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# Young Person's Guarantee: process evaluation

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## Glossary

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AIF	Active Inclusion Fund
ALN	Additional Learning Needs
ALP	Additional Learning Provision
AMHS	Adult Mental Health Services
APS	Annual Population Survey
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
BW	Business Wales
CA	Capabilities Approach
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CIW	Care Inspectorate Wales
CIE	Counterfactual Impact Evaluation
CFW	Communities for Work
CFW+	Communities for Work Plus
CLES	Centre for Local Economic Strategies
CoE	Council of Europe
CV	Curriculum Vitae
CW	Careers Wales
CWRE	Careers and Work-related Experiences
CWVYS	Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services
DID	Difference in differences
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
EA	Evaluability Assessment
EEB	Employment and Enterprise Bureau
EET	Education, Employment and Training
EETSE	Education, Employment, Training or Self-Employment
EMA	Education Maintenance Allowance
EPC	Engagement and Progression Coordinator
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESA	Employment and Support Allowance
ESB	Employability and Skills Plan Board



ESF	European Social Fund
EU	European Union
FE	Further Education
FEI	Further Education Institutions
FSB	Federation of Small Businesses
GSR	Government Social Research
HE	Higher Education
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HIW	Health Inspectorate Wales
HMPPS	His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service
IAG	Information Advice and Guidance
IDP	Individual Development Plan
ILO	International Labour Organisation
JCP	Job Centre Plus
JETS	Job Entry Targeted Support
JGW+	Jobs Growth Wales Plus
JSA	Job Seekers Allowance
KAS	Knowledge and Analytical Services
LA	Local Authority
LDD	Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities
LEA	Local Education Authority
LEO	Longitudinal Educational Outcomes
LHB	Local Health Board
LLWR	Lifelong Learning Wales Record
LSP	Learning and Skills Plan
LFS	Labour Force Survey
LWI	Learning and Work Institute
MI	Management Information
NATCEN	National Centre for Social Research
NDC	Neurodevelopmental Conditions
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

ONS	Office for National Statistics
OoWS	Out of Work Service
PaCE	Parents Childcare and Employment
PfG	Programme for Government
PLA	Personal Learning Account
PLASC	Pupil Level Annual School Census
PMHS	Primary Mental Health Services
PSM	Propensity Score Matching
QCA	Qualitative Comparative Analysis
RDD	Regression Discontinuity Design
RSP	Regional Skills Partnership
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SFR	Statistical First Release
SMD	Social Model of Disability
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
SPF	Shared Prosperity Fund
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TWE	Tailored Work Experience
UC	Universal Credit
UCAS	University and Colleges Admissions Service
WBFGA	Well-being of Future Generations Act Wales
WBL	Work Based Learning
WEN	Women's Equality Network
WLGA	Welsh Local Government Association
WW	Working Wales
YEI	Youth Employment Initiative
YEPF	Youth Engagement and Progression Framework
YPG	Young Person's Guarantee
YTS	Youth Training Scheme

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Young Person's Guarantee (YPG) is a Welsh Government Programme for Government commitment launched by Vaughan Gething, the then Minister for Economy, in November 2021. The stated purpose of the YPG is twofold:
- 'to provide 16 to 24 year-olds in Wales with support to gain a place in education or training, or support to get into work or self-employment'; and
  - to 'ensure a more coherent, simple and accessible system for (...) young people to gain access to the range of opportunities available to them' (Welsh Government, 2022a, pp. 3-9).
- 1.2. The YPG is intended to contribute to 'the delivery of the [Skills and Employability Plan](#), the Economic Action Plan and the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework' (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 3).
- 1.3. The [Youth Engagement and Progression Framework](#) (YEPF), which was first published in 2013 and refreshed in 2022, complements the YPG and aims to support the 'early identification of young people aged 11 to 18 who are at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) or homeless, understanding their needs, putting appropriate support and/or provision in place and monitoring their progression' (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 2).
- 1.4. Both the YPG and YEPF aim to contribute to the [Well-being of Future Generations Act](#) (WBFGA) and the [national indicators and milestones](#) (used to measure progress against well-being goals), in particular:
- that at least 90 per cent of 16 to 24 year-olds will be in education, employment or training by 2050
  - eradication of the gap between the employment rate in Wales and the UK by 2050, with a focus on fair work and raising labour market participation of under-represented groups (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 4).

## **The scope of the YPG**

- 1.5. The YPG is composed of multiple parts and defining its boundaries and scope is challenging. For the purposes of this evaluation, the YPG is defined as the offer of support to find a place in education, employment or training (EET), rather than the offer of a job or a specific place in education or training. Apprenticeships, which are included in the YPG and offer support to young people to gain the skills and qualifications they need to progress, are a partial exception to this definition (Welsh Government, 2023a). The YPG offer of support includes employability support programmes, such as Jobs Growth Wales Plus (JGW+) and Communities for Work Plus (CfW+) which offer education and training. The offer also encompasses education and training support delivered in education and training settings, such as schools and colleges.<sup>1</sup>

### **The main programmes and services that deliver or complement the YPG's offer of support to gain a place in education or training or an apprenticeship, to find a job or become self-employed<sup>2</sup>**

- \* Marketing: 'Feed Your Positivity' campaign.
- \* Education: core sixth form funding, core further education funding, additional innovation and transition funding for schools and colleges.
- \* Work based learning: apprenticeships, Personal Learning Accounts (PLAs).
- \* Early identification and support: the YEPF.
- \* Employability programmes: JGW+, CfW+, ReAct+, the Out of Work Service (OoWS), Working Wales.
- \* Self-employment support: Business Wales through the Big Ideas Wales Service for Young People, Employment and Enterprise Bureaux and support of an Enterprise Champion in each College in Wales.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'college' to describe the 12 colleges providing further education courses in Wales: Bridgend College, Cardiff and Vale College, Coleg Gwent, Coleg Ceredigion, Coleg Sir Gâr, Coleg Y Cymoedd, Gower College, Swansea, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, NPTC Group, Pembrokeshire College, The College Merthyr Tydfil and St David's Sixth Form College.

<sup>2</sup> As noted above, defining the boundaries and scope of the YPG for the purposes of this evaluation has been challenging. This is primarily because the YPG is an 'umbrella structure that sits above all programmes for young people' (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 2), making it potentially very broad in scope. In addition, as we outline in Sections 6 and 7, and detail in the timeline presented in Appendix D, the YPG offer has evolved over time.

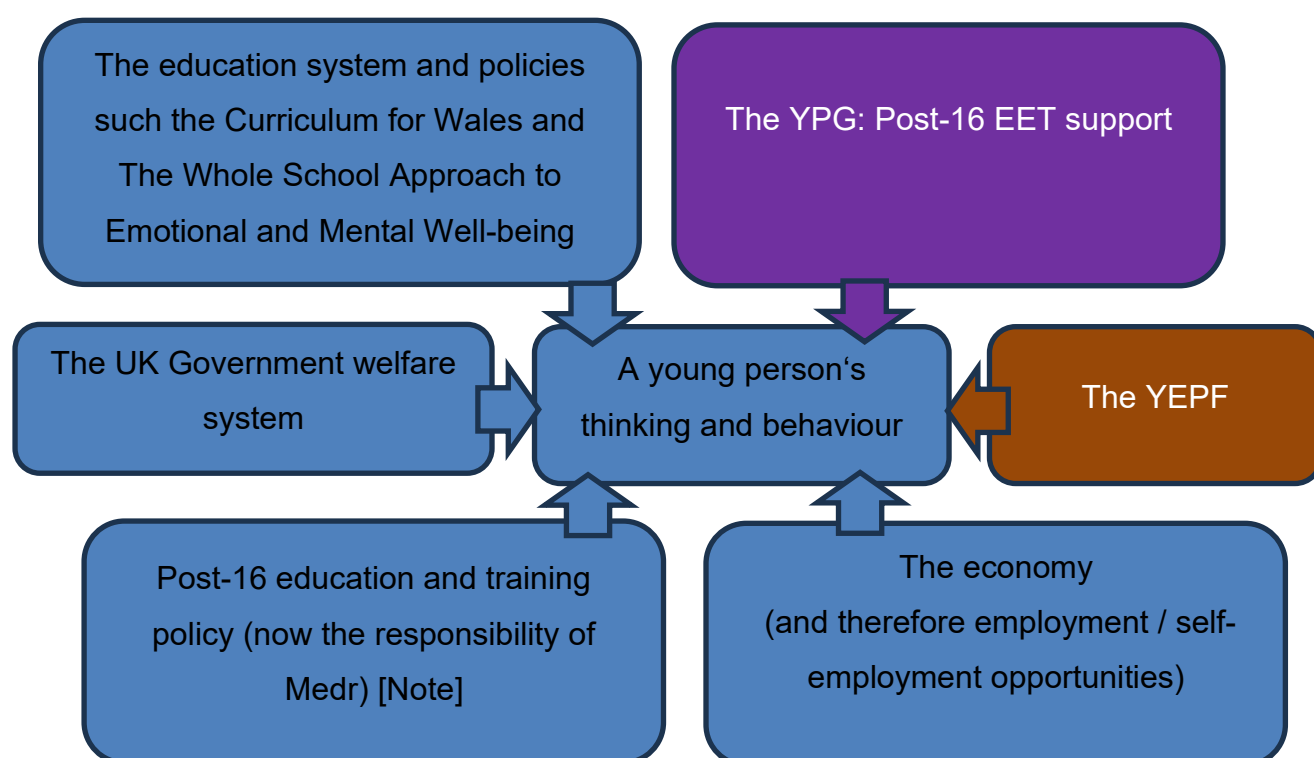
\* Careers and employability information, advice and guidance: Careers Wales and Working Wales, EEBs.

\* Employer engagement: Welsh Government's Disabled People's Employment Champions and Business Wales' Disabled People's Employment Advisors.

\* Financial support; Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), Student Finance Wales and the Further Education Financial Contingency Fund.

1.6. The YPG is situated within a wider context – or series of systems - that impact upon and are impacted by the YPG. As figure 1.1. illustrates, at age 16, a key transition point, a young person's thinking and behaviours will be shaped by a myriad of different services, programmes and policies, of which the YPG is only one.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1.1. Examples of the different systems that shape young people's thinking and behaviour at age 16**



[Note] Medr is also known as the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER). Medr began regulating the post-16 sector in August 2024. This was previously conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council Wales (HEFCW).

<sup>3</sup> In addition, the YPG occasionally forms a small part of these other systems, such as support for transitions for young people in school year 11 (which forms part of the education system as well as part of the YPG's post-16 EET support system).

- 1.7. Although the focus of this evaluation is upon the YPG and YEPF, we consider how this wider context has shaped the YPG and young people's thinking and behaviour and the implications of this for the YPG and YEPF.

### **The process evaluation aim and objectives**

- 1.8. The aim of the process evaluation is to 'review the design, implementation, and delivery of the YPG against its strategic intent and intended outcomes'. The objectives are 'to explore what is working well, and what could be improved, during the YPG implementation and early delivery of the initiative'. (Welsh Government 2022c, p. 13.)

### **This report**

- 1.9. Following this introductory section:
- Section 2 outlines the approach and methods;
  - Section 3 contains evaluation questions;
  - Section 4 describes the context, in terms of the numbers of young people in Wales who are not in education, employment or training (NEET);
  - Section 5 discusses the post 16 support landscape;
  - Section 6 discuss the design of the YEPF and YPG;
  - Section 7 discusses the process of implementing and delivering the YPG and YEPF;
  - Section 8 discusses how the system of support has been shaped at national and regional levels;
  - Section 9 discusses young people's experiences of transitions;
  - Section 10 considers the success of the YPG in providing an offer of support to all young people;
  - Section 11 considers the success of the YPG in providing a simple and accessible pathway to support and opportunities; and
  - Section 12 outlines the study conclusions and implications.

## 2. Evaluation questions

2.1. This section outlines an overarching evaluation aim and the process evaluation questions in two key areas:

- **policy and practice:** how the offer of support to 16 to 24 years olds changes (policy outcomes<sup>4</sup>); and
- **young people's behaviour:** how the behaviour of 16 to 24 years olds changes in response to changes in the offer of support (behavioural outcomes, such as engaging with EET and EET support services and programmes).

### **Policy and practice: evaluation aim and questions**

- 2.2. **Aim:** to identify if the YPG changed the nature or extent of support for young people (aged 16 to 24) to gain a place in education or training or an apprenticeship, find a job or become self-employed and if so, how and why.
- 2.3. The research questions explore what worked well and why and also what has not worked so well and why, and stakeholders' roles and differences between them in delivery of the YPG.

### *Process evaluation questions about the YPG*

1. How well have intentions and expectations of the YPG from its instigators been communicated to other stakeholders, such as Welsh Government policy and delivery colleagues, particularly those who lead on education, employability, self-employment support, health, sponsorship of Careers Wales/Working Wales, and education and training providers, information, advice and guidance (IAG) services (for example, Careers Wales), employment and self-employment support services, local authorities (LAs) (especially Engagement and Progression Co-ordinators and youth workers) and strategic bodies, such as Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs)?

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<sup>4</sup> Considering both policy on paper and practice (for example, considering delivery/ implementation).

2. Were/are stakeholders aware of the support and guidance provided by the Welsh Government to deliver the YPG and was/is this support and guidance valued?
3. What was the role of stakeholders in setting the direction and expectations of the YPG, including the roles played by different partners?
4. How well did stakeholders work together to deliver the YPG? What is working well and what have been the challenges in embedding the 'Team Wales' ethos<sup>5</sup>?
5. What progress has been made towards implementing the YPG? For example, were there any observed changes in either the policy or provision of EET support for young people?
6. To what extent did implementation of the YPG embody the five ways of working laid out in the WBFGA ('involvement'; 'integration'; 'prevention'; 'long-term'; 'collaboration')?
7. What strategies were put in place to promote the YPG and engage the target groups of young people?
8. Were there any differences in how the offer of support to young people changed in different geographical areas (for example, regions) or for different groups of young people (for example, those aged 16 to 18, those aged 19+)?
9. What good practice, key learning (for example, barriers/enablers, what worked/did not work) and areas for further development were identified?

*Process evaluation questions about the YEPF*

10. Has the new YEPF guidance<sup>6</sup> led to changes in stakeholders' understanding of roles, responsibilities and partnership working to deliver the YEPF?
11. To what extent do stakeholders understand the alignment between the YEPF and the YPG? What role has the refreshed YEPF played in clarifying roles

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<sup>5</sup> In the specification for this research, this is described as a 'sense of collective responsibility to draw together the support available to young people to access opportunities, government programmes, academia and the business community to support the YPG in order to reach the national milestone of 90% of our young people being in employment, education or training by 2050' (Welsh Government, 2022c, p. 8). The 'Team Wales' ethos has also been described as a 'cross-Welsh Government, pan Wales, multi-agency' response in 'collaboration with our key strategic partners' (Welsh Government, 2023b, p. 1).

<sup>6</sup> This includes the [YEPF Overview and Handbook](#) published in 2022 and the [Early Identification Guidance](#) published in 2023.



and responsibilities for organisations and increasing the understanding of the options available to support young people aged 16 to 18 who are, or are at risk of becoming, NEET?

