding to coordinate and implement the necessary support.

The Welsh Government is committed to collaborating with providers to cater for learners and practitioners by providing them with the resources, guidance and help that they need to overcome the pandemic related disruption.

For the 2021/22 academic year, over £35m of additional pandemic related funding was issued to school sixth forms and FE colleges to support learner progression and wellbeing. A further £13m has been allocated to local authorities and FE colleges to support the transition of learners into and between the post-16 sectors.  HE institutions received £2.1m of pandemic related funds via HEFCW.  For adult learning in the community, £75k was used to build on the work of the previous year's mental health, wellbeing and professional learning projects. An additional £1m was issued to work-based learning providers to support the mental health and wellbeing of apprentices and £600k to support the mental health and wellbeing of traineeship learners during the 2021-22 financial year. For the 2022/23 academic year, at the time of writing in March 2022, £21.4m of additional funding has been ear-marked for pandemic related support to school sixth forms and FE colleges, with a further £2.3m ring-fenced

# MOVING ON
# FROM THE PANDEMIC

to support FE and HE learners' mental health and wellbeing in the wake of the pandemic.

**The funding allocated to school sixth forms and FE colleges is being used to enable:**

- learners who have missed subject content to have the opportunity to review previous learning and develop knowledge in order to meet the demands of their courses;

- learners to have specific pastoral support, including resilience and confidence building, to aid a successful return to in-person learning; and

- learners to have additional support with practical/workshop skills development that they may have missed during periods of remote learning.

FE colleges and school sixth forms have been given the flexibility to focus these additional hours of activity on the needs of their learners.  This means that provision will vary from place to place and from learner to learner according to need, with some learners receiving individual one-to-one support and others taking part in group sessions or a combination of both.

**Examples of how school sixth forms and colleges are using these additional hours include:**

- specific subject tuition;

- additional practical lessons such as laboratory or studio time;

- pastoral support to build confidence or help with mental health and wellbeing;

- live and recorded web-based events focused on strategies to support all learners;

- study skills and exam technique workshops; or

- masterclasses and talks from industry experts or guest speakers.

**The expectations of school-sixth forms and colleges are that they:**

- have a clear vision of the intended outcomes for the additional investment;

- work with a wide range of partners to develop strategies to support learners' progress and wellbeing;

- regularly track and evaluate the impact of additional spending in order to adjust current plans and inform future planning;

- consider building on successful changes to practice made during the pandemic; and

- ensure that learners' progress in Welsh is a priority, irrespective of linguistic background.

As part of the Renew and Reform programme, the Welsh Government will continue to work with providers to support them in delivering additional provision to post-16 learners.
Case studies of effective support will be used to share good practice among providers. Following on from Estyn's thematic review in June 2021[34], we will evaluate the effectiveness of additional pandemic related spending and use this to help inform our future planning.  We will remain mindful that the goal is to secure the best support for our learners, not simply delivering a headline figure of additional learning hours.

Alongside this approach of enabling providers to direct their support efforts according to local need, the project will help guide the coordination of activity among providers to make the most of the work taking place. In addition, the Welsh Government will collaborate with the sectors to secure improvements on a national level; these will facilitate the work of providers and achieve value for money through economies of scale.

# MOVING ON
# FROM THE PANDEMIC

**Supporting beyond the pandemic**

Collaborative working with stakeholders is at the core of the project's forward looking approach. The support offered will be informed by the experiences of learners, providers and practitioners, and will be shaped by how these stakeholders feel they can best be helped to move forward despite the effects of the pandemic. The project will take a differentiated approach to working with the various sectors according to the established norms of operation and oversight for each sector. Project activity will rely on the active participation of providers but leave space for the autonomy that different sectors need. For example, support offered to school sixth forms will likely involve a higher degree of Welsh Government coordination compared to support for universities, which are independent institutions with significant research and intelligence gathering expertise. However, where learners are preparing to transition from school or college to HE, there will likely be opportunities to coordinate further collaboration and information sharing between the sectors.

**The project will support learners and providers over the years that follow by coordinating activity and implementing support measures within the following four categories:**

## LEARNER WELLBEING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Supporting the wellbeing of learners including their physical and mental health; promoting learners' aspirations and confidence; developing learners' employability skills and work experience, study skills, interpersonal skills and resilience; promoting healthy choices and productive study environments.

## TEACHING, LEARNING AND ATTAINMENT

Additional teaching and learning, over and above the norm, that enhances the knowledge and skills of learners; formative assessment activities that help optimise teaching and learning.

## WORKFORCE WELLBEING AND RESILIENCE

Safeguarding the wellbeing of practitioners including workload considerations; developing the resilience of the education workforce through professional learning; expanding the workforce through recruitment and retention, making the most of individual and collective attributes.

## LEARNER TRANSITIONS AND PATHWAYS

The acquisition of insightful information about learners' abilities, needs and attributes; sharing knowledge and information about learners and their needs with relevant practitioners in a secure and timely way to support learner progress; enhanced support for learners in moving between sectors of education and training and into the workplace.

# EARLY SUPPORT
# MEASURES

**Due to the pressing nature of the work, the Welsh Government has instigated the development and piloting of a number of early national support measures, aimed at securing gains for learners and practitioners over the short and medium term.**



**At the time of writing in March 2022, support measures in development include:**

- 'Winter of Wellbeing' activities aimed at supporting the social, emotional and physical wellbeing of children and young people up to 25 years of age over the winter months of 2021/22; delivered by universities, FE colleges, local authorities, schools and national organisations.

- Development of a trauma informed approach to FE delivery; in partnership with the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Hub.

- A-level revision digital resources to help learners reinforce their classroom learning and prepare for assessments; developed in collaboration between the Renew and Reform 'All Learners in Schools' project and the WJEC[35].

- A recruitment campaign to expand the Welsh education workforce by encouraging interest in teaching related roles and facilitating return to teaching; conducted in partnership with the Education Workforce Council.

- The 'Well Aware' pilot project to promote mental health and wellbeing among teaching practitioners; conducted by the Joint Trade Unions and FE institutions.

- Reviews of FE and school teacher workloads.

- Digital delivery professional learning resource development. A programme of staff training units to advance digital delivery practice among FE, work-based and adult learning practitioners; developed by Jisc on behalf of the Welsh Government.

- Additional digital support for the FE and skills sectors including tailored support for cyber security, sustainable ICT investment and data analytics; delivered by Jisc on behalf of the Welsh Government.

- University Ready digital resources to support learners with their applications and transitions to university; developed by Welsh universities in partnership with the Open University[36].

- Piloting improved arrangements for learner information sharing to support learner transition and transfer between schools and colleges; in partnership with ColegauCymru.

- Tailored work experience opportunities to engage key stage 4 learners who have not been attending school as well as they should since the return of full time in-person teaching; pilot programme delivered by Careers Wales.

We will continue with the implementation and evaluation of these measures, as well as develop further support measures in collaboration with stakeholders.

# FUTURE SUPPORT
## MEASURES

**The four categories will be used as a framework for the support measures that the project will implement and coordinate. As part of the process of working with stakeholders, information about the effects of the pandemic and the experiences of learners will be used to form a wide range of possible support measures.**

Stakeholders will consider, shape and trial different support measures, providing feedback on their effectiveness where possible. The design, development and implementation process for these support measures is illustrated below:
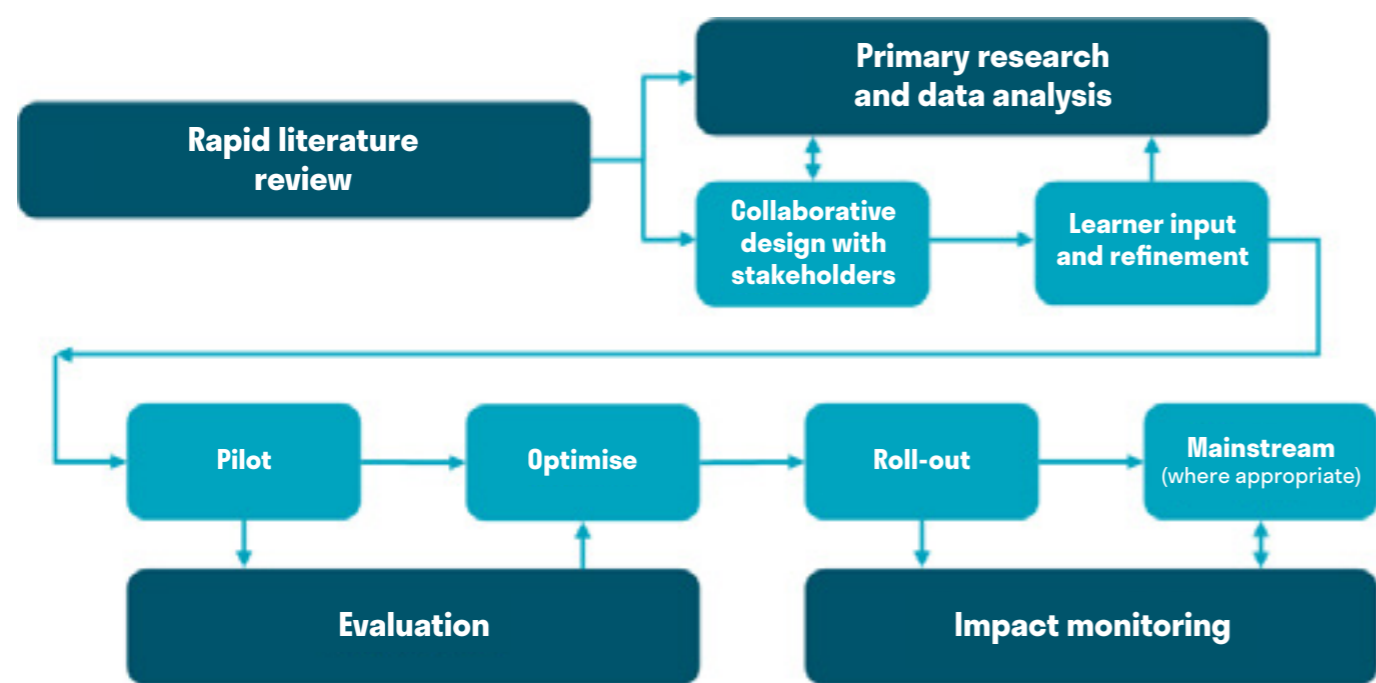


As part of the collaborative stakeholder design phase, providers together with wider stakeholders, will scope, assess and select the strongest support measure proposals. Different support measures will address very different identified development needs across the four categories. As such, they will progress through the design, development and implementation process at different rates according to prioritisation, resource availability and workforce capacity. Wherever beneficial to do so, support measures developed in the context of a particular age group or sector will be extended to encompass different age groups and sectors across the projects of the Renew and Reform programme.

# FUTURE SUPPORT
## MEASURES

**Timeline**

The main project delivery phases span the three year period from the 1st August 2021- 31st July 2024, followed by a period of continued monitoring and evaluation. The design, development and implementation stages (as illustrated previously) will not be linearly distributed across the three years of the project. The roll-out of support measures, whilst at a relatively advanced stage within the design, development and implementation process, needs to be achieved relatively quickly in order to benefit the maximum number of learners and practitioners affected by the pandemic.
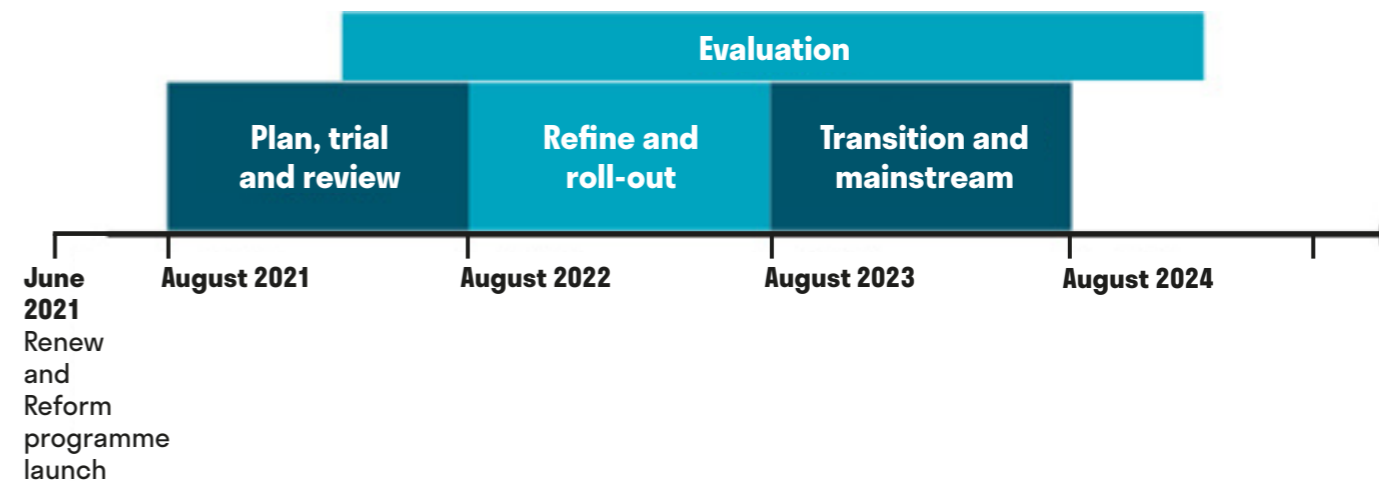


During the lifetime of the project, if an opportunity exists to meet a newly identified need, the process of planning and trialling may be revisited to develop specific newly proposed support measures. This responsive approach means that whilst support measure development and implementation is generally expected to align to the timeline above, specific support measures can be introduced at later stages as needs arise.

# FUTURE SUPPORT MEASURES

### Stage 1: Plan, trial and review

In consultation with stakeholders, and drawing on wider evidence where available, the initial focus of the project will be to determine the nature and urgency of the additional support needs.  Knowledge about the wide range of existing support that providers have put in place will allow any gaps and potential improvement opportunities to be identified.  The effectiveness of these existing measures will be gauged using the evidence available, including the views of learners and practitioners.

Reviewing the available literature, the most effective mitigations against the impacts associated with the disruption to education and training during the pandemic will be identified.  This process will require ongoing updating as further evidence becomes available.  Stakeholder representatives, including providers and learners, will be consulted on which support measures have proven effective so far and how they believe they can best be supported going forward.  Additional, longer term research into the effects of the pandemic related disruption will be instigated in collaboration with the other three projects of the Renew and Reform programme.  In parallel, a set of impact metrics will be identified to enable the effects, predominantly on learners but also on practitioners, to be gauged over the course of the project and beyond.   As part of this process, the Welsh Government is currently investigating which data can be used to quantify the impacts of the pandemic and the disruption to education and training.

Informed by the research and in collaboration with stakeholders, support measure proposals will then be developed.  Following a collaborative stakeholder process of prioritisation, an initial set of measures will be piloted.  Subsequent trials may be instigated throughout the plan, trial and review phase.  Information collated from trials will be used to refine approaches and inform decisions as to the appropriateness of wider roll-out.

### Stage 2: Refine and roll-out

During this phase, the range of support directly available to learners and practitioners will expand.  Successful trials from the preceding phase will be evaluated and used to inform Ministerial budget decisions, before refinement and possible wider roll-out.  Much of the activity during this phase will be concerned with overcoming the challenges of wide-scale roll-out.  Impact monitoring activity will be used to refine aspects of the implemented support measures, including where appropriate and feasible, refinement of approaches to suit different sectors, providers or groups of learners.

Subject to legislation, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) will be established as an independent Welsh Government sponsored body in 2023[3]. The Post-16 and Transitions project is dedicated to addressing the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and as such it is distinct from the work of the Welsh Government in establishing the Commission.  However, following the establishment of the Commission, elements of the work of the project may be transferred to the Commission.

### Stage 3: Transition and mainstream

As well as ensuring the continued effective and optimal operation of the implemented support measures, activity during this phase will focus on identifying those aspects of support that will be most impactful on an ongoing basis.  Work will begin to identify ways in which additional support measures can become an integral part of mainstream activity across the sectors and how any associated costs can be met going forward.

# EVALUATING THE
# PANDEMIC SUPPORT

The Renew and Reform Post-16 and Transitions project is underpinned by the recognition that good quality evidence is vital to navigate the unique circumstances presented by the pandemic, its impacts and the policy challenges it represents. The project has, as part of its guiding principles, the aim that it will be evidence based and that monitoring and evaluation of all support measures will be undertaken. An evaluation and monitoring framework is being developed that will encompass the following areas:

- review of emerging evidence about the impacts on learners and the effectiveness of interventions - from project level analytical activity as well as wider evidence sources;

- stakeholder engagement focusing on shared understanding, co-development of support measures and perceived programme effectiveness;

- wider evidence-gathering activity led by specialist organisations and making use of existing data sets and survey evidence; and

- identification and development of relevant impact metrics.

The framework will be composed of multiple elements designed to assess the effectiveness of delivery, outcomes and longer-term impact of the project. The evaluation has a number of broad objectives that will cut across the project's delivery phases:

# EVALUATING THE
# PANDEMIC SUPPORT

| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Learning lessons** | **Sharing best practice** | **Future-proofing** | **Evaluating** |
| Identify 'lessons learned' (both positive and negative) from the response to the pandemic. | Identify and share good practice, finding opportunities to retain positive outcomes including innovative approaches to learning delivery, learner support and professional learning. | Identify learning that can be effectively applied to future business continuity challenges. | Evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on learners, practitioners and on the sectors overall. |

**The following table sets out the approach to evaluating the project through each delivery phase. Not every proposed activity will be discrete to each delivery phase, for example, the synthesis and use of existing and emerging evidence is a continuous activity as is stakeholder learning and engagement.**

| | EVALUATION APPROACH |
|---|---|
| **DELIVERY PHASE 1: PLAN, TRIAL AND REVIEW** | - Development of a theory of change approach for the project, including a review of the project's aims and objectives<br>- Synthesis and use of existing evidence and intelligence gathering<br>- Development of impact metrics from existing and proposed monitoring data<br>- Ensure that evidence gathering has a learner and practitioner focus – understanding their perspectives, as well as the need to engage key stakeholders in research design<br>- Process evaluation of pilot support measures<br>- Gathering learner and staff views via surveys, interviews, focus groups.<br>- Use and build on existing surveys. |
| **DELIVERY PHASE 2: REFINE AND ROLL-OUT** | - Commission evaluation of the Post-16 and Transitions project to explore: the form of delivery to-date; what works; communication of plans and how well they are understood and acted upon; any unfulfilled aims; the short-term outcomes; measurement of longer-term impact; and recommendations for changes.<br>- Build on and improve existing impact metrics. |
| **DELIVERY PHASE 3: TRANSITION AND MAINSTREAM** | - Commission a mid-term evaluation to investigate the extent to which activities have been mainstreamed and their effectiveness. |
| **DELIVERY PHASE 4: EVALUATION** | - Commission a final impact evaluation of the project. |

## OPPORTUNITIES
# BEYOND THE PANDEMIC

**While the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic have required rapid responses and difficult decisions to be made, these have led to some positive developments and opportunities that should be capitalised upon:**

- frequent and clear communication with the sectors and with stakeholders;
- quicker and more transparent decision-making by Welsh Government, including direct responses to provider queries and requests;
- reduced bureaucracy;
- institutions' rapid responses to community needs, including providing their premises for field hospitals, producing personal protective equipment and volunteering by staff and learners;
- opportunities to strengthen communication with learners and support them to become more resilient and independent;
- increased online learning delivery and support, accelerating the sector's response to our Digital 2030 vision, and providing opportunities to extend blended learning models in future; and
- increased utilisation of online working, enabling learners and practitioners to engage with elements of learning and collaboration through the medium of Welsh, regardless of where they are based[19][29].

As we begin to embed the 'new normal', we need to ensure that progress in these areas is not lost. We will work with sector partners to help evaluate the positive changes that have taken place and to plan to make them sustainable. We will continue to take opportunities to improve learner and practitioner wellbeing, learner experiences and educational outcomes across the post-16 education and training landscape in Wales. We will develop the resilience of the post-16 system to better prepare the sectors to respond to future threats and challenges.

We will continue to support the post-16 sectors to develop and implement their wellbeing strategies. Working with providers, we will encourage collaboration and embed wellbeing support services for learners and practitioners, into the sectors. We will enable providers to build on existing mental health and wellbeing initiatives and ensure they are fully embedded, sustainable and accessible to the staff and learners who require them. Alongside this, we will evaluate the impact of support measures implemented across the sectors, and support the ongoing development of approaches that are shown to be effective.

Working closely with providers and key stakeholders we will explore sustainable and strategic approaches to further develop blended learning and our digital infrastructure. We will provide additional support to increase awareness, enhance understanding and promote good practice in the areas of digital disaster planning, cybersecurity and resilience of digital delivery. We will continue to support the embedding and integration of effective blended learning approaches and will maintain a focus on the dissemination of best practice and collaboration for teaching, learning and assessment.

Planning to move on from the pandemic whilst remaining responsive to the changing public health situation is challenging. We must build resilience across the post-16 sectors and future-proof against any potential disruption, threats and challenges that may lie ahead. We need to learn the lessons from the past two years and build on what has worked well. Most importantly we will continue to take a 'team Wales' approach that involves close collaboration between the Welsh Government, our stakeholders and education institutions, to respond to the needs of post-16 learners in Wales with swift, flexible and effective interventions.

## APPENDIX
# LITERATURE REVIEW

**A rapid review of published literature was conducted in September 2021 to examine what is known about the impact of COVID-19 on learners and education practitioners across the post-16 sectors in Wales and beyond[27]. The findings of the review are being used to inform proposals for the expansion of existing support measures, and in the development of new measures, with the aim of minimising the negative impacts of the pandemic on learners and practitioners. The review of the existing literature has also helped identify gaps in the evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on post-16 learners and practitioners.**

The following summary outlines the main harms caused to the wellbeing and progress of learners, as well as the wellbeing of practitioners, but focusses on the suggested approaches to mitigating against these harms. Much of the evidence on harms and mitigations referred to below has been collated from rapid reviews commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), or by the Welsh Government via the Wales COVID-19 Evidence Centre. In addition, we have drawn on a range of wider publications including the findings of Estyn thematic reviews and have considered a number of learner and practitioner surveys carried out by the Education Workforce Council (EWC), the National Union of Students (NUS) and teaching unions.

## Availability of evidence

It is important to highlight that at the time of conducting this literature review in November 2021, the evidence available on the harms caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is largely preliminary, and in many cases incomplete as the effects of the pandemic are still emerging. Furthermore, the availability of evidence is inconsistent across the different post-16 education and training sectors, and may not be directly relevant to the experience of learners in Wales as it draws on international research. The information gathered thus far should be regarded as a snapshot of the pandemic related challenges; further research is required to understand how these harms will evolve. In terms of

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suggested mitigations, it is important to be mindful that effective approaches in one context may not always work in another.

Where we have identified gaps in the evidence base we will consult with providers and learners, including learners from protected groups, those who are socio-economically deprived, and Welsh speakers, to enhance our understanding of the impacts upon them. We will work with them to identify potential mitigations wherever possible. In addition, where reasonable, we will extrapolate relevant findings relating to learners in adjacent age groups or different sectors, to address gaps in evidence.

## Mental health and wellbeing

The disruption to normal routines, education, recreation, as well as concern for family income and health, has left many young people feeling anxious, frustrated and concerned for their futures. The ongoing effects of the pandemic, particularly on the most disadvantaged, highlight the importance of recognising and meeting the support needs of learners and their families. We need to ensure that inequalities do not widen further and that learners of all ages are given the opportunity to reach their full potential despite the pandemic.

**The published evidence suggests exploring the following mitigations:**

- Prompt and careful identification of learners most at risk of disengaging from learning or experiencing mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. Monitoring of their wellbeing on a regular basis and prioritisation of support according to need[14].
- Clear signposting of how support for mental health and emotional wellbeing can be accessed by all learners, including those studying with subcontractors or partner providers[27].
- Easier access to a wide range of mental health and wellbeing services[14].

- Help from care services in the form of screening and effective referral pathways to clinical treatment can have a benefit for learners in sixth form colleges[27].
- Interventions, such as counselling, physical activity, and sleep improvement can positively impact on older teenagers' and sixth form students' wellbeing[27].
- Mindfulness interventions have been shown to be successful in improving wellbeing for a wide range of learners including 4-15 year olds, and youths in sixth form colleges. The strongest evidence on the beneficial impact of mindfulness exists in post-secondary education[27].
- The development of 'recovery frameworks' based on local collaborative inter-disciplinary and multi-agency strategies. These are seen to be most effective when attempting to address complex socio-mental health issues[28]. Support is provided more efficiently and effectively when providers work closely with internal and external partners and specialist agencies and multi-agency support arrangements are most effective where learners are given a single point of contact[14].
- An increase in staff awareness of mental health and emotional wellbeing. Estyn report that this allows staff to be better placed to identify and support learners that are struggling as well as helping staff to maintain their own emotional wellbeing[14].
- Appropriate supervision, mentoring and professional learning for counselling staff with regards to providing effective support remotely[14].
- Further training for youth workers particularly in the areas of homelessness, drug misuse awareness, domestic abuse, trauma recovery, LGBTQ, gender and identity[18].

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### Teaching, learning and transitions

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant disruption to in-person teaching and learning which resulted in changes to curriculum and pedagogy as learners and practitioners moved to online learning. There is little information available about the impact of remote learning on attainment gaps between learners from different socio-economic backgrounds. However, learners who had readily available access to technology and reliable broadband internet connectivity found it easier to adapt to new ways of working[14]. Prior to the pandemic, research suggested that there were considerable existing challenges relating to progression through the upper secondary phase of school, for middle and lower-attaining learners. Current research suggests that internal barriers to progression, particularly associated with attainment in maths and English, may be compounded by the pandemic[28].

### The published evidence suggests exploring the following mitigations:

- Provision of resources and activities to develop learners' resilience to overcome challenges and prepare them for work[14].
- Targeted support activity for learners from the most deprived socio-economic backgrounds. This can have a significant positive impact on their progress[27].
- Additional subject specific tutoring by trained and qualified teachers on a one-to-one or small group basis, this has a positive impact on progress in learning for 3-18 year olds[27].
- Peer led learning support and mentoring schemes that have a positive impact on the progress of 3-18 year olds[27].
- Metacognition and self-regulation activities to help learners assess their own needs and progress with their learning[27].
- Additional teaching delivered during holiday periods as well as at the end of the school/

college day; these have been shown to be successful in promoting progress in 3-18 year olds and students transitioning to higher education[27].
- Financial aid and improved information which have been found to help high-potential but low income learners progress to higher education. Wider interventions aimed at retaining students at higher education institutions have also been shown to be beneficial[27].
- Adapting online or blended learning in ways appropriate to specific programmes and students[30].
- Teaching and researching about disasters and pandemics as part of mainstream higher education curriculum and research programmes[28].
- Improved training, collaborative learning and more blended learning to support catch-up[28].
- Quality assurance of remote and blended learning provision to ensure that all programmes meet a minimum quality standard so as to reduce the variability in provision[29].
- Sharing of emerging and innovative remote and blended learning practice within and across post-16 sectors in Wales and beyond[29].
- Continued support for the post-16 sectors with guidance to enable providers to develop high quality remote and blended approaches[29].
- Professional learning which is free to providers and helps them to develop specific expertise in remote and blended learning design and assessment skills[29 18].
- Access to a national resource bank developed by awarding bodies or by experienced practitioners (especially useful for newly qualified teachers); including assessment and marking schemes which can be adapted[18].
- Upskilling youth workers with the necessary IT skills to be confident in delivering blended learning[18].

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### Vocational education

It has been more challenging for some courses and programmes than others to utilise remote learning methods. This has been particularly the case for learners in vocational and work-based learning settings who are undertaking technical courses and apprenticeships. They need to practise with specialist equipment and in specialist facilities, as well as take supervised assessments to demonstrate occupational or professional competence[29].

Providers of vocational, work-based and adult learning have also faced an increase in youth unemployment, delays to apprenticeship starts and completions, disruption to the uptake of practical vocational qualifications, and challenges in verifying learners' skills[28]. Problems of participation have affected adults in particular.

### The published evidence suggests exploring the following mitigations:

- Multi-agency joined up measures (e.g. careers guidance, personal support programmes), starting early and co-ordinated locally[28].
- Improved availability of jobs placements[28].
- The creation of sufficient work-based learning opportunities ensuring the most vulnerable young people have access to these[28].
- 'Youth' or Opportunity Guarantee schemes (to note this is already a Programme for Government commitment in Wales and existing policy in Scotland)[28].
- Longer-term plans based on a 'green recovery' that have young people at their centre[28].
- Enabling adult learning in the community partnerships and learners to access a national centralised digital platform to provide remote and blended learning more easily[29].

Evidence from the literature suggests that disruption to learning has magnified socio-economic gaps and widened inequalities. This was evidenced

by an initial increase in the number of learners who were NEET across the UK and Ireland and the impact of the pandemic on youth unemployment and rates of worklessness experienced by racially minoritised young people[28]. A suggested mitigation strategy is to link interventions at different levels and to bring them together in personalised support packages.

### Higher Education access and participation

Higher education (HE) in the UK, like other phases of education, has been significantly affected by the COVID pandemic, with in-person teaching and learning suspended for significant periods during the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years. The wellbeing and health, including mental health, of many staff, students, applicants and recent graduates, will have been impacted by the pandemic. Potential future self-isolation, repeated re-isolation, or quarantine requirements may exacerbate a range of mental health issues, in addition to feelings of loneliness and lack of belonging[31]. Increased home working and use of online learning may raise additional challenges related to safety, for example micro-aggression and harassment.

The pandemic has exacerbated the attainment gap in schools associated with levels of poverty and this, together with the high relative cost of higher education to medium and low-income families, presents a significant barrier to widening participation in HE[30].

It remains too early for the full impact of the pandemic on apprenticeships, including degree level apprenticeships, to be gauged. Due to the nature of their work roles, most degree or graduate apprentices have been able to remain in learning throughout the pandemic. Some have been able to undertake their job-roles from home, whilst others who were furloughed, have been able to continue with the off-the-job elements of their studies as they wait to resume their work. A longer-term challenge is maintaining the balance of study and workplace elements.

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Whilst study activity can usually continue in a distance/online learning format, work-based elements are dependent on employment circumstances and whether apprentices are able to gain the required experience. The longer the period of disruption to the work-based experience, the further the apprenticeship experience may deviate from its intended form. As with other higher education courses, providers have made increasing use of distance/online learning approaches and new digital technologies. The challenges associated with this change may be exacerbated by the learning arrangements in place for delivery, for example, whether apprentices are usually on campus for block periods or whether the arrangements are more akin to day release[37].

All universities deliver the GO Wales Achieve through Work Experience programme. Work placements delivered via this programme, have not been as widely available during the pandemic. Some priority students who normally find engagement in GO Wales' activities challenging, may disengage from the programme or from HE altogether as a result of remote living and/or blended learning. Alternative mechanisms for developing employability skills, tailored to individual needs, should be developed[31].

Overall, the increased use of online learning across HE can affect new and returning students' sense of belonging, which is known to be a contributing factor to retention, wellbeing and success. A September 2021 survey found that 64% of students felt that the in-person start of the new academic year would have a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing and 69% agreed that feeling part of a university community was important[38].

The move to different forms of teaching and learning has increased demands on staff. Such demands may impact more on women and early career researchers, many of whom experience COVID-19-related increased responsibilities as parents or

carers of young children[31].

**The published evidence suggests exploring the following mitigations:**

- Mentoring and support with university entrance applications[30].

- Financial incentives, either on their own or combined with information, motivation and support[30].

- Increasing local community support for higher education institutions[30].

- Promotion of Welsh Government campaigns to protect people experiencing violence or abuse and ensure appropriate support is available to victims[31].

- Collaboration between providers and employers to enable apprentices to continue their studies where possible and to widen access to apprenticeships[31].

- Development of blended learning programmes which support all learners and take into consideration the needs of disabled learners, those impacted by digital poverty and those with caring responsibilities[31].

- Monitoring the retention of all students and utilising the Strategic Equality Plans and Fee and Access Plans to demonstrate how students under-represented in HE, including students with protected characteristics, will be retained and enabled to succeed[31].

- Cross-organisation working between GO Wales's teams and other HE professionals to ensure all students have equality of opportunity and retention[31].

## Education workforce

The Institute for Employment Research (IER) was commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to undertake a rapid review of international evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on education, childcare and social workers and other relevant

parts of the social care workforce[32]. The objective of the review was to understand the short- and long-term impacts on the above groups and how these could be mitigated to minimise the negative impact of the pandemic. The research evidence highlights the mental health and wellbeing harms observed amongst education workers; high levels of stress as a consequence of the pandemic resulted in low morale and high staff turnover.

A report by the charity 'Education Support' published in summer 2020 found that 52% of teachers across the UK felt their mental health and wellbeing had declined compared to 2019[39]. The decline in mental health, particularly amongst teachers, was attributed in part to lack of clear guidance and concerns about their physical health. Reports suggest that the mental health of teachers deteriorated as the pandemic went on, particularly as teachers returned to in-person teaching[40 41 42]. In terms of physical health there was little evidence to suggest that education workers were at increased risk of contracting coronavirus compared to other professional groups. However, there was evidence of a perception amongst education workers that they were at significant risk[32]. Findings of a review of international research suggested that a lack of clear guidance and lack of PPE exacerbated this perception[32].

**The published evidence suggests exploring the following mitigations:**

- Improving communication within organisations.

- Improving the functioning of the workplace.

- Limiting working hours to manageable levels.

- Limiting paperwork and other administrative tasks.

- Providing training to deal with difficult situations.

The utilisation of individual coping strategies such as mindfulness, sleeping and eating well and balancing personal and work demands declined during the pandemic as educational workers had less time.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that addressing the root cause of mental health issues is more effective than using self-care strategies to cope with their impacts. There was some evidence to show that physical activity could improve mental health, but there was no evidence that physical activity had declined during the pandemic[32].

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