



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

From: Redacted S40 (2)

Cleared by: Redacted s 40(2)

Date: 22 August 2025

MINISTERIAL ADVICE - MA/JMHSC/2101/25

For decision by: Jeremy Miles MS, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care

Copied to: Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing

Subject	The future commissioning of Physician Associate (PA) training places in Wales.
100-word summary	Continued uncertainties about the future direction for PAs has resulted in a lack of demand from NHS organisations for commissioning PA places in 2025 and 2026, together with limited employment opportunities for those already in training. An urgent decision is therefore required about the future commissioning of PA training places.
Timing	Urgent - by 29 August. The minimum notice period for Health Education Improvement Wales (HEIW) to inform Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of a change in contracts is 12 months from the start of the programme (i.e. September 2025 for September 2026 programme start). Therefore, a decision is required as soon as possible.
Recommendation	Officials recommend Option 2 (<i>Negotiate a pause in the programme / a fallow year</i>) as the preferred option and way forward.
Decision report	This decision requires a Decision Report, which may be published at any point.

ADVICE

The current situation

1. Due to continued uncertainties about the future direction for PAs there has been a lack of demand from NHS organisations for commissioning PA places in 2025 and 2026, together with limited employment opportunities for those already in training (47 graduating in both 2025 and 2026).
2. Officials have discussed this urgent matter with HEIW senior colleagues and obtained additional information as requested by the Special Adviser, the findings of which have been incorporated within this advice.
3. Urgent consideration in relation to the way forward is required by the Cabinet Secretary (by 29 August), as the minimum notice period for HEIW to notify HEIs of a change in contracts is 12 months from the start of the programme (i.e. September 2025 for September 2026 programme start). Three options have been set out below (at paragraph 11), for the Cabinet Secretary's consideration.
4. Additionally, a decision is required ahead of the submission of the annual *Education and Training Commissioning*. HEIW aim to submit the draft 2026-27 Education and Training Plan (ETP) to the Welsh Government in early September. On receipt of the draft plan, officials will consult with wider Welsh Government colleagues, before preparing separate advice for the Cabinet Secretary to consider.

Background

5. The NHS Wales has commissioned the education and training for PAs since 2016-17. There are currently two contracts in place, as outlined below:

	Location	Health Boards Covered	Full Time Post Graduate Diploma /MSc Provision (2-year course)
			Commissioning range (minimum & maximum numbers per annum)
Swansea University	South, West and Mid-Wales.	Cardiff and Vale, Aneurin Bevan, Cwm Taf Morgannwg, Swansea Bay, Hywel Dda (East, West and South), and Powys.	34-37
Bangor University	North Wales.	Betsi Cadwaladr.	18-20

- The current cost of training a PA over two years is approx. £30k (which includes fees, bursary, travel etc.).
- There are currently 94 PAs in training (two cohorts) and the annual cost is circa. £2.82m across both contracts (*from 2025/26 fees will rise by £535 per student per year from £9,000 to £9,535*).
- Until 2025, levels of commissioning have been maintained at 52-54 per annum. This has been informed by levels of requests for Health Boards which have varied from 42 – 63. Recruitment into roles within NHS Wales has generally been positive at around 80%.

HEIW's assessment

6. During 2024 concerns emerged across the UK from medical professional bodies leading to adverse media coverage and significant criticism of these roles in relation to quality and lack of clarity on professional boundaries. Together with financial reasons, in 2024 this led to significant difficulties in securing roles for graduating PAs and despite substantial efforts only 30 out of 47 were able to find employment.
7. At the same time Health Board commissioning requests which informed the ETP for 2025-26 reduced to five. When the ETP was approved it was therefore agreed a minimum contract level position should be assumed, with 42 places commissioned to start in September 2025.
8. The *Leng Review* was announced prior to the decision on the ETP, and it was anticipated this would provide some clarity and forward direction for PAs. The *Leng Review* was published on 16 July and several recommendations from the review, will impact on these roles going forwards.
9. The streamlining process for the 2025 graduating cohort has commenced with only five jobs available for the cohort of 47 students, who are currently completing their programme and due to graduate. Integrated Medium Term Plan (IMTP) requests for this cohort had totalled 42. The commissioning requests for the next ETP round (2026-27) totals seven.
10. It has therefore been necessary for HEIW to consider the following issues:
 - *Responsibility towards students applying to join the programme in September 2026 and the prospect that there will be insufficient jobs available.*
 - *Value for money (VFM) in terms of education and training investment.*
 - *Continued tension with NHS organisations regarding future employment of these individuals when they have not requested them.*
 - *Adverse impact on the potential outcomes for those individuals who are already participating in the PA programme.*
 - *PA commissioning from the 2026/27 ETP.*

Options for consideration

11. An assessment of the risks, benefits and financial implications associated with each option has been provided below. **Option 2** is deemed the preferred option by officials.

Option 1: Continue with minimum contract levels

Risks / Benefits

- There may be few or no job opportunities for students recruited onto the programme once they complete.
- Poor value for money on investment if students unable to secure suitable employment on completion.
- Commissioning 42 (minimum) places minimises investment in contract and maintains commitment in developing new roles.

Financial implications

- Cost of commissioning minimum 42 places for Autumn 2026 is estimated at £1.625m (£38.7k each) over the two-year period (starting in September 2026) and will be reflected in the ETP 26-27 submission.

Option 2: Negotiate a pause in the programme (a fallow year).Risks / Benefits:

- Avoids recruiting students onto a programme where there may be few or no job opportunities on completion.
- Potential to retain programmes for future years.
- HEI staff with specific skills may leave, particularly if paused for more than one year, impacting on the ability to commission the programme in the future.
- “Retention” cost likely to sustain course provision for future years.
- Value for Money (VFM) - noting the above, this could minimise investment costs involved.
- Perception that the role of PAs is not supported in Wales, although it could be argued that there is still the provision to commission after the pause / fallow period.

Financial implications:

- This would require negotiation with HEIs regarding the fixed, costs that would still be incurred, particularly if there is an intention to continue commissioning following the fallow period.
- On the basis that there would be no students, the costs of bursary and travel would be avoided. There is no specific provision in the contract for agreeing pause/fallow periods, therefore it would be subject to a financial negotiation with each HEI.

Option 3: DecommissioningRisks / Benefits

- Avoids recruiting students onto a programme where there may be few or no job opportunities on completion.
- Perception that role of PAs is not supported in Wales.
- Avoids poor VFM investment should graduates be unable to find suitable employment following completion.

Financial implications

- September 2026 - if 12-month notice is provided before this programme commences the costs of running this programme could be avoided (estimated £1.6m over 2-year period - c£0.5m in 20-26-27, £0.8m in 2027-28, £0.3m in 2028-29).

Recommendation

12. On balance, officials recommend **Option 2** (*Negotiate a pause in the programme / a fallow year*) as the preferred option and way forward.
13. In addition to the benefits outlined under Option 2, implementing a fallow year would align with recommendations from the recently published *Leng Review*. Specifically, the review highlights the importance of scope of practice, credentialling, career development, teamworking, and oversight. It recommends that newly qualified Physician Associates gain a minimum of two years' experience in secondary care before transitioning into roles within primary care or mental health trusts.

14. Subject to the *Leng Review* recommendations being implemented in Wales, HEIs will need to review the curriculum for PA education, to ensure it remains appropriate. Implementing a fallow year would allow the curriculum implications of the *Leng Review* to be considered, changes made to the course, and communications to be developed to support future recruitment.
15. The number of PA students and graduates in the pipeline, against the low number of job opportunities being identified, would support a pause in the current PA programme, for one year, while the *Leng Review* recommendations are implemented and an assessment made of future PA demand and how this is balanced with future supply.
16. HEIW has informed officials the projected costs associated with Option 2 (a fallow year) are expected to be lower than those incurred during a standard commissioning year, due to the absence of funding requirements for clinical placements. However, the precise funding requirements (i.e. for staff retention and already incurred cost) will need to be clarified by HEIW in consultation with HEIs and subsequently communicated to the Welsh Government through the ETP process.

Finance

17. There are no immediate financial implications arising from this Ministerial advice. Any costs associated with the 2026–27 ETP will be subject to future Ministerial consideration, and financial implications will be addressed as part of that process.

Legal

18. There are currently no legal obligations arising from this advice, and as such, legal clearance has not been sought. As further work is undertaken and findings are submitted to the Welsh Government, officials will provide the Cabinet Secretary with updated advice. At that stage, the need for legal input will be assessed and sought as appropriate.

Media / Communications

19. There is no activity planned at this stage.

Annexe 1: ASSURANCE AND COPY RECIPIENTS**CLEARANCE TRACKING**

Aspect	Tracking	Yes	No	N/A	Clearance no.
Finance	Financial implications over £50,000?	☐	☐	☒	
	Cleared by Group Finance?	☐	☐	☒	
	Cleared by Budget & Government Business Division?	☐	☐	☒	
	Cleared by Local Government Finance?	☐	☐	☒	
Legal	Legal issues?	☐	☐	☒	
	Cleared by relevant lawyers?	☐	☐	☒	
Governance	Novel and contentious issues?	☐	☐	☒	
	Cleared by Corporate Governance Centre of Excellence?	☐	☐	☒	

DEPUTY DIRECTOR, STATEMENT OF ASSURANCE

In clearing this MA, I confirm that I, Redacted S 40 (2) have quality assured this advice, ensuring it is provided on the basis of evidence, accurately presents the options and facts and I am accountable for the recommendations made.

I am satisfied that the recommended decision or action, if agreed, would be lawful, affordable and comply with all relevant statutory obligations. Welsh Government policy priorities and cross portfolio implications have been fully considered in line with delivery of the government objectives.

I have fully considered the statement of assurance contained in the MA guidance to ensure all relevant considerations have been taken into account, appropriate impact assessments have been undertaken and that the actions and decisions take account of regularity, propriety and value for money.

COPY LIST

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- Redacted s 40(2)