12. What other monitoring information on young people who are judged at risk of becoming NEET, or who are NEET, is being collected at LA level and how effectively is this driving decisions and partnership working at local level?

### **Proposed evaluation aim and questions about the effectiveness of the YPG in changing young people's behaviour**

- 2.4. **Overarching aim:** to identify if changes in the offer of support to young people aged 16 to 24 (see questions about policy and practice) contributed to a change in the behaviour of young people in relation to:
- i. the take up of the offer of education, employment, training and/or self-employment (EETSE) support; and/or
  - ii. their participation in EETSE<sup>7</sup>;
  - iii. and, if so, how, why and for whom (that is, which groups of young people)?

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<sup>7</sup> These should both be measurable / quantifiable and may form the basis for Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). We note that if the YPG is successful, the proportion of young people in EET will increase. However, it is also possible that the YPG is having an effect, but the effect is not big enough to change national indicators; for example, if there is an economic downturn and unemployment and economic inactivity (and the numbers of young people who are NEET) increase, it is possible that an increase in the numbers of young people who were NEET would be larger without the YPG. Conversely, if there is strong economic growth and unemployment and economic inactivity (and the numbers of young people who are NEET) decrease, it is possible that the decrease would be smaller without the YPG.

*Process evaluation questions about the YPG*

13. What is young people's understanding of the YPG, including in relation to what support is available and how support is accessed, and how accessible do they think it is?<sup>8</sup>
14. What are young people's expectations of the YPG, including what they want from the offer of support?
15. What are the experiences of young people accessing the programmes and services (mainly Careers Wales/Working Wales) that form the YPG?
16. How robust are different YPG pathways through EETSE?
17. To what extent were young people involved in the design and development of the YPG?<sup>9</sup>
18. To what extent are strategies put in place to promote the YPG and engage the target group of young people working? For example, are participant numbers in line with the targets?
19. How effective are referrals for young people most at risk of disengagement from EET?
20. Are there patterns and trends in which groups of young people are (or are not) engaging with the YPG offer?
21. Why are some eligible young people not accessing the offer of support or dropping out of the process before a positive outcome?
22. What contribution has the YPG made to building networks of employment support for young people?
23. What is working well and what is not working so well (including the barriers and facilitators for young people furthest from the labour market entering EETSE via the YPG)?
24. What can be learnt from the YPG about 'what works for whom and when' for young people seeking progression into EETSE?

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<sup>8</sup> As noted in the specification for this research, 'special consideration should be paid to the accessibility of the YPG to deliver services to young people not in Education, Training and Employment (NEET), those furthest away from the labour market, people with Protected Characteristics and those who face additional barriers to accessing and sustaining work' (Welsh Government, 2023h, pp.13-14).

<sup>9</sup> This research question was originally 'To what extent do young people feel that they have a say in the design of services and are given a voice to challenge the system (especially seldom heard groups)?' However, with the agreement of the Welsh Government it was reworded to better reflect the question that the evaluation was able to answer.

25. Is the current mode of delivery suitable, given the YPG aims and objectives?

*Process evaluation questions about the YEPF*

26. What is the contribution of the YEPF in supporting young people (aged 11 to 18) at risk of disengaging from EET and taking up the YPG support offer?

27. How effective is the YEPF in enabling a smooth transition from (pre-16) education into (post-16) further or higher education, training or employment?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

- 3.1. In line with the recommendations of the Evaluability Assessment (EA) of the YPG (Welsh Government, 2025a) (see boxed text) the process evaluation took a theory-based approach, focused upon first understanding how the YPG and YEPF were expected to work in practice (their theories of change), given:
- the context in which they have been implemented and the challenge they seek to address (discussed in Sections 4 and 5);
  - the different component parts of the YPG, such as programmes like Jobs Growth Wales Plus (JGW+), and of the YEPF, such as Lead Workers (discussed in Sections 5 and 6); and
  - the mechanisms: the ways in which these different component parts are expected to generate the intended outcomes of the YPG and YEPF by, for example, engaging and supporting young people (discussed in Section 5).
- 3.2. The theories of change developed as part of the EA (see Welsh Government, 2025a, pp.13-53) informed the development of the evaluation framework used for this process evaluation. The evaluation tests the theories of change, to explore the extent to which:
- the plan or design of the YPG and YEPF on paper has been translated into practice, by considering implementation of the different component parts (discussed in Section 7); and
  - the extent to which the two core outcomes of the YPG<sup>10</sup> outlined in Section 1 (providing an offer of support to all young people and a simple and accessible system to access opportunities) have been realised (discussed in Sections 9 and 10).
- 3.3. The findings relating to these two objectives were, in turn, used to identify what worked well and what has not worked so well (discussed in Section 11).

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<sup>10</sup> As Section 5 outlines, the intended outcomes of the YEPF overlap with these and the YEPF contributes to these outcomes for young people aged 16 to 18.

### **The YPG evaluability assessment**

The YPG EA sets out a framework to support the evaluation of the 'whole system' approach to delivering the YPG' (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 11). This reflects the nature of the YPG which, as Section 5 outlines, is an 'umbrella structure that sits above all programmes for young people' (Welsh Government, 2022c, p. 3).

Understanding how these different programmes that make up the YPG interact with each other and with young people, and how they have been shaped by the YPG, is therefore central to evaluating the delivery of the YPG.

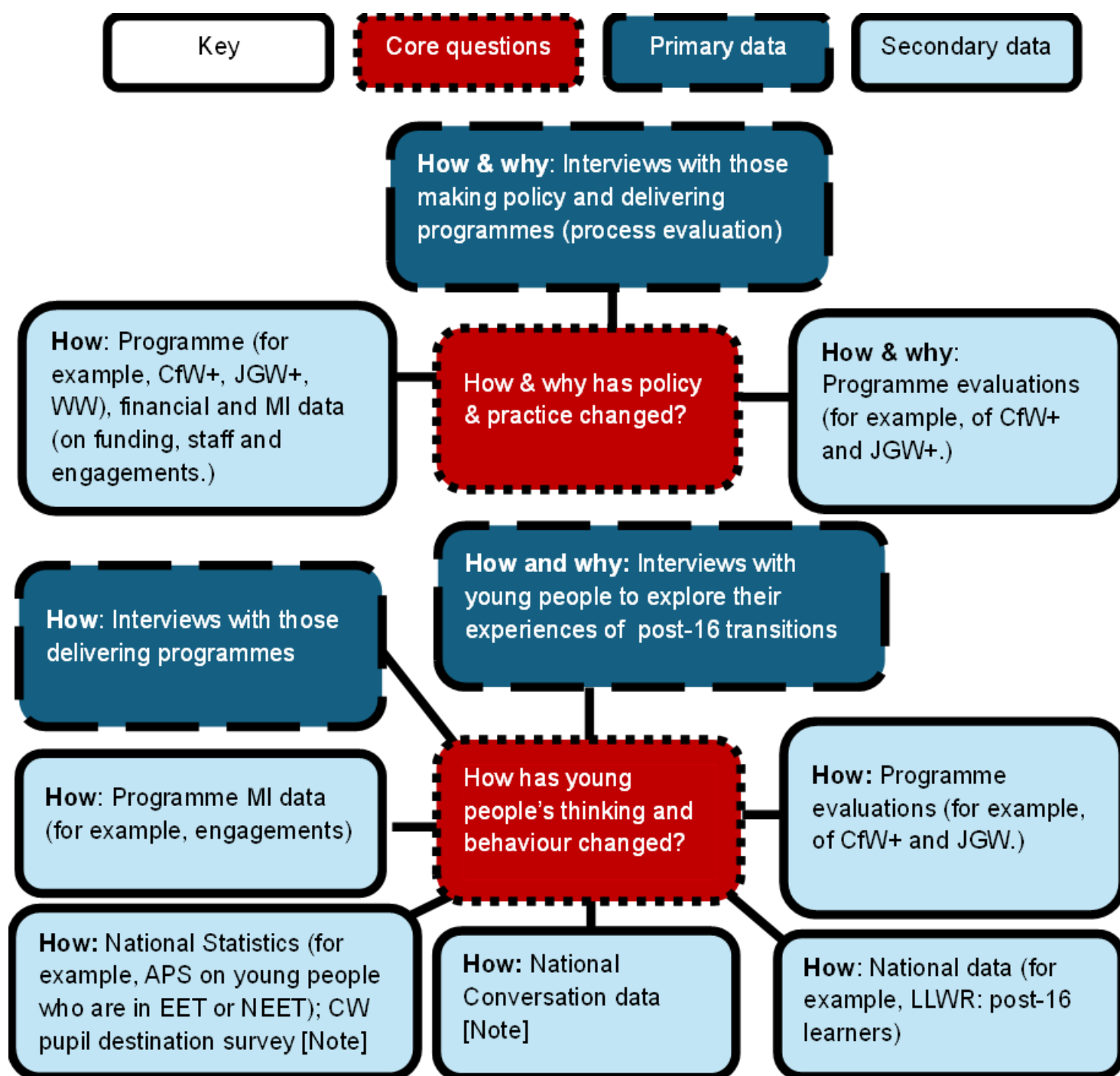
The evaluation framework sets out how best to measure whether:

- the YPG was implemented as planned;
- the YPG is having the intended impact (for whom and why);
- there were any unintended outcomes (positive or negative) of the YPG; and
- the YPG creates any 'additionality' to the effects of other policies (for example by estimating the counterfactual, and the extent to which any observed change would have happened anyway, in the absence of the initiative).

### **Sources of data**

- 3.4. In accordance with the recommendations of the EA, the process evaluation draws upon a range of data sources. This is illustrated in Figure 3.1 below, which shows the two main evaluation questions addressed in red boxes with sources of primary data shown in the darker shade of blue and sources of primary data shown in light blue. Figures in this report were correct at the time of drafting.

**Figure 3.1. Overview of the key sources of primary and secondary data**



[Note] The National Conversation was launched in May 2022 and aims to give young people a voice about their experiences of post-16 EET. See [Young Person's Guarantee National Conversation: update for participants | GOV.WALES](#)

- 3.5. The evaluation of whether, how and why policy, practice, and young people's behaviour have changed draws primarily upon the primary and secondary data discussed below.

### **Desk-based review of secondary sources**

- 3.6. The desk-based review included:
- policy-related documents including, for example, the YPG Impact Assessment (Welsh Government, 2022a) and the YEPF Overview (Welsh Government, 2022b);
  - secondary data, including national statistics (and the Statistical First Release (SFR) on young people who are NEET), administrative data, such as the Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR), and programme data (such as Management Information (MI) data);
  - research and evidence relating to the YPG's and YEPF's focus upon young people who are, or are at risk of becoming, NEET<sup>11</sup>; and
  - evaluations of component programmes and services that make up the YPG, such as Communities for Work Plus (CfW+), Jobs Growth Wales Plus (JGW+), Working Wales, and the Out of Work Service (OoWS), and evaluations and reviews of the YEPF.

### *Analysis of service or programme data*

- 3.7. The evaluation requested service or programme data from four of the main programmes and services that support young people as part of the YPG: CfW+, Working Wales, ReAct+ and the OoWS. This focused upon identifying what was known about:
- the numbers of young people taking up the offer of support (that is the number of participants aged 16 to 24 accessing each programme or service); and
  - the numbers of young people taking up the offer of support who achieved positive outcomes.

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<sup>11</sup> This included, in particular, [Rapid Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education, or training](#) (Welsh Government, 2024o, 2024t).

3.8. Where available, this data was broken down by age group (16 to 18 years and 19 to 24 years) and by the characteristics of young people, such as their sex or gender, disability and ethnicity. In addition, published data on JGW+<sup>12</sup> was reviewed. Table 3.1 summarises the data provided by, or in the case of JGW+ published by, each programme or service.

**Table 3.1. Programme data provided by YPG programmes and services 2021 to 2024**

	Data covering either financial, academic or calendar years, 2021 to 2024	Engagements (all young people taking up the offer)	The characteristics of young people engaging with the programme or service	Positive outcomes of young people engaging with the programme or service	The characteristics of young people achieving positive outcomes
WW	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
[Note 1]					
JGW+	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
CfW+	✓	✓	✓ [Note 2]	✓	✓ [Note 2]
ReAct+				✓	
OoWS		✓		✓	

[Note 1] The Working Wales data comes with some important caveats. These include: the risk that over time the same young person will be counted in different age groups; a small number of young people who were aged 15 at the point of their first interaction when details are recorded and are therefore included in the figures; and differences in when outcome data were collected.

[Note 2] Data specific to young people aged 16 to 24 is only available for April 2023 to March 2024. Data was collected in previous years, but data on young people aged 16 to 24 cannot be extracted.

<sup>12</sup> Information on Jobs Growth Wales+ learning programmes and the learners enrolled on them is routinely published at [Jobs Growth Wales+ statistics | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/jobs-growth-wales-statistics).



### **Primary research with stakeholders involved in developing and/or implementing policy**

- 3.9. In order to explore the development and implementation of the YPG and YEPF, and the ways in which they shaped the system of support for young people aged 16 to 25, interviews with policy makers, managers and practitioners working at national and local levels in Wales were undertaken. As Table 3.2 outlines, purposive, stakeholder sampling techniques (Palys, 2008) were used to select relevant participants.

**Table 3.2. Interviews with policy makers, managers and practitioners: sampling**

<b>Stakeholder group</b>	<b>Sample target</b>	<b>Sample achieved</b>
Policy makers in the YPG and YEPF teams	8-10	7 [Note 1]
Leaders and operational managers in key programmes or services that make up or support the YPG	35-40	32
Managers and practitioners involved in the planning and/or delivery of the YEPF of the YPG in six areas	10-12	26 [Note 2]

[Note 1] Likely to be near a census sample of all the key stakeholders.

Several were interviewed more than once.

[Note 2] The numbers were higher than planned, to ensure coverage of different programmes that make up the YPG.

#### *Interviews with policy makers in the YPG and YEPF teams and programme leads*

- 3.10. An initial round of interviews was conducted with Welsh Government policy makers in the YPG and YEPF teams and programme leads in May and June 2023. These interviewees were selected following discussion with the YPG policy team, and were intended to ensure representation of the key

stakeholders. The interviews were used, alongside other types of data, such as those generated through a desk-based document review:

- to explore and map the context, including the policy landscape and system of support for young people;
- to assess how the YPG was developed; and
- to identify expectations of the YPG.

3.11. The data generated by this were used to develop a theory of change for the YPG (outlined in the EA, Welsh Government, 2025a), which was discussed and refined further through a series of three workshops with stakeholders in October 2023.

3.12. The stakeholder workshops brought together a range of staff from across the Welsh Government, including members of the YPG and YEPF policy teams and staff with responsibilities in areas such as entrepreneurship and Business Wales, Careers Wales, employment support, health-related employability support, knowledge and analytical services, post-16 education, training and skills, and staff from partners such as Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs). The evaluation was also discussed with members of the Young Person's Guarantee Stakeholder Advisory Group in November 2023 and emerging findings were discussed with the Employability and Skills Plan Board in November 2024, providing opportunities to both share and 'sense check' the emerging findings.

3.13. A second, summative round of interviews with Welsh Government policy makers in YPG and YEPF teams and programmes leads was conducted in January and February 2025. These interviewees were suggested by the Welsh Government given the interviewee's role in the involvement in the design and/or delivery of the YPG. Comments on the draft report were invited from Welsh Government policy and programme leads in March 2025, with these comments (in annotated, email and verbal form) providing additional

qualitative data.<sup>13</sup> Comments were also received from members of Knowledge and Analytical Services in the Welsh Government, Careers Wales and Medr at this time.

*Interviews with operational programme managers and practitioners involved in the planning and/or delivery of the YEPF and/or YPG*

- 3.14. In the period September 2024 to January 2025, interviews were undertaken with 26 people involved in the planning and/or delivery of the YPG and/or YEPF in seven LA areas, outlined in Table 3.3. The areas were purposively chosen to represent areas with different characteristics within Wales. The interviews included staff from Business Wales/Big Ideas Wales, the Welsh Government (such as Careers Wales staff), CfW+, colleges (including EEBs), LA employment services, RSPs, training providers (including those delivering JGW+ and the Youth Service<sup>14</sup>), to provide a local perspective:
- on the delivery of the YPG and YEPF; and
  - the system of EET support for young people aged 16 to 24, in that particular area.

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<sup>13</sup> Although Welsh Government officials providing comments also took part in interviews, for the sake of transparency, where reported data refers to that provided in comments on the report rather than an interview, it is referred to as being sourced from an 'informant' or 'respondent' rather than an 'interviewee'.

<sup>14</sup> Interviewees from the OoWS were also invited to take part but chose not to.

**Table 3.3. Selected characteristics of the local authority sites sampled**

LA	Region	Characteristics
Conwy and Denbighshire	North Wales	Predominately rural; access to EET opportunities likely to be a challenge for some young people (for example, due to transport, more limited options).
Gwynedd	North Wales	Predominately rural and Welsh speaking; access to EET opportunities likely to be a challenge for some young people (for example, due to transport, more limited options); above average attainment at the end of Year 11.
Cardiff	South East Wales	City (urban); wide range of EET opportunities; a diverse and often transient population of young people (with high levels of migration into and out of Cardiff) including large numbers of students.
Powys	Mid Wales	Predominately rural, access to EET opportunities likely to be a challenge for some young people (for example due to transport, more limited options); above average attainment at the end of year 11.
Rhondda Cynon Taf	South East Wales	Mix of urban and more rural valley communities; access to EET opportunities likely to be a challenge for some young people (for example, due to transport, more limited options); higher than average rate of (adult) unemployment and economic inactivity.
Swansea	South West Wales	Mix of urban (city) and more rural areas; moderate range of EET opportunities; a diverse and often transient population of young people (with moderate levels of migration into and out of Swansea) and relatively large numbers of students.

### **Primary research with young people**

- 3.15. As outlined above, the EA identified the need to ensure that young people's lived experiences of the YPG were considered as part of the evaluation. The breadth of the YPG, coupled with the range of programme level evaluations either ongoing or completed (discussed further in Section 6) meant that it was neither viable nor desirable to attempt to capture the experiences of young people in relation to each (and all) of the programmes that make up the YPG. Instead, the focus of the primary research was to explore young people's experiences of making transitions and the context (including the system of support) and the thinking and behaviour that defined the transitions they made. This meant the focus was upon young people's journeys rather than their experiences of any specific service, education setting or training provider.
- 3.16. Given the age of the young people, most of their experiences of making or preparing for transitions came after the YPG was introduced in 2021. However, for some of the older young people (that is to say, those over the age of 20) that were interviewed, some of their experiences of making or preparing for transitions when they were younger, will predate the YPG. This is important to bear in mind. However, because the aim of the interviews was primarily to explore and understand their experiences of making or preparing for post-16 EET transitions, rather than evaluating specific components of the YPG, this does not render pre-YPG experiences as irrelevant. Although, as with any account, as the length of time that has passed since the experience being described increases, the risk that an individual's account is inaccurate (as for example, memories fade), or outdated (given changes in the context over that period of time), increases.
- 3.17. A narrative approach to interviews was adopted. This enabled young people to tell their own stories of their transitions from school to employment, education or training, or of their disengagement from education, employment or training, and to highlight what they felt was important to them. Additional data on their characteristics were collected via a participant information

questionnaire. A copy of this is included in the appendices. In order to say “thank you” for their participation, young people were given a £20 voucher.

### *The sample of young people*

3.18. The EA identifies the importance of ensuring representation of young people with different characteristics in qualitative fieldwork for the process evaluation (see below). As such, the sampling strategy incorporated elements of both criterion sampling (as the focus was upon individuals with particular characteristics) and maximum variation sampling (as the aim was to try to cover a range of experiences) (see Palys, 2008, for a discussion of purposive sampling strategies). In addition:

- as Section 7 discusses, it was hoped that a number of young people who were involved in the YPG youth advisory group could be included. However, in the event, only one young person from the YPG youth advisory group came forward following invitation to take part, limiting the conclusions that could be drawn about young people’s involvement in the YPG; and
- as Section 8 outlines, although young people who were home educated were not identified as a target group for sampling, three young people who were home educated were interviewed, and when the data was analysed, they emerged as key group, whose experiences of post 16 transitions were quite different to those of other young people.

### **Rationale for the characteristics of young people to be included in the sample**

**Sex (male or female):** there are differences in the experiences and behaviours of young men and women; for example, women typically bear much of the caring responsibility for young children and are more likely than men to be economically inactive while they care for young children (Welsh Government, 2024o).

**Gender identity: trans or non-binary:** transgender or non-binary young people may face or experience discrimination in post-16 education or training. They may also experience other risk factors, such as poor mental health, at higher rates than those young people whose gender matches the gender they were assigned at birth or those whose gender fits with the definition of male or female.

**Age: 16 to 18 and 19 to 24:** there are differences in the experiences and behaviours of young people aged 16 to 18 and 19 to 24. For example, those aged 16 to 18 are more likely to be in post-16 education and training, such as school or college (and less likely to be NEET) than those aged 19 to 24 (ibid.).

**Disabled young people:** there are differences in the experiences, behaviours and circumstances of disabled young people compared to non-disabled young people. For example, disabled young people are more likely to be NEET (ibid.).

**Young people with an additional learning need (ALN):** there are differences in the experiences, behaviours and circumstances of young people with an ALN compared to young people who do not have ALN. For example, they are more likely to be NEET (ibid.).

**Young people with no or low qualifications:** there are differences in the experiences, behaviours and circumstances of young people with low or no qualifications compared to young people who have higher levels of qualifications. For example, they are more likely to be NEET (ibid.).

**Young people who are (or were) ‘lost’ or ‘undecided’; young people with complex needs (such as homelessness and mental health issues):** Research suggests that there are different groups of young people who are NEET, such as young people who are:

- ‘cyclical, in transition or open to learning’: ‘likely to re-engage in education, training and the workforce in the short term, tending to have higher attainment and a more positive attitude to exploiting opportunity’ than the other two groups identified (‘floating’ or ‘core’) (Welsh Government, 2013, p.7, cited in Welsh Government, 2024o.);
- ‘floating’, “at risk” or undecided’: ‘may be dissatisfied with available opportunities or are most vulnerable to economic downturn’ including ‘those young people who find themselves lacking direction and/or motivation and move in and out of the NEET group’ (ibid.); and
- ‘core or sustained’: ‘experiencing longer-term disengagement in education, training and the labour market, linked to a wider pattern of poor attainment and experience’ (ibid.).

**Young people from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group:** young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups can experience discrimination, and some groups are under-represented in the labour market, although overall, fewer young

people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups are NEET compared to white British/Welsh/English young people. There is also evidence that they make different choices about post-16 education and training pathways; for example, young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups are less likely than people from White groups to choose WBL courses (Welsh Government, 2024o).

**Young people with caring responsibilities:** caring responsibilities are identified as a key risk factor for being NEET (ibid.)

**Young people living in a rural area:** young people in rural areas can face a range of barriers to accessing post-16 EET, such as weakness in digital infrastructure, difficulties in accessing post-16 EET (given, for example, distance and weakness in public transport) and weakness in local labour markets (ibid.).

**Care experienced young people:** Experiences of care are identified as a key risk factor for being NEET (ibid.).

**Young people considering self-employment:** self-employment support for young people (through the YPG) has not been evaluated. There is anecdotal evidence that some young people who face barriers to EET may opt for self-employment in order to try to bypass them.

**Young people with a criminal record:** young people with a criminal record may face discrimination. Offending behaviour is also associated with a range of other risk factors than can increase a young person's likelihood of being NEET (ibid.).

3.19. The evaluation identified that setting targets or quotas for sampling young people defined by a single specific characteristic, such as their gender or ethnicity, would run somewhat counter to the concept of intersectionality<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, as Table 3.4 outlines, rather than setting quotas, or target numbers, for young people with a specific characteristic, which would suggest recruitment of people with a particular characteristic would continue until the quota was met, minimum targets were identified. This approach was intended to provide the flexibility to help ensure the representation of young people with both different characteristics and also with different sets of characteristics,

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<sup>15</sup> Intersectionality highlights how different characteristics, experiences and positions in society can intersect and create unique sets of advantages or disadvantages for different people. Intersectionality and its applicability to the YPG and YEPF are discussed further in the [Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education or training](#).



without requiring ‘interlocking quotas’ (where for example, targets for young people with a number of different characteristics were set) (see, for example, Brown, et al, 2017). This approach enabled a young person with different combinations of characteristics - for example, a young person could be female, from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group and considering self-employment – to be included in targets for different characteristics. Adopting this approach also did not discourage the evaluation team from including a young person simply because the target for a particular characteristic that young person had had already been achieved.

### *Recruiting and interviewing young people*

- 3.20. It was envisaged that research with young people in each of the six LA areas would be undertaken by members of the evaluation team and community researchers<sup>16</sup>. It was hoped that community researchers would help support engagement with ‘seldom heard’ groups of young people and could potentially provide greater insight into young people’s lived experience than could be achieved by an outsider. In practice, delays before fieldwork could be started, while data protection and privacy arrangements were agreed,<sup>17</sup> and the considerations linked to data security<sup>18</sup> and safeguarding<sup>19</sup> complicated the planned recruitment and meant that it was only possible to recruit a small team of three community researchers.
- 3.21. It was envisaged that young people would be recruited via ‘gatekeepers’ - intermediary bodies working with them who could share information about the evaluation with young people and potentially encourage young people to take part. However, unexpected delays before the fieldwork could start meant that some groups which had expressed an interest in supporting the evaluation were unable to. There also appeared to be a reluctance on the part of some

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<sup>16</sup> Community researchers are members of a community given training to undertake research in their own community (CLES, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> For example, because the research involved the collection of sensitive personal information, a Data Protection Impact assessment as carried out, and because different groups were involved in the research, a number of different versions of privacy notices were required.

<sup>18</sup> For example, that all IT equipment used by Community Researchers had Cyber Essentials Certification.

<sup>19</sup> For example, that community researchers had enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks.

intermediaries to share information about the evaluation with young people and/or to encourage young people to take part. As a result, although over 45 intermediary bodies in the six areas were approached and most agreed to support the research, most of the young people interviewed came from a smaller number of organisations and services. These included two colleges, Engagement and Progression Coordinators (EPCs)<sup>20</sup>, youth clubs and hubs, and voluntary sector groups.

- 3.22. A further consideration, in terms of recruitment of young people, was what was already known about the experiences of different groups. As outlined above, a range of programme level evaluations were either ongoing or completed, and it was judged that there was likely to be limited value in undertaking further research with groups of young people accessing programmes like CfW+, JGW+ and the OoWS that had recently been evaluated<sup>21</sup>. Consequently, the sample of young people interviewed included young people with a wide range of experiences of support. However, young people accessing programmes like CfW+, JGW+ and the OoWS will have been under-represented, and their experiences are instead interpreted through the evaluations of these programmes.
- 3.23. Table 3.5 presents the sample of 81 young people achieved, compared to the original targets.

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<sup>20</sup> The EPC is described as a 'function', rather than role. As the YEPF guidance explains, 'The EPC function will continue to play a critical and strategic role, overseeing the Framework at a local level'. The EPC function also includes brokering agreements to ensure the availability and quality of services, including 'brokering support services for specific groups needing bespoke support'. In addition, the 'coordinates and oversees the local partnership', reports to senior leadership within the LA and provides 'updates to the Welsh Government' (Welsh Government 2022a, p. 18).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example: [The Evaluation of Communities for Work and Communities for Work Plus: participant characteristics and experiences](#) and the Formative Evaluation of Jobs Growth Wales+ [Evaluation of Jobs Growth Wales+ | GOV.WALES](#)

**Table 3.5. The characteristics of young people interviewed compared to the original targets**

<b>Characteristics (including experiences and position in society)</b>	<b>Target (minimum number)</b>	<b>Actual sample achieved</b>
Sex: male	40	44
Sex: female	40	35
Gender identity: trans or non-binary	3	2
Age 16 to 18 [Note 1]	20	52
Age 19 to 24 [Note 1]	40	20
Disabled young people	10	10
Young people with an ALN	10	16
Young people with no or low qualifications [Note 2]	25	25
Young people who are (or were) 'lost' or 'undecided'	20	8
Young people with complex needs (such as homelessness and mental health issues)	5	12
Young people from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic group	5	27
Young people with caring responsibilities	5	3
Young people living in a rural area	15	16
Care experienced young people	5	6
Young people considering self-employment	10	1
Young people with a criminal record	(No target)	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>81</b>

[Note 1] Not all participants ages are known and therefore the number of participants in the two age categories adds up to 72, not the 81 actually interviewed (however, all participants were aged 16 to 24).

[Note 2] Some younger participants did not currently have qualifications but were expecting to gain qualifications in the future. If these participants are excluded, the

number with low or no qualifications (that is to say, qualifications below Level 2) would be 12.

3.24. As Table 3.5. illustrates, the sample of 81 young people achieved includes representation of young people with a range of different characteristics but does not fully represent all key groups or experiences. Moreover, given the way young people were recruited via intermediary organisations, the sample is likely to be subject to a high degree of selection bias with, for example, a bias toward:

- more confident and articulate young people, who felt more comfortable putting themselves forward for an interview; and
- young people who were engaged with intermediary bodies, and therefore more likely to be either engaged in or actively seeing to re-engage with EET, and who might be more likely to perceive the research as relevant, compared to those who were economically inactive and who were not engaged with intermediary bodies.<sup>22</sup>

3.25. Given these considerations, the findings from interviews with young people (discussed in Sections 4 and 9) are considered in the context of (and triangulated with) the findings from interviews with policy makers and practitioners and other research, including that considered in the [Rapid Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education, or training](#). This includes evidence about groups, such as young people with caring responsibilities, young people aged 19 to 24, and those pursuing self-employment, all of whom were under-represented in the sample. For this last group, some case studies of young people who had received the Young Person's Start up Grant gleaned by the Welsh Government were also used to gain insights into this constituency of young people.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, economically inactive young mothers with substantial caring responsibilities may not have perceived the evaluation as relevant to them.

### **Analysis of qualitative data**

- 3.26. Interviews were recorded (subject to interviewees' consent). Post-interview, each participant was assigned a unique participant code to access a participant characteristics questionnaire (Appendix F). This questionnaire collected additional information not covered during the interviews and the data on participant characteristics was used to provide a profile of the sample and to inform interpretation of the data.<sup>23</sup> The audio recordings were saved and renamed using these unique participant codes to ensure the participant characteristic data and transcripts could be linked.
- 3.27. The audio files were transcribed using MAXQDA transcription software. The resulting transcripts were then imported into the MAXQDA analysis software, and an inductive thematic analysis approach was used to identify broad initial themes which emerged from the data in transcripts. These broad themes were then refined and expanded (or condensed) into varying more distinct key themes.
- 3.28. To test the inductive approach to coding, and to try to ensure that we were not missing the ways in which particular characteristics, such as gender, were shaping experiences, a more deductive approach was also taken. For example, we examined the responses of different groups to explore whether there were patterns in the data which indicated systemic differences in the experiences of different groups. These included:
- young men, young women, and trans young people;
  - disabled and non-disabled young people; and
  - young people aged 16 to 18 and 19 to 24.
- 3.29. As Section 8 outlines, we identified marked differences between the experiences of young people aged 16 to 18 and those aged 19 to 24, disabled and non-disabled young people, and other groups such as home educated

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<sup>23</sup> In order to identify information on participants' characteristics, both the transcripts of interviews and data from the participants' characteristics questionnaire were used. The unique participant codes were used to avoid duplication (double counting).

young people. However, we also observed considerable diversity of experiences within each group, particularly in relation to young people who identified as disabled, and, in line with the theory of intersectionality, we found that it was very rare for any one single characteristic to appear to define young people's experiences.

- 3.30. We did not observe marked differences in the experiences of young men and young women, and our sample of trans young people was too small to draw meaningful conclusions from. Other research suggests that there are differences in the experiences of young men, young women, and trans young people (see, for example, Welsh Government 2024r). We concluded that the reason we did not also identify marked differences in the experiences of young men and young women, probably reflected the nature of the sample (discussed above). In addition, the impact of intersectionality meant that multiple factors, including but not limited to gender, appeared to shape young people's experiences of transition. The COM-B lens did not discount gender, however. For example, it focused attention upon how caring responsibilities, which young women are more likely to bear, might hold young people back.
- 3.31. At a second stage of data analysis, the COM-B model of behaviour change was used as a framework to organise the data. Themes and quotes were used to analyse how young people's characteristics, experiences, drivers and barriers impact and shape young people's capabilities, opportunities and motivation, which in turn shape their behaviour.

### **Research ethics**

- 3.32. A Government Social Research Ethics Checklist (GSR, 2021) was completed and reviewed by the Welsh Government contract manager and a member of the project steering group. The checklist was then reviewed at intervals during the evaluation in discussion with the contract manager and evaluation steering group.

3.33. The evaluation was conducted in line with the six principles outlined by the GSR ethics guidance (ibid) in order to ensure that:

- there was a 'clear and defined public benefit' to the evaluation (principle 1). The need for a robust, systematic and timely assessment of the design, implementation, outcomes and effectiveness of the YPG, was explored through the EA (Welsh Government, 2025a).
- the evaluation was 'based on sound research methods and protect[ed] against bias in the interpretation of findings' (principle 2). As outlined above, the design and approach were informed by a comprehensive EA, with a detailed research protocol developed and agreed with the evaluation steering group, and then implemented.
- the evaluation 'adhere[d] to data protection regulations and the secure handling of personal data' (principle 3). The legal basis for the collection of personal data (public task) was identified, privacy notices were drafted and issued, personal data was stored securely and deleted as soon as no longer needed. In addition, a Data Protection Impact Assessment was undertaken as some 'special category' data was collected.
- participation in the evaluation was based on 'specific and informed consent' (principle 4). Participants were provided with a (plain language) information sheet and privacy notice before they were asked to consent to take part. In addition, key points from the information sheet were explained verbally to participants and they were invited to ask questions before choosing whether to take part or not.
- the evaluation 'enable[d] participation of the groups it seeks to represent' (principle 5). Potential barriers participants might face were discussed and explored with both intermediary bodies, where applicable, and participants, and a range of ways to take part in the evaluation, including face to face, video or telephone interviews, discussion groups or self-completion questionnaires, were offered.
- the evaluation was 'conducted in a manner that minimises personal and social harm' (principle 6). The evaluation team was briefed, and in the case of community researchers, trained, to ensure they adopted a sensitive and respectful approach that invited young people to share as

much or as little about their experiences as they were comfortable with. The evaluation team was also briefed on potential sources of post-interview support that young people who disclosed difficulties (for example, in areas like mental health) could be signposted to and a 'sources of support' information sheet was prepared, to be provided to participants if needed.



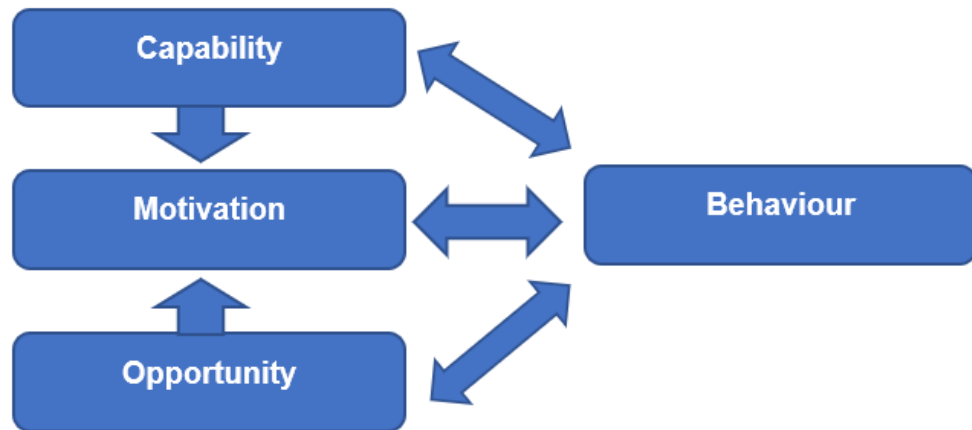
## 4. The thinking and behaviour of young people aged 16 to 24

### The rationale for focusing upon young people's thinking and behaviour

- 4.1. As outlined in Section 1, the YPG aims to increase the proportion of young people who are in education or training or employed or self-employed. One necessary condition for this is a change in (some) young people's behaviour. In order to explore this, the evaluation is using the COM-B model of behavioural change (Michie et al., 2011). As Figure 4.1 below illustrates, the model posits that a young person's behaviour, such as effectively searching for work and applying for jobs, requires:
- the ability - or **capability** - to perform the behaviour (for example, having the skills, knowledge and self-efficacy or self-belief required);
  - the intention - or **motivation** - to perform the behaviour; and
  - the absence of environmental constraints (for example, not facing barriers such as lack of childcare) or, conversely, having the **opportunity** to perform the behaviour (Michie et al., 2011).
- 4.2. As the single headed arrows in Figure 4.1 illustrate, capability and opportunity both influence motivation; for example:
- having confidence in their ability to successfully perform a behaviour, such as searching for work, and the opportunity to do so, can increase a young person's motivation to search for work;
  - conversely, having limited capability (for example, due to ill health or limited experience and/or understanding of the labour market) and/or facing barriers to accessing opportunities (for example, due to caring responsibilities or digital exclusion) can undermine motivation.
- 4.3. As the double-headed arrows in Figure 4.1 illustrate, capability, motivation and opportunities both influence and are influenced by behaviour. For example, a behaviour, such as participation in EET, can increase capabilities (for example, if new skills are learned), increase access to opportunities (for example, by providing income to pay for transport) and can increase

motivation (for example, as a result of realising the benefits of engaging in EET, such as gaining skills and income).

**Figure 4.1. The COM-B (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation – Behaviour) framework**



Source: [Michie et al, 2011](#). Reproduced with permission from the author

- 4.4. It should be noted that one of the strengths, but also potential weaknesses, of the COM-B model is its focus upon the individual. In the model, ‘capabilities’ relate to individual psychological and physical capabilities, in the sense of having the ability to do something, while opportunities are dependent on environmental factors. The understanding of capabilities in the COM-B model can be contrasted with the concept of ‘capability’ in the Capabilities Approach (CA) developed by Amartya Sen and others. The CA focuses upon a person’s capabilities in the sense of their freedom and ability to act (that is, their opportunities), given both their individual resources and circumstances, such as their health, knowledge and skills, and external factors such as social and environmental conditions (Lewis, 2012). Both theoretical approaches highlight the need to consider environmental constraints or barriers to opportunity.

- 4.5. Sen's Capabilities Approach, coupled with data from young people, led us to reconceptualise 'capability' in the COM-B model as best understood as a function of both:
- an individual's psychological and physical capabilities (what I alone can do); and
  - the support an individual young person can access (what I can do with the help of others)<sup>24</sup>.
- 4.6. Therefore, the capability of a young person to, for example, search for a job, would depend upon both:
- the capability of the individual young person, such as their digital literacy and their knowledge of employers' recruitment practices and expectations; and
  - the support they could access, such as advice and guidance from a careers advisor or work coach on how best to search for work, or social, emotional and informational support from a youth worker.
- 4.7. This (re)conceptualisation of 'capability' also opens the door to considering the role that assets or resources such as social, family and economic capital can play in enhancing a young person's capabilities. For example, economic and family capital may enable a young person with a caring responsibility for a young child, to manage their caring responsibilities through a mix of formal and informal childcare arrangements, increasing their capability. Or conversely, where those assets are limited, they can constrain their capabilities, to for example, access EET opportunities.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> In this case capability is understood in relational, rather than just individual terms (Edwards and Mackenzie, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> There are different conceptualisations and definitions of capital assets (see, for example, Moser, 1998; Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). For the purposes of this paper, in order to align with the COM-B framework, we define 'assets' as resources that enable behaviours, that is to say they enable an individual to do things – in effect they provide 'capabilities'. This is perhaps clearest in relation to 'human capital', the skills and knowledge and physical and mental health needed to perform a particular behaviour. Similarly, having access to 'economic' capital, the financial resources people can access, such as wages, welfare benefits, savings and loans; 'physical capital', material things, such as housing, cars or white goods (for example, washing machines); and 'social capital', the networks and relationships we have with others, can all enable behaviours (that is to say, they can enable an

- 4.8. We also identified the importance of treating capability as a ‘situated and contextual phenomenon’ (Lewis, 2023, p. 18). Capabilities are not a fixed attribute which exist in a vacuum; instead, they are best understood in the specific context in which a young person finds themselves and in relation to a specific task or behaviour (meaning they are context dependent).<sup>26</sup> For example, a young person might be very ‘capable’ and confident in a familiar environment, but feel much less confident and therefore become less capable in an unfamiliar environment. Moreover, as we outline below, capabilities are also a product of context, and, shaped by young people’s experiences in, for example, education and the home.
- 4.9. We continue to treat motivation as the attribute of an individual, albeit one clearly shaped by context. As Figure 4.1 demonstrates, motivation will be affected by capabilities and also by opportunities (e.g. job openings in the local labour market). It will also be affected by other environmental factors like the degree to which family, friends and trusted adults in a young person’s life encourage and support or discourage and hinder a specific behaviour. Like capabilities, motivations are not a fixed attribute but best understood in relation to a specific behaviour. A young person may, for example, be highly motivated to perform some behaviours, but very opposed to performing others.
- 4.10. We continue to treat opportunity (or the absence of external constraint) as the product of the context a young person finds themselves in (and therefore, by definition, context dependent). This does not mean that a young person is

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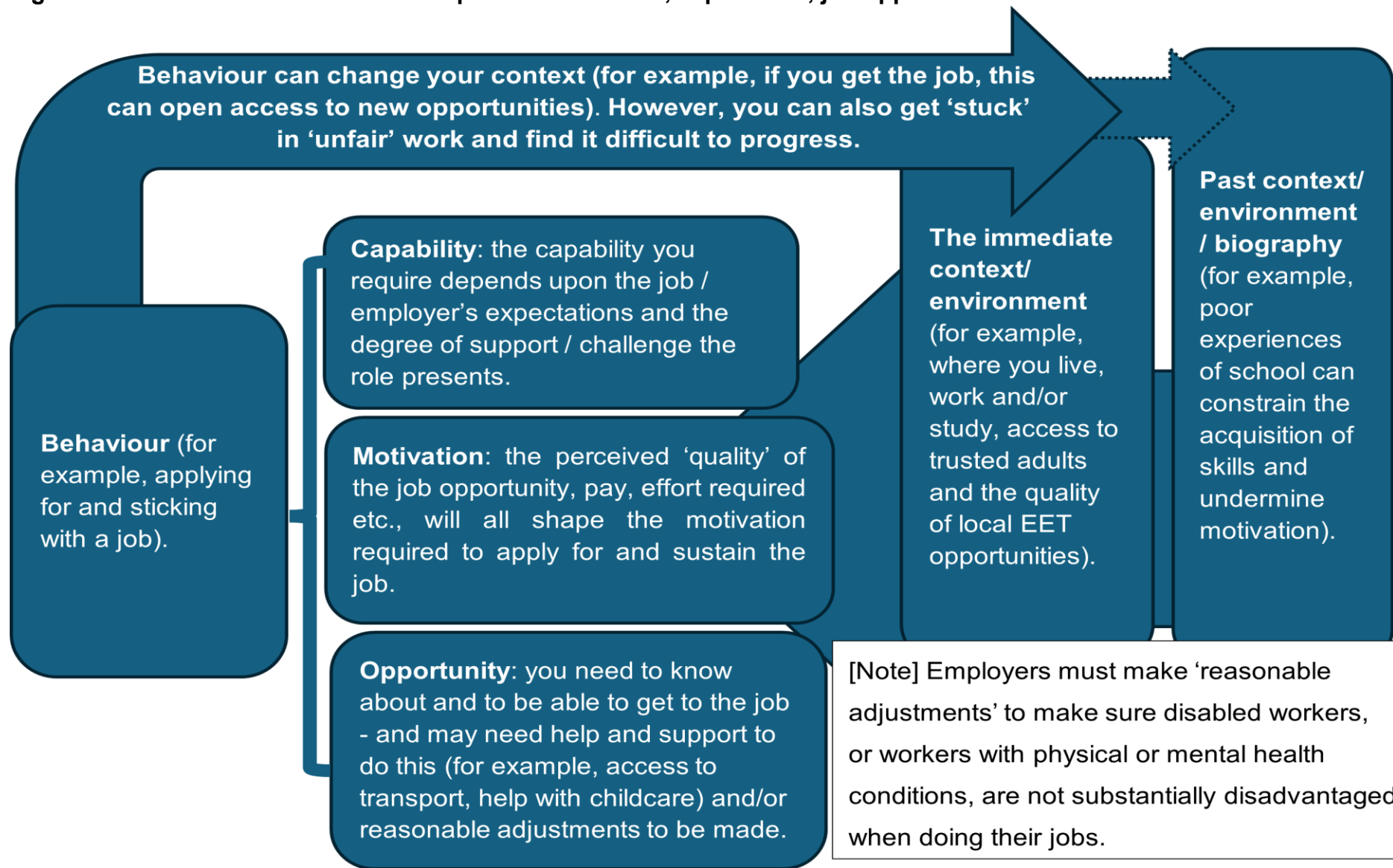
individual to do things), and their absence can limit an individual’s capabilities. For example, having a car (physical capital) can help people travel to EET opportunities, and having secure accommodation (another type of physical asset) can provide the sense of security and stability needed to look for EET opportunities. Not having such assets can impact upon a young person’s motivation to look for EET opportunities, illustrating the interconnections between capability and motivation in the COM-B framework. ‘Family capital’ is a newer concept, that builds upon the concept of ‘social capital’ to describe the resources, including, for example, the social, economic and physical capital, that a family can access (see, for example Zhao, et al, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> This also has parallels with the social model of disability, in which disability is caused not by the impairment, but by societal barriers to access and inclusion.

powerless and cannot change their context. For example, by moving to a new area (a behaviour), or increasing their capabilities, a young person may change the opportunities and constraints they face.

- 4.11. Therefore, as Figure 4.2 illustrates, a young person's capability, motivation and access to employment, education or training opportunities can only be understood in context.

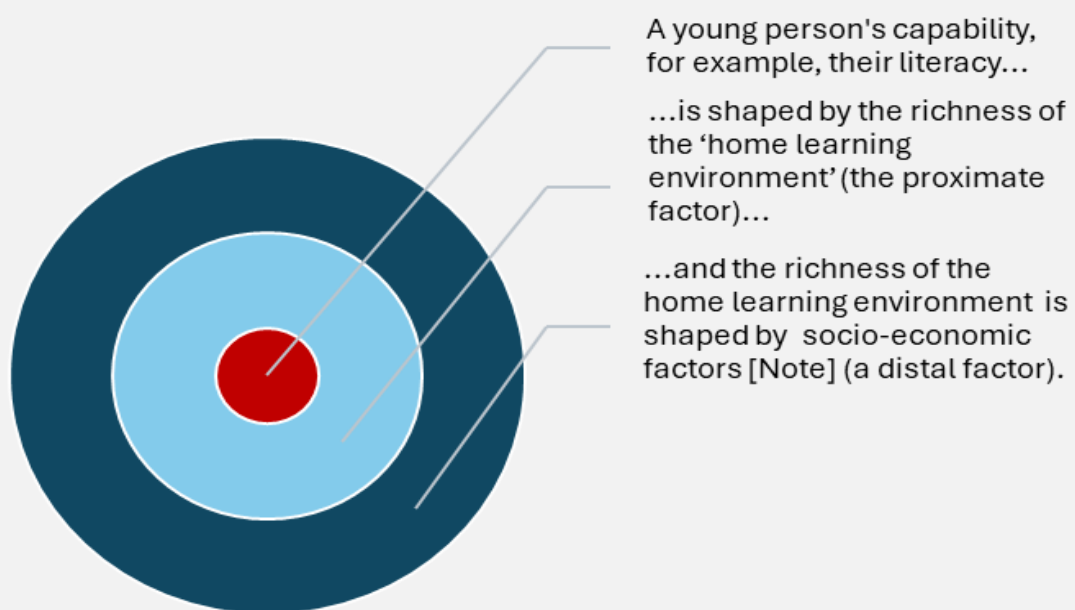
Figure 4.2. Illustration of the relationship between context, capabilities, job opportunities and motivation



### Context: distal and proximate factors

A distinction between proximate and distal factors can be helpful to distinguish between elements of a young person's immediate environment and biography most closely linked to their capabilities, opportunities and motivations, and more distant contextual factors which influence these. As Figure 4.3. illustrates, the metaphor of an onion may be useful here, with more proximate factors at the centre of the metaphorical onion and the more distal factors representing the outer layers.

**Figure 4.3. Example of proximate and distal factors**



[Note] For example, socio-economic factors, like growing up in poverty, may have contributed to the educational experiences of a young person's parents. These socio-economic factors may have contributed to their (parents') struggles at school, struggles which meant they (the parents) exited education with low or no qualifications, and have been confined to poorly paid work, constraining their capability to provide a rich learning environment for their child or children (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

This approach provides a way of thinking about and linking underlying structural factors to the capabilities, motivation and opportunities open to an individual young person. In this concept, proximate factors are akin to the transmission mechanism that links the underlying structural (distal) factors to a young person's capabilities, motivation, opportunities and behaviours. When used in this way, it is useful to think about where different factors sit on the continuum from distal to proximate (and more

than one factor can be considered a 'proximate' or 'distal' factor), rather than viewing the factors in purely categorical terms as either 'proximate' or 'distal'. This also means that what is considered a 'proximate' or 'distal' factor may depend upon how far out or back the 'lens' is drawn, to reveal more and more of 'layers' of the onion, as more and more of the structural factors in the background shaping a young person's capabilities, access to opportunities and motivations are revealed, or brought into view.

### **The COM-B framework and the social model of disability**

- 4.12. The Social Model of Disability (SMD) is a transformative reframing of the way we think about disability. Developed by disabled people and formally adopted by the Welsh Government in 2002, it posits that people with 'impairments' are 'disabled' by barriers in society, such as 'negative attitudes, and physical and organisational barriers, which can prevent disabled people's inclusion and participation in all walks of life' (Welsh Government 2023, p. 1). Therefore, by working with disabled people and institutions in society such as employers to identify solutions (by removing barriers), you remove the disability. In contrast the more traditional, medical model of disability posits that 'a person's impairment is 'the thing which disables them' (ibid.).
- 4.13. Applying the SMD to the COM-B framework helps ensure a nuanced understanding of behaviour within its environmental and social context and helps ensure that the focus is not simply upon an individual's 'deficits'. From this perspective, an impairment may be understood as a constraint upon capability, but its impact is mediated by the environment. For example, needing a wheelchair (which affects physical capability for walking) or heightened sensitivity to external stimuli is only disabling in an environment that is inaccessible to wheelchairs or that creates sensory overload for those with sensory processing differences. In these examples, it is the environment which affects people's access to opportunities. It can also help illustrate how experiences of discrimination, and of past failures to make reasonable



adjustments,<sup>27</sup> which have limited access to opportunities can continue to undermine people's motivation, even once those barriers are removed (if disabled people do not perceive that society has changed).

- 4.14. However, applying the COM-B framework to the SMD also illustrates the risks if the Social Model of Disability focuses attention solely upon opportunity and eliminating the barriers in society that hold disabled people back. This risks denying disabled people any individual agency in overcoming barriers in society. It also increases the risk that issues linked to disabled people's capability and/or motivation to access EET opportunities, such as poor literacy or numeracy, or social and emotional skills, which may hold disabled young people back, even when social barriers are dismantled, are overlooked. Crucially, both individual factors (such as skills or confidence) *and* societal/environmental barriers may need to be addressed if rate of participation in EET for disabled young people are to be increased. But it is important to recognise that these factors are inter-related, as for example, personal 'confidence' is a relational and socially produced phenomenon. It would be negatively affected by experiences of bullying or discrimination in the workplace, for example, and built through social support mechanisms and positive experiences. As outlined above, therefore, capability needs to be understood as a situated and contextual phenomenon.

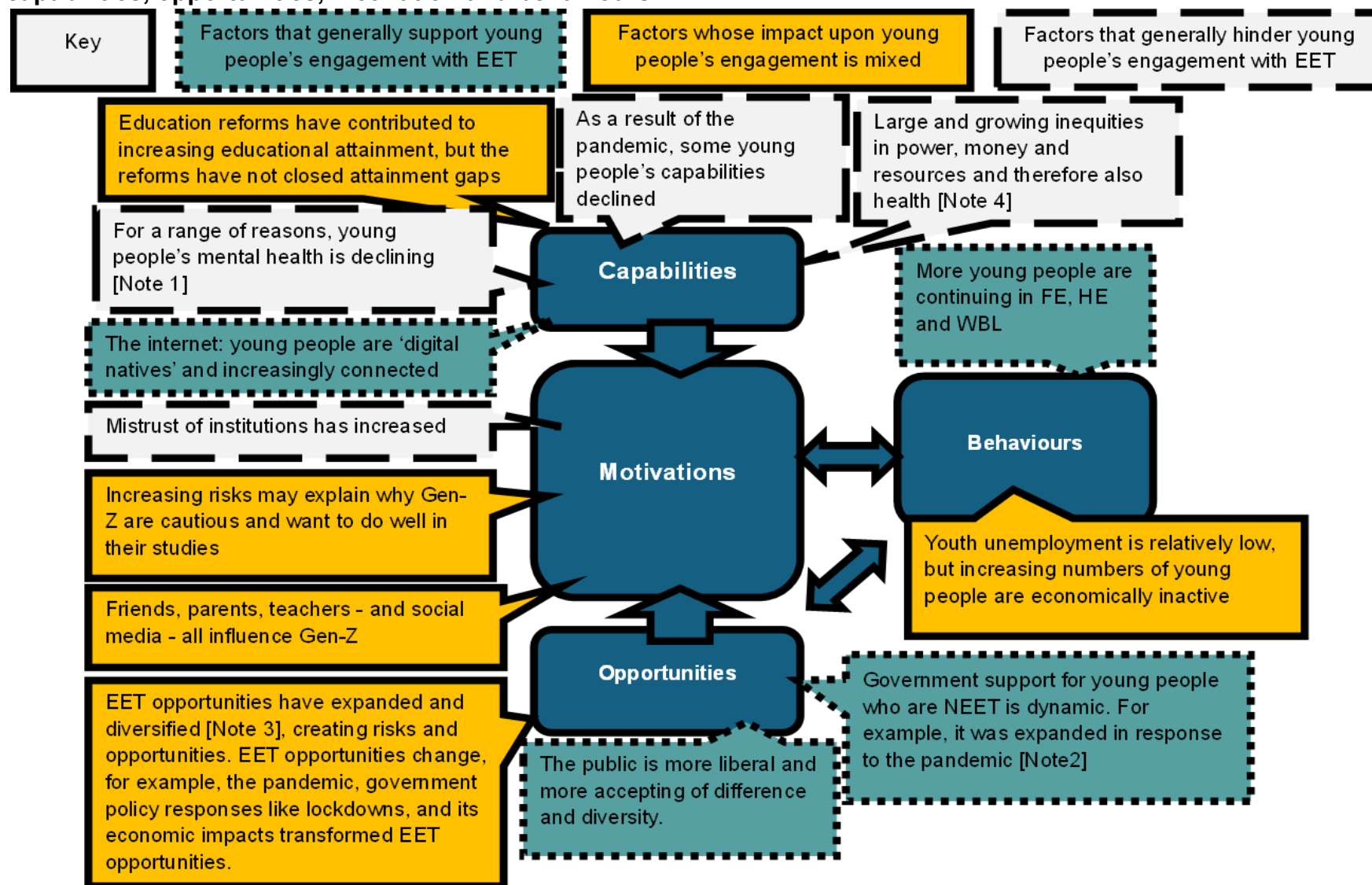
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<sup>27</sup> 'Where someone meets the definition of a disabled person in the Equality Act 2010 (...) employers are required to make reasonable adjustments to any elements of the job which place a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage compared to non-disabled people.' (Government Equalities Office, 2010, p. 2).

### Young people's agency

- 4.15. Much of the focus of this section is upon young people's 'agency'. This has been defined in different ways (see for example the discussion in Giddens, 1984) and for the purposes of this study we use it to describe young people's capacity to act, make choices and shape the world around them. In line with the COM-B framework, this capacity to act, depends upon both an individual's capabilities and the opportunity to act (or the absence of constraints). Motivation then shapes how young people choose to act – or to use the language of COM-B, how they behave.
- 4.16. As Figure 4.4 illustrates, young people's **capability** to navigate these **opportunities** and challenges created by the socio-economic, political and cultural context, and the choices they make (given their **motivation**) and therefore ultimately their **behaviours**, are shaped by a range of different external factors and forces.

**Figure 4.4. Examples of the ways in which the social, political, economic and cultural context shapes Generation Z's capabilities, opportunities, motivation and behaviours**



Sources: [Welsh Government, 2024b](#); Golley Slater, 2023; McGuire, 2022; NatCen 2022; [Public Health Wales, 2021](#); [Institute of Health Equity, 2020](#); Lloyd-Jones, 2005.

[Note 1] Declines in young people's mental health predated the pandemic but may have been accelerated by the pandemic for some groups (Public Health Wales, 2021).

[Note 2] Cuts in Welsh Government funding for EET support services are forecast as a result of the end of EU funding for Wales and moves toward new funding streams such as the Shared Prosperity Fund (Senedd Research, 2023).

[Note 3] Changes in both the number of jobs and the type or character of jobs (for example, in terms of pay, security, training and progression opportunities), as well as the number and type of education and training opportunities, are all important contextual factors.

[Note 4] These are identified as the 'social determinants of health' (Institute of Health Equity, 2020).

4.17. As the Evaluability Assessment (Welsh Government, 2025a) concludes, an analysis that considers both external factors and forces (context) and the ways they shape and interact with young people's capabilities, access to opportunities, motivation, and behaviours, can help explain why:

- most young people remain in EET, but a sizeable minority disengage and become NEET; and
- some groups, such as disabled young people, those with health conditions and those with no or low qualifications, are exposed to a much higher risk of being NEET than other groups.

### **The COVID-19 pandemic**

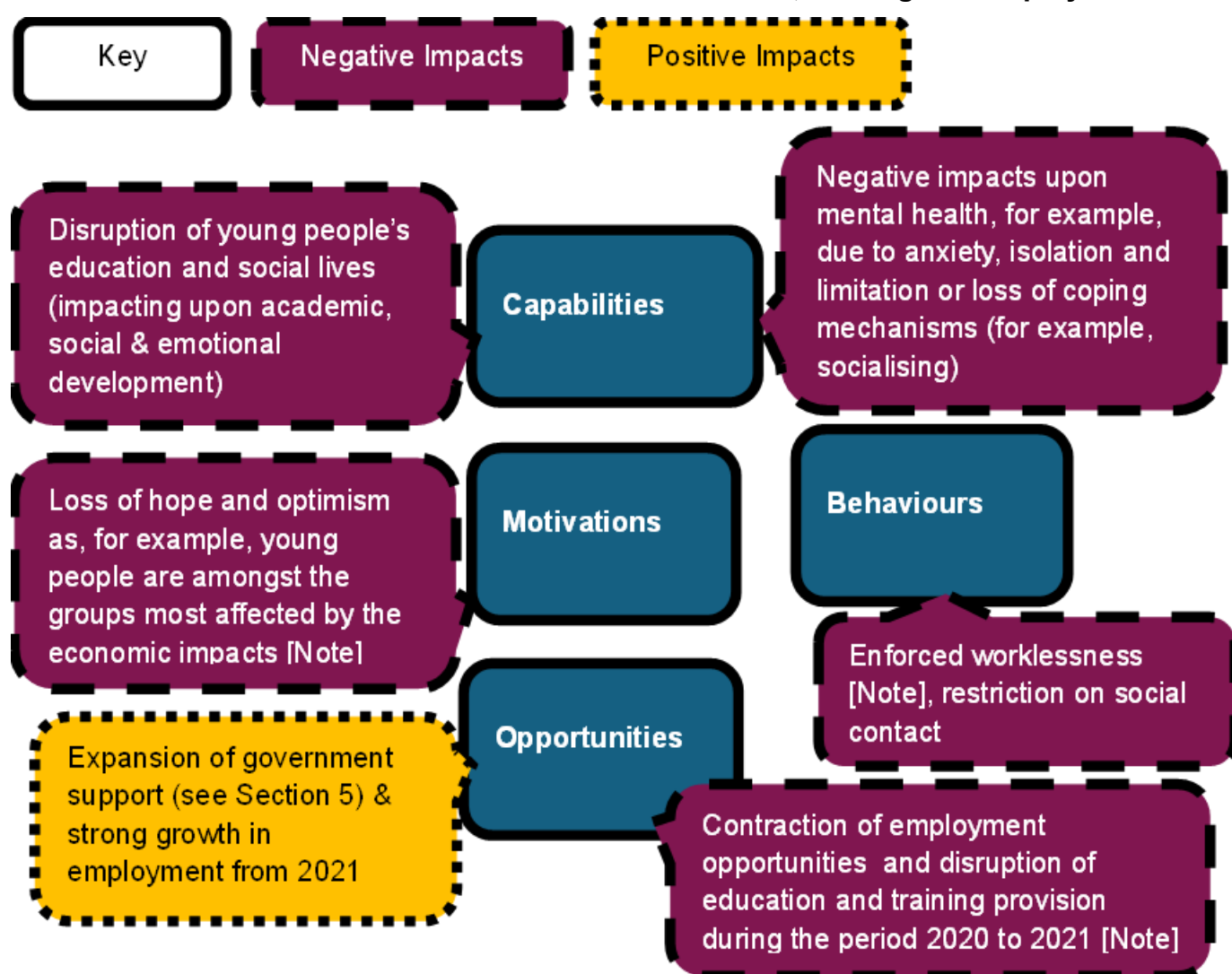
4.18. The COVID-19 pandemic was in many ways a singular experience for Generation Z (Gen-Z)<sup>28</sup>. The period was unlike any other experienced by young people in modern times and, as Figure 4.5 illustrates, it impacted

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<sup>28</sup> Gen-Z describes the cohort of young people born between the mid-1990s and the early 2010s. They follow earlier cohorts such as Millennials, Generation X and Baby Boomers.

considerably upon young people’s capabilities, motivations and access to opportunities and therefore their education, training and transitions to, and ability to sustain, employment. As outlined in the introduction, the YPG was initially developed in response to the expected impact of the pandemic upon youth unemployment.

**Figure 4.5. Examples of the impact of social, economic and policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic upon young people’s capabilities, opportunities, motivations and behaviours in relation to education, training and employment**



[Note] Young people aged 18-24 were the age group most likely to have experienced extended worklessness (including furlough) during the pandemic (Murphy, 2022a). Interviewees from the Welsh Government noted this included the loss of part time employment opportunities, which could have helped young people broaden their skills and experience while they were still in education. Interviewees from the Welsh

Government also observed that the pandemic disrupted work experience placements for those in school.

4.19. However, while aspects of the pandemic were a singular experience for young people, increases in youth unemployment following a contraction of economic opportunities are not<sup>29</sup> and have been experienced by previous generations. The 'baby boomers' may have entered a buoyant labour market in the 1970s, when most young people who left school at 16 entered employment. However, the experiences of subsequent generations, Gen-X (those born in the second half of the 1960s or 1970s), Millennials (those born in the 1980s to mid-1990s), and Gen-Z (who are the focus of the YPG) have been very different; in particular, from the 1980s onwards:

- deindustrialisation disrupted youth labour markets;
- government concern with, and support and intervention to address, rising youth unemployment increased sharply; and
- further and higher education opportunities were expanded and increasing numbers of young people continued in further education (FE) and higher education (HE) (Lloyd-Jones, 2005; McGuire, 2022; Roberts, 1995).

### **The social and economic context for Gen Z and the YPG**

4.20. The social and economic changes since the 1980s have created a wider range of EET opportunities but also more risks for young people, who are increasingly responsible for navigating a complex structure of opportunities and challenges (see Lloyd-Jones, 2005; Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005; Roberts, 1995). The economy and society up to the 1980s could be likened to an 'opt out' model, where the expectation was that most young people would follow narrow and often gender segregated employment pathways after school. For young men, there were pathways to the steel works, factory or mine and, for young women, pathways to administrative or

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<sup>29</sup> Young people are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns, and when there are fewer employment opportunities, some young people who would not otherwise do so choose to stay on in post-16 education or training. But those who either do not stay on or who drop out of education and training, or complete and then exit post-16 education or training are more likely to end up NEET during a recession. (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015)

secretarial work, factory work, catering or cleaning. The economy subsequently moved to more of an 'opt in' model, where pathways to employment and post-16 education and training splintered and proliferated, requiring young people to choose what to do. As a consequence, as we explore further in Section 8, the importance of young people's own agency (and therefore their individual capabilities, motivations and opportunities) has increased.<sup>30</sup>

- 4.21. These socio-economic changes, coupled with the rise in youth unemployment in the 1980s, led to the establishment of new programmes to support young people's transitions into employment, such as the Youth Training Scheme (YTS), programmes that, as the next Section outlines, have continued to evolve and develop to the present day.
- 4.22. These changes in post-16 education and training, the labour market and support services intersect with changes in young people's aspirations. For example, inflation (and the cost-of-living crisis) and rising house and rental prices have increased many young people's reliance upon parental support and left many unable to live independently, delaying this dimension of their transition to adulthood (Murphy, 2022b). This may, in turn, have depressed employment-related aspirations (as, for example, the possibility of using employment to achieve independent living becomes harder to achieve).

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<sup>30</sup> Roberts (1995) likened this to young people in a particular area catching the same (metaphorical) train when making transition from school to work, contrasting this with the situation in the 1990s, when young people had to choose and make their own individual journeys from school to work.

## 5. The system of EET support for young people aged 16 to 24

- 5.1. As the boxed text below illustrates, there is a sizeable body of literature examining ‘what works’ in relation to supporting young people’s engagement and progression with EET. The evidence considered for [Rapid Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education, or training](#) suggested that Welsh Government policies and programmes were informed by (and incorporated) evidence on ‘what works’. However, it was not within the scope of the review to comprehensively evaluate the extent to which Welsh Government policies and programmes embodied the evidence of ‘what works’ (Welsh Government 2024t).

### **Engaging and supporting young people’s engagement and progression with EET: what works?**

- Focusing upon young people to better understand their motivation, capabilities and/or access to opportunities. This focus is crucial as young people’s motivations, capabilities and/or access to opportunities enable and constrain young people’s behaviour, such as their engagement with:
  - EET support services, such as JGW+ or CfW+; and/or
  - their engagement with EET opportunities such as further education, work-based learning or employment opportunities.
- Focusing upon employers and also education or training providers, to better understand their expectations and the EET opportunities open to young people. This can help ensure that support for young people equips them with the capabilities, attitudes and behaviours employers or education and training providers expect, that those providing support can broker access to opportunities, and that young people’s aspirations are aligned with their capabilities and the EET opportunities they can access.
- Supporting young people in a flexible, responsive, person-centred way, through the dual roles of a trusted adult and lead professional who can provide pastoral and practical support themselves and broker access to EET opportunities and support from others (e.g. health and housing services) where needed.



- Doing all of this well by, for example, ensuring that staff have the motivation and capabilities and access to opportunities (such as support from partners) they need to perform their roles and that programmes are adequately funded and robustly evaluated.

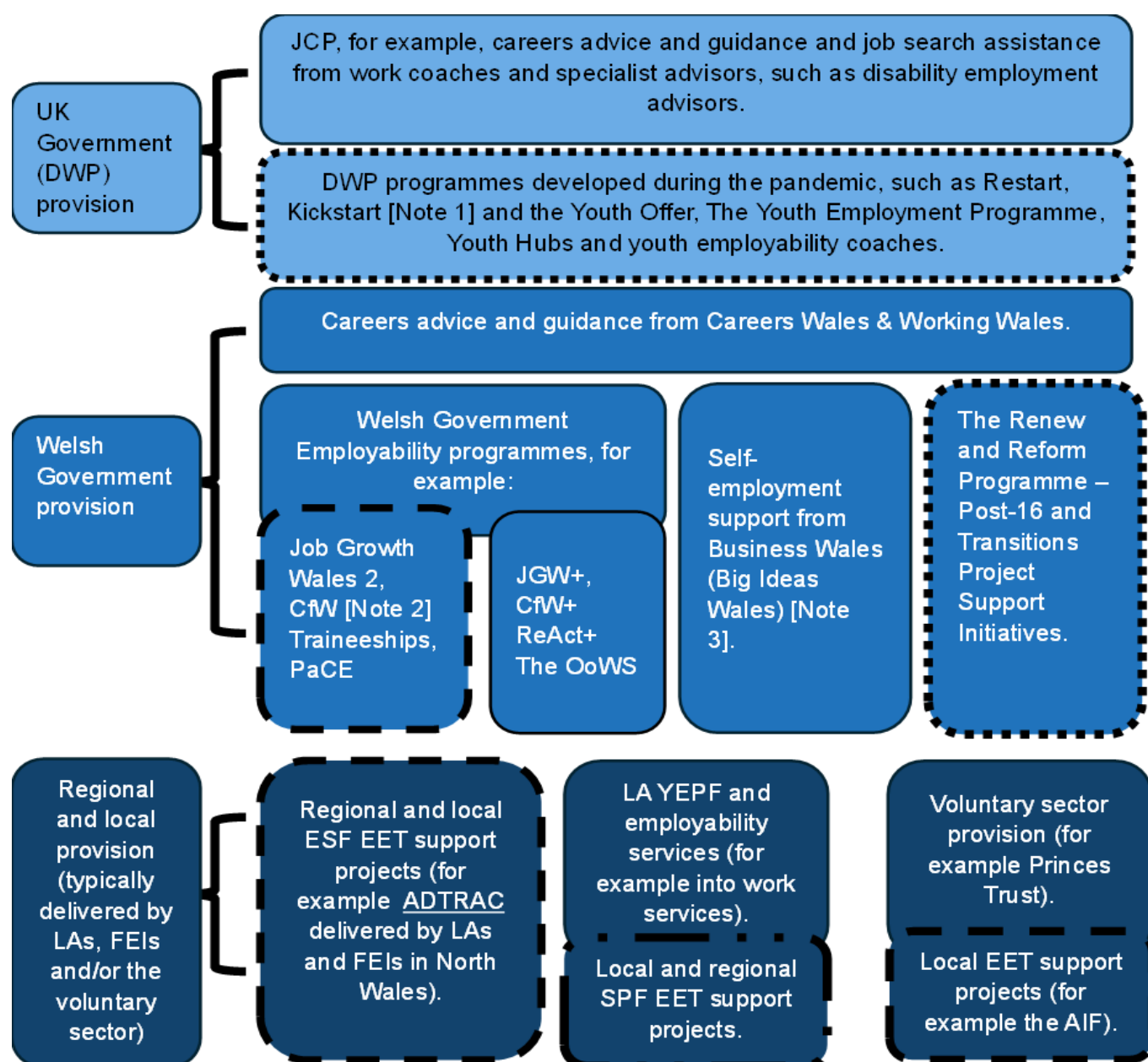
However, this evidence base is largely restricted to ‘what works’ for those young people who engage with EET support services (as they are included in evaluations) and much less is known about ‘what works’ with those who do not engage (who are generally not included in evaluations).

Adapted from Welsh Government, 2024t, p. 92.

5.2. Nevertheless, as Figure 5.1. illustrates, in early 2020 (pre-pandemic) the system of post-16 EET support was fragmented, being delivered by different bodies at different scales or geographies. It has changed further since 2020 as:

- new programmes and interventions have been developed in response to the pandemic (indicated by the square dots);
- European Social Fund (ESF) provision (indicated by thick oblong dashes) ended in 2023; and
- Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) provision (indicated by thick oblong dashes and square dots) was phased in from 2022 onwards.

**Figure 5.1. The system of post-16 EET support in Wales**



Acronyms: AIF – Active Inclusion Fund<sup>31</sup>; PaCE – Parents, Childcare and Employment<sup>32</sup>.

[Note 1] Kickstart ended in December 2021.

[Note 2] CfW was delivered in partnership with the DWP and ended in March 2023.

[Note 3] Big Ideas Wales was supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) initially from 2007 to 2013 and then as part of the Business Wales service from 2014 to June 2023. This scheme is discussed further in Section 7.

<sup>31</sup> The ESF Active Inclusion Fund (AIF) supported people distant from work to engage or re-engage in the labour market and ended in March 2023.

<sup>32</sup> PaCE supported economically inactive parents or guardians, helping them prepare for and access employment opportunities.

- 5.3. As the Learning and Work Institute (LWI) identifies, although the services developed in response to the pandemic ‘offer a greater range of support for young people, it has also created a more complex landscape to navigate and potentially more complicated referral routes into appropriate support for young people’ (LWI, 2021b, p. 5). As Section 8 outlines, interviewees from the Welsh Government and from programmes that form the YPG, reported that the end of the ESF programme in 2023 and the start of SPF funding from the UK government, which has been allocated to LAs since April 2022, has further fragmented the landscape.

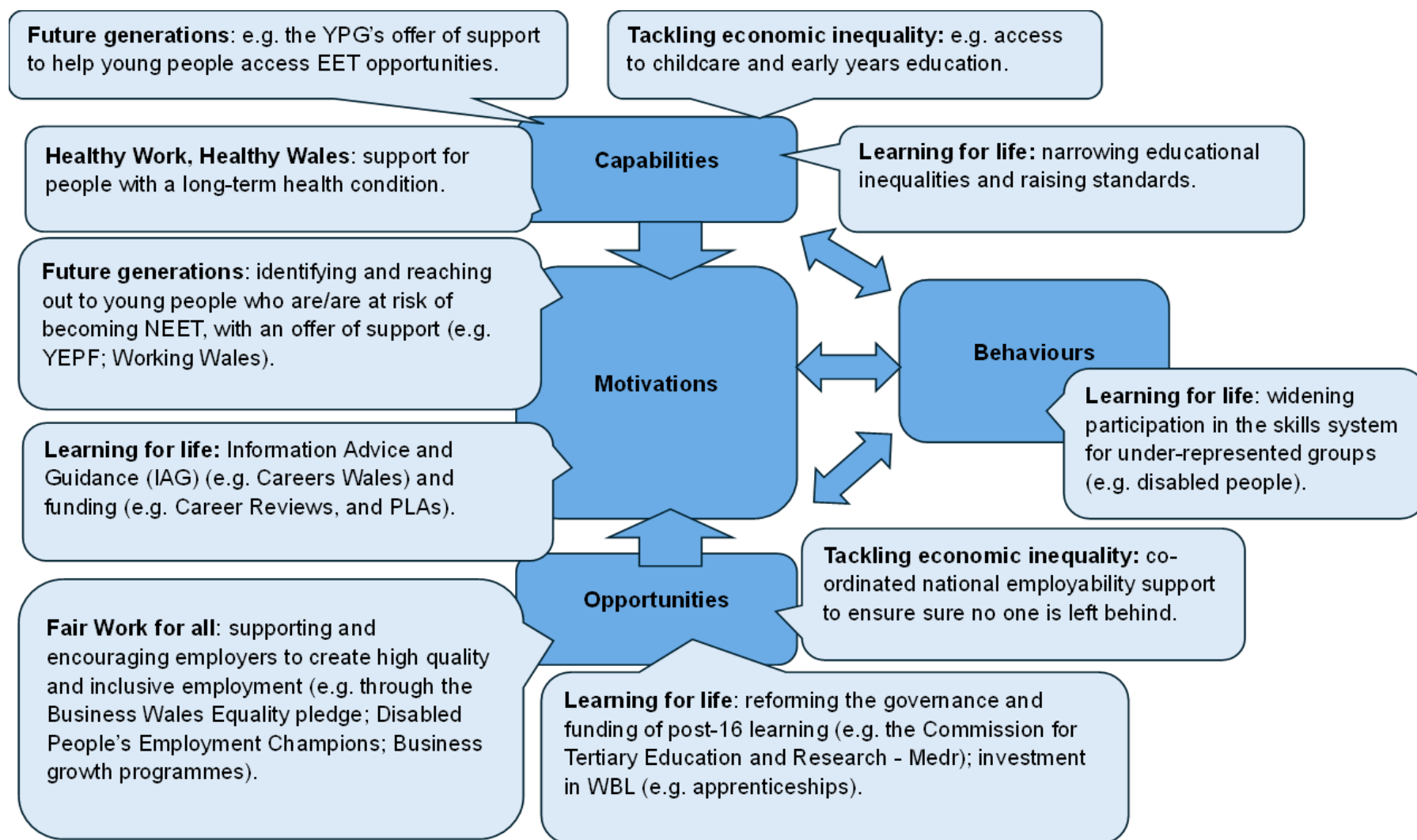
*The wider policy context*

- 5.4. As Figure 5.2. illustrates, the policy context for the YPG extends beyond employability programmes to encompass policy in areas such as education, health and childcare. These wider policy areas often aim to address more ‘distal’ factors, such as low levels of educational attainment or poor health,<sup>33</sup> which limit young people’s capabilities, rather than the more ‘proximal’ factors like access to EET support services (Welsh Government, 2024b). For example, the Welsh Government’s [NYTH/NEST Framework](#), and the [Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being](#), with their focus upon prevention, early help and intervention, are a key part of a ‘whole systems’ approach to strengthen young people’s mental health and wellbeing.

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<sup>33</sup> This does not mean that for example, improving educational attainment or mental health is solely the preserve of the education or health policy, simply that policies in these areas are intended to have roles to play.

**Figure 5.2. Welsh Government policy map: support for young people to engage with EET**



Source: adapted from [Welsh Government, 2022f](#)

## **Education and training pathways, advice and guidance**

- 5.5. There have been longstanding concerns around educational and training pathways for young people in Wales. For example, the Hazelkorn review identified, among other things, that there was an ‘absence of coherent learning pathways and educational opportunities for students, of all ages, gender and talent, from school, into/through further and higher education’ (Welsh Government, 2016a, p. 11). Similarly, in their 2022 review of 16 to 19 education, Estyn identified that ‘learners’ options to continue learning at age 16 vary considerably depending on where they live in Wales, what language they wish to learn in and what their educational attainment was at age 16’ (Estyn, 2022a, p.12). In addition, as Estyn identify, ‘there remains too much variation in the quality of careers and work-related education [CWRE] and impartial advice and guidance to support all learners in schools fully in making choices about their education and training options post-16’ (Estyn, 2022b, p. 14).
- 5.6. This criticism is mainly directed at educational settings, which may have a vested interest in encouraging learners to continue with them rather than move to another setting. This means that there is a risk that some learners do not have access to comprehensive or sufficiently impartial advice about the range of options open to them. For example, Estyn identify that:
- ‘insufficient attention is paid to alternative learning pathways other than staying on in the sixth form, especially if learners are expected to achieve well academically in their GCSEs’; and
  - ‘there is a mixed understanding of vocational qualifications, that learners have differing perceptions of the value of vocational education, and that learners believe that more ‘non-academic’ learners are encouraged to take vocational education’ (Estyn, 2022a., p. 32).
- 5.7. This concern was echoed by interviewees from the Welsh Government. For example, as one observed:

If you're academically minded, you do well; school is going to give you lots of information about sixth form but not other things. And if you're not and the school

doesn't think it's for you, then you'll probably get told about college. That's basically [what] we need to change.

- 5.8. Careers Wales reported that they introduced an offer of a careers guidance interview to all young people in KS4 in September 2024 in response to these concerns and to try to ensure that all young people have been made aware of all their options by someone impartial . Although evidence on the effectiveness was not available (as it comes at the very end of the period being evaluated), Careers Wales reports that between September 2024 and April 2025 they had seen 83% of the KS4 cohort. However, they also reported that access to some young people can be restricted by schools.
- 5.9. There are also particular concerns that progression pathways though vocational qualifications are not clear enough (Welsh Government, 2024b). This reflects concerns about:
- how information about different pathways is communicated;
  - how prospective learners are advised about different pathways (including the examples outlined above); and,
  - to a lesser degree, the architecture of pathways, with for example, concerns raised about duplication of content at different levels.
- 5.10. In response, the Review of Vocational Qualifications in Wales recommends that 'Qualifications Wales works with stakeholders to produce vocational qualification 'route maps' to enable learners to identify progression opportunities in each sector' (emphasis omitted, *ibid*, p. 88). In this context, one informant from the Welsh Government suggested that the [Welcome to Caerphilly Pathways](#) resource was a good example of what could be done.
- 5.11. As a consequence of these interlocking factors, as outlined below, although at 16 most young people transition to either sixth form or college, there are concerns that too many young people do not end up on their optimal pathway.<sup>34</sup> This, in turn, contributes to the considerable numbers of young people who do not sustain that pathway and drop out (Estyn, 2022a).

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<sup>34</sup> For example, Estyn identify that 'too many learners lacked awareness of work-based learning opportunities such as apprenticeships' (Estyn, 2022b, p.1).

### *Young people's progression*

- 5.12. Analysis by the Wales Centre for Public Policy (Huxley and Davies, 2024)<sup>35</sup> estimates that a year after completing year 11:
- 50% of young people were enrolled in FE (including WBL);
  - 44% of young people were enrolled in a sixth form;
  - 10% of young people had enrolled in both sixth form and college; and
  - 7% of young people were not enrolled in sixth form or college (and were either employed, unemployed or economically inactive).
- 5.13. This is broadly in line with other estimates (see for example Estyn, 2022a), highlighting how, at 16, most learners continue into either college or sixth form.
- 5.14. Huxley and Davies' (2024) analysis also identifies:
- marked differences in the pathways different groups take, with learners from lower socio-economic groups, with a long-term illness or impairment and/or SEN<sup>36</sup> likely to choose vocational and WBL pathways; and
  - the scale of early exit from education (they estimate that 6% of learners withdrew from all activities they were enrolled in during Year 12 and 5% of learners withdrew from all activities they were enrolled in during Year 13).
- 5.15. The YPG is part of the Welsh Government's response to this challenge, alongside the creation of Medr, which aims to create a unified regulatory and funding system for post-16 education and training.<sup>37</sup>

### **Transitions for young people with ALN**

- 5.16. There have been long standing concerns about the difficulties young people with ALN can experience when making transitions from secondary education (see, for example, Welsh Government, 2016b). Indeed, the proportion of young people with

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<sup>35</sup> This is based upon a longitudinal analysis 'examining cohort progression from compulsory schooling into tertiary education and considering the characteristics of populations within different tertiary settings' (Huxley and Davies, 2024, p. 59).

<sup>36</sup> The report authors acknowledge that 'SEN is no longer the preferred terminology and has been replaced by Additional Learning Needs (ALN)' but state that they 'continue to use SEN in this report to accurately reflect the data used, which was collected before these changes' (Huxley and Davies, 2024, p.16.)

<sup>37</sup> This includes FE (colleges and school sixth forms), HE, adult and community learning, and apprenticeships and training.

ALN making and sustaining transitions to post-16 education or training are much lower than those learners without ALN (Huxley and Davies, 2024).<sup>38</sup>

- 5.17. Learners with ALN have historically experienced a range of difficulties (that go beyond transitions). The Welsh Government aims to address many of these difficulties through its ALN reform programme.<sup>39</sup> The reforms include establishing a 'unified system' covering schools and colleges to support learners with ALN aged 0 to 25 (Welsh Government, 2021b). The ALN reforms have been phased in over four school years (September 2021 to August 2025).
- 5.18. An [evaluation of the ALN system](#) is underway and evaluating the full impact of the reforms is well beyond the scope of this report. It is also probably too early to judge. For example, given this report's focus upon the YPG, it is notable that in 2023, Estyn identified that local authorities' strategies for post-16 provision were still 'at a very early stage of development', with very little clarity on the how the system would work in colleges (Estyn, 2023a, p 23).
- 5.19. Nevertheless, one potentially important impact of the reform was highlighted by interviewees from the Welsh Government: in 2024 the numbers of learners in schools categorised as having an ALN had fallen by 44% since the new system was introduced in 2020 to 2021 (Senedd Research, 2024). An impact on this scale was not expected because the definition of ALN<sup>40</sup> had not significantly changed from that

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<sup>38</sup> This report examines participation, progression, and non-progression in tertiary education in Wales between 2011/12 and 2018/19. The report identifies that when looking at the various SEN classifications, 'higher proportions of SEN Statement learners (21%) and Action Plus learners (12%) did not progress into Sixth Form or FE. SEN learners (between 9% and 15%) had the lowest proportions progressing to Sixth Form settings. Learners with SEN diagnoses were more frequently found in FE colleges (between 66% and 73%) compared to learners with no known SEN (46%).' (Huxley and Davies, 2024, p. 19.)

<sup>39</sup> The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 ("the ALN Act") establishes the statutory framework for supporting children and young people with ALN in Wales. This replaces the legislation surrounding special educational needs and the assessment of children and young people with learning difficulties.

<sup>40</sup> According to [The Additional Learning Needs Code](#): 'A person has additional learning needs if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability (whether the learning difficulty or disability arises from a medical condition or otherwise) which calls for additional learning provision. A child of compulsory school age or person over that age has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she (a) has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or (b) has a disability for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010 which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities for education or training of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream maintained schools or mainstream institutions in the further education sector' (Welsh Government 2021b, p. 28). (Note: this language does not reflect the Social Model of Disability which the Welsh Government observes.)



of SEN or LDD (Estyn, 2023a). This is important for this study because, as we outline below, it affects the transitional support young people are entitled to.

5.20. It is not clear why the numbers of learners categorised as having an ALN has declined. It was initially suggested by the Welsh Government that young people with SEN were ‘over identified’ under the old system (Senedd Research, 2022a). In their [2023 review of the new additional learning needs system](#), Estyn identify that ‘There are many factors that are likely to have contributed to an overall reduction in the number of children on schools’ ALN registers’ (Estyn, 2023a, p. 14). These include:

- the introduction of new terms ‘that describe learning provision as: ‘universal’, ‘targeted’, ‘specialist’ and ‘additional’. This may have changed the thresholds as it is ‘only when provision is classed by local authorities and/or schools as ‘additional’, that pupils are considered as having an ALN.’ (ibid, p. 15);<sup>41</sup>
- the mis-categorisation (under the old system) of learners who received short-term catch-up interventions for literacy and/or numeracy as having a ‘general learning difficulty’ (and therefore SENs);
- greater scrutiny of ALN registers under the new system; and
- changes in funding for schools (ibid).

5.21. In addition, as Estyn identify, schools report increasing complexity and/or severity of need amongst young people identified as having an ALN. This may help explain why there have been much sharper falls in the numbers of learners supported at School Action and School Action Plus between 2020 and 2023, alongside a very large increase in the number of statutory plans, including statements of SEN and IDPs, issued (Ibid).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> However, it should be noted, that this interpretation has also been challenged. For example, the President of the Education Tribunal for Wales has described the ALN code as ‘intellectually challenging’ to understand (Senedd, 2024, p. 27). She noted that, for example, the Code does not define what constitutes ‘universal’, ‘targeted’, or ‘specialist’ provision and only defines ‘additional learning provision’ (which forms part of the criteria for determining if a child or young person has an ALN). This is important because, in her view, if provision types are not defined by the Code, they cannot be used to deny a child or young person an IDP (Senedd, 2024, p. 33). Estyn also acknowledge this in their latest thematic survey on the ALN System, noting ‘widespread and ongoing confusion around what constitutes ‘universal’ provision which is generally available to all pupils of the same age and what is additional learning provision’ (Estyn, 2024a, p.7).

<sup>42</sup> Under the old SEN system, provision was made at three levels: ‘School Action’, where the special educational provision could be provided by the school; School Action Plus, where external advice or support was required to provide the special educational provision; and statements of SEN, generally for those with the

- 5.22. In contrast, the Senedd Children, Young People and Education committee has concluded that the ‘primary reason for this fall is that schools do not have the resources to put in place targeted provision for every child with [an] ALN’ (Senedd, 2024, p. 4.).
- 5.23. Given the uncertainty about what is driving the changes, the Evaluation of the ALN System has identified exploring the reasons for these changes as a ‘key line of investigation’ (Welsh Government, 2023j, p. 72). Similarly, in her evidence to the Children, Young People and Education committee, the Cabinet Secretary for Education reported that she was ‘seeking to “get under the skin of what is going on”, and that she was “really worried” about the decrease in recorded’ ALN numbers’ (Senedd, 2024, p. 28).
- 5.24. The decline in the numbers of young people identified (categorised) as having an ALN means that:
- fewer young people are receiving transitional support from a range of stakeholders because they have an ALN; and
  - as an interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, if learners who would have been categorised as having a SEN under the old system are not categorised as having an ALN under the new system, these learners may be disadvantaged when they move to post-16 provision, if it means that their learning needs are not recognised or met by settings such as colleges.<sup>43</sup>

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most severe and complex needs that could not be met by the school. Over the period 2020 to 2023, there was a 56% decrease in the numbers of learners supported at School Action, 46% decrease in the numbers of learners previously on School Action Plus and, in contrast, a 67% increase in the number of statutory plans, including statements of SEN and IDPs (Estyn, 2023a, p. 16). It should be noted, however, that every child or young person who has an ALN is generally entitled to an IDP, irrespective of the severity or complexity of their needs, so the comparison between statements of SEN and IDPs is not straightforward.

<sup>43</sup> There are two issues here. Firstly, if ALN are not being met in schools with appropriate ALP, young people are at risk of underachieving. If their ALN continues to not be met through appropriate ALP in post-16 education and training, their risk of under-achievement continues. Secondly, any failure in transition planning, which means that a post-16 education or training provider is not aware that a young person has an IDP, means they may not get the ALP they need. Nevertheless, as another interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, when enrolling students, there should be opportunities for young people to raise whether they have or have had an IDP. This provides an opportunity for discussion between the young person and the college about their needs and the support that may be required and to discuss any issues about the young person’s consent. Post-16 settings may also identify previously unidentified ALN.

5.25. In response to the decline in the number of young people receiving transitional support because they have an ALN, since September 2024 Careers Wales have adjusted their support offer to include disabled young people in their targeted offer (see boxed text for details of the differing levels of support Careers Wales offers). This aims to ensure that Careers Wales reaches out to disabled young people earlier during KS4. Careers Wales also confirmed that they continue to support over 90% of young people with ALN.

#### **Careers Wales' support offer**

Young people have differing levels of need, and Careers Wales support reflects this. In order to best match needs with resources, the four levels of support Careers Wales offers are:

1. Universal support - via group sessions, website (including webchat) and telephone.
2. Career Check support – those indicating a need for guidance and coaching support' via Careers Wales' 'Career Check survey.'
3. 'Targeted support'<sup>44</sup> – aimed at those young people who require additional support to make a positive transition into employment, education and training.'
4. 'Additional learning needs (ALN) support for young people with ALN'.

Source: Careers Wales, 2024, p. 20.

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<sup>44</sup> The targeted Support group includes those with the following individual characteristics: free school meals; looked after children; EOTAS (PRU and alternative curriculum); at risk of becoming NEET; young carers; school action +; poor attenders; English for speakers of other languages (ESOL); labour market entrants and disabled young people.

- 5.26. The critical question, that is not known (and which this evaluation cannot answer), is whether the numbers of young people having an ALN has declined by 44% since 2020 to 2021 because of:
- mis-categorisation in the past and/or more educational settings becoming more inclusive, meaning that ‘additional learning provision’ (ALP)<sup>45</sup> is not required<sup>46</sup>; and/or
  - children and young people who meet the definition of ALN (that is to say, they have ‘a greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age (...) which calls for additional learning provision’ (Estyn, 2023a, pp. 13 to 14), are not being categorised as having an ALN, as schools and local authorities do not have sufficient resources.
- 5.27. If it is primarily because of the former (as initially the Welsh Government and also Estyn has suggested), the declining numbers of young people identified as having an ALN means that a reduced number of young people have a transition plan and wider support in place and, consequently, that the additional support Careers Wales (and others such as colleges) provide will be better targeted at those young people who need it. However, if it is primarily because of the latter (as the Senedd Children, Young People and Education committee concluded), young people who would have been entitled to additional support for transition planning under the old system, are no longer entitled to the same level of support, because ‘schools and local authorities do not have sufficient resources to put in place targeted provision for every child with ALN’ (Senedd, 2024, p. 32).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “According to [The Additional Learning Needs Code](#): “Additional learning provision” for a person aged three or over means educational or training provision that is additional to, or different from, that made generally for others of the same age in (a) mainstream maintained schools in Wales, (b) mainstream institutions in the further education sector in Wales, or (c) places in Wales at which nursery education is provided.’ (Welsh Government, 2021b, p. 29).

<sup>46</sup> This reflects changes in the graduated response, from the old SEN system, based upon School Action, School Plus and Statement of SEN to ‘universal’, ‘targeted’, ‘specialist’ and ‘additional’ provision under the new ALN system (discussed above). Therefore, while a child or young person may have ‘a greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age’, because that ‘does not call for ALP’, they do not have an ALN (Estyn, 2023a, p. 14).

<sup>47</sup> In addition, although beyond the scope of this evaluation, if this means these children or young people are not receiving the ALP they need while in school (because schools lack adequate resources, rather than, for example, miscategorisation), they are exposed to a higher risk of poor educational attainment, which may hinder their transitions at 16 and beyond.

5.28. However, a further consideration, is that even though the numbers of children and young people entitled to support because they have been identified by schools as having an ALN has fallen by 44%, this may have been offset in part, by changes in Careers Wales support. For example, as noted above, since September 2024 Careers Wales have added disabled young people to their 'Targeted Group' definition. This aims to ensure that disabled young people who do not have an ALN will still receive extra careers guidance support from Careers Wales. This 'targeted support' is 'aimed at those young people who require additional support to make a positive transition into employment, education and training' (Careers Wales, 2024, p. 20).<sup>48</sup> It offers guidance and coaching support but not, for example, transition planning which is included in the ALN support offer (Careers Wales, 2022). Moreover, a Welsh Government informant observed:

- all young people in maintained education settings are entitled to access careers information, advice and guidance from Careers Wales, delivered via face to face, telephone, video or digital means (as the boxed text outlining Careers Wales' offer illustrates); and
- the ALN Transformation programme is increasing the number of interviews undertaken by Careers Wales, as the emphasis for Careers Wales' work moves from preparing Learning and Skills Plans (LSPs) and funding applications to increased direct work with young people.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The target groups are 'young people whose characteristics can lead to them being under-represented in education, employment or training post-statutory education, including those who are free school meal (FSM) eligible, Looked After Children, children Educated Other Than at School (EOTAS), young carers, School Action +1 and poor attenders' (Huxley and Davies, 2023, p. 2).

<sup>49</sup> Under the old SEN system, on behalf of the Welsh Government, for young people with statements of SEN and who were leaving school to go into further education, Careers Wales undertook assessments (known as section 140 assessments). These assessments were to identify a young person's education and training needs and the provision necessary to meet those needs. This assessment would inform a LSP and would identify if a young person needed a specialist college placement (Welsh Government, 2020c). For the 2024 to 2025 academic year, Careers Wales is only responsible for submitting funding applications for anyone in year 14 or anyone over 19 but under the age of 25. The Local Authority has the responsibility of determining whether or not a young person requires a specialist college placement (known as an Independent special post-16 institution, or ISPI) for young people in years 11 to 13 (or those of equivalent age who are no longer in school). From August 2025 Careers Wales will have no duties in relation to the funding of specialist college placements for young people of any age, but can continue to support young people and LAs or education settings. The definition of an ISPI is provided in [The Additional Learning Needs Code](#), p. 24.

## 6. Design of the YPG and the YEPF

- 6.1. The YEPF built upon [Extending Entitlement Guidance for Youth Support Services for 11 to 25 year olds](#) (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002) and [the 2011 Youth Engagement and Employment Action Plan](#) (Welsh Government, 2011). In response to ‘stubbornly high’ numbers of young people who were NEET (Welsh Government, 2013), the YEPF sought to systemise good practice drawn from across Wales and develop a co-ordinated response (Welsh Government, 2019a). The aim was to increase the proportion of young people aged 11 to 25 who make successful transitions from compulsory education to FE and training (ibid.).
- 6.2. The YEPF has six core components:
- ‘early identification’ of young people aged 11 to 18 who are at risk of becoming NEET, who are NEET and/or who are at risk of becoming homeless;
  - ‘brokerage’, introducing and linking young people to appropriate support (including ensuring services work together and are able to respond to young people’s needs);
  - ‘monitoring’ and evaluating support, provision, progression and outcomes for young people;
  - harnessing appropriate provision to support young people at risk of becoming NEET, who are NEET and/or (since 2022) who are at risk of being homeless<sup>50</sup>;
  - access to employability and employment opportunities; and
  - ‘shared responsibility and accountability amongst partners for delivering the Framework’ (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 8).
- 6.3. As outlined above, ‘local authorities provide the strategic and operational leadership for implementing the [Youth Engagement and Progression]

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<sup>50</sup> This includes, for example, mainstream and alternative education, FE, WBL and pre-engagement programmes, ‘support to boost a young person’s mental health, well-being and self-esteem’, and ‘interventions for preventing youth homelessness’ (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 8).

Framework, while local partnerships have a critical role in supporting its delivery' (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 8). To support delivery of the YEPF, the Welsh Government funds LAs via the Youth Support Grant and delivery of NEET prevention activity under the YEPF is underpinned by two main roles at LA level:

- the EPC, who oversees delivery of the Framework; and
- lead workers, drawn from different services, such as the Youth Service and Careers Wales, who support young people 'who need ongoing support' (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 9).

6.4. In addition, in 2022, a third role, the Youth Homelessness Co-ordinator focused on prevention of youth homelessness, was added.

6.5. By 2020, as an interviewee from the Welsh Government put it, although the YEPF was seen as effective, particularly for those aged 11 to 18, it was felt that there had been a loss of 'momentum', and the decision was made to refresh and strengthen the YEPF. Consultation events in the first half of 2021 on the refresh of the YEPF identified that 'there was evidence of a strong commitment to and understanding of the aims of the YEPF from partner organisations' (Learning and Work Institute, 2021a, p.12). However, they also confirmed that although the YEPF was 'well developed' in relation to identifying and supporting young people aged 11 to 18, it 'remains less developed and effective post-18' (ibid., p.13).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the evaluation of the YEPF in 2019 identified that 'progress in relation to early identification, brokerage and tracking has continued to be strong, particularly with regard to young people aged up to 18' but weaker for those aged 19 to 24 (Welsh Government, 2019a, p. 23).

The report from the consultations also identified that:

- ‘there is a growing gap in relation to provision which supports young people with mild to moderate mental health difficulties to engage with education and training’;
- ‘there were concerns from local authorities that they are seen as primarily accountable for the level of NEET young people and that this is not appropriately shared with other partner organisations’;
- ‘the complexity of the policy and provider landscape, including European Social Fund (ESF) funded provision and support funded by different governments and agencies contributed to a lack of collective accountability’;
- different organisations and programmes working to different KPIs and objectives, different ESF programmes competing with each other and austerity (cuts to services) were all hampering both collective action and collective accountability;
- there were difficulties engaging and tracking older young people, including those linked to data sharing and ‘the effectiveness and appropriateness of tracking adults’;
- there are difficulties young people experience at transition points, such as those at 16 (for example, moving from school to college) or 18 (for example, moving to employment) and a need for support at those points; and
- there was a need for a wider range of more flexible, vocational and WBL pathways for young people for whom the mainstream school offer is not suitable and a stronger support offer for those considering self-employment (ibid., pp. 11-13).

6.6. These challenges, particularly those linked to tracking and supporting young people aged 18+, are further discussed in Sections 7 and 8.

6.7. Consultation with young people also identified a difference in their experiences of FE, such as college and traineeships. They reported they felt



more supported and generally felt ‘far more informed about their options’ in these settings, compared to their experiences of school (ibid., p. 13).

- 6.8. Given the feedback from the consultation and the changes in the policy landscape since the YEPF was first developed, including the announcement of the YPG in 2021, the decision was made to refocus the YEPF upon those aged 11 to 18.<sup>52</sup> However, interviewees from the Welsh Government also noted that, although the guidance for the YEPF only covers 11 to 18 year olds, the principles of the YEPF does not stop at 18 and LAs can continue to support those aged 19 and over, where they are in contact with those young people.
- 6.9. The refreshed YEPF Handbook also identifies that ‘a system-wide, collaborative focus is needed to remove the silos in delivery that have developed since the Framework was first published’ (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 7). It also notes that the local partnerships involved in delivery should include ‘partners delivering the YPG, including Working Wales, and the voluntary youth work sector, whose role in delivering the Framework has been under-developed to date’ (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 4). The shared responsibility for delivery includes a shared requirement for a ‘process of review and reflection (...) to develop a deeper understanding of how well the Framework is working in their local area and identify where improvements can be made’ (ibid.).

### **The YPG**

- 6.10. In 2021 there was widespread concern that, as the LWI and the Prince’s Trust identified:

The coronavirus pandemic has triggered a labour market crisis which is hitting young people hard. Young people are over-represented in “shutdown” sectors that have been most affected by social distancing

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<sup>52</sup> In addition, given the correlation between the risk factors for youth homeless and being NEET, youth homelessness was added in 2022.

restrictions and more likely to have been furloughed. In addition to this, young people account for around two thirds of the total fall in employment since the start of the pandemic, and youth unemployment is almost four times higher than the rest of the working-age population. Whilst progress with the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine programme presents an optimistic picture for the re-opening of the economy, there is a real risk that the pandemic will have a long-lasting impact on the labour market and on opportunities for young people for years to come. (LWI, 2021b, p. 6)

6.11. Their concern was twofold. First, the short term effects of increased unemployment, due to the shutdown of much of the economy and the medium term changes in the structure of the labour market, with forecasts for changes in demand across different sectors. Second, 'that young people are over-represented in the sectors and occupations that will see a slower recovery or no recovery at all'. (LWI, 2021b, p. 42)

6.12. In response, one of the recommendations to help young people successfully transition in a more challenging context where they might, for example, need to switch sectors, was that:

the Government should introduce a Youth Guarantee in order to prevent long-term youth unemployment. This clear and simple offer would ensure that all young people who are unemployed and not in education are able to access a job, an apprenticeship, or an education or training place. (ibid., p. 44.)

Notably, however (given the trends discussed in Section 4), the report makes no mention of economic inactivity.

6.13. In response to this challenge, in Wales, [plans for the YPG were announced in June 2021](#) to help ensure there was no 'lost generation' following the pandemic (Welsh Government, 2021a, n. pag.) and were included in the Programme for Government (PfG). The challenge, as another interviewee observed, was that at this stage, the YPG was a 'statement not a strategy' and, as another interviewee from Medr put it, 'it felt like a ministerial project' that was announced before the detail of how it would be delivered was worked

out.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, interviewees from the Welsh Government were clear that decisive action was required given the need, as one put it, to try to 'save a generation of young people' from the scarring effects of unemployment. The urgency and atmosphere (during the pandemic) were captured by one interviewee from the Welsh Government who observed that 'panic would not be too strong a word' to describe the well-founded fears around mass youth unemployment post-pandemic, with the threat of the consequent scarring of a generation's prospects for employment. Similarly, another Welsh Government interviewee described it as a 'frantic time'.

6.14. Given the urgency, another Welsh Government interviewee described the YPG as being 'pulled together really, really quickly'. The speed with which the YPG was developed meant that, as another interviewee observed, there was little scope for co-design of the YPG as 'it almost felt like we were designing it as we were running'. However, and importantly, Welsh Government interviewees also observed that this development of the YPG at pace was not made from a standing start. For example:

- there was already a raft of support programmes they could mobilise;
- there were examples of youth guarantees elsewhere, 'like the Scottish and European guarantees' (Welsh Government interviewee comment) they could look to and learn from; and
- they could draw from the 'infrastructure' of stakeholder groups such as the Disability Rights Taskforce (established in 2021) and the Race Equality Action Plan.

6.15. As we discuss further in Section 8, stakeholders from across government, including education (for example, FE and HE and apprenticeships), employability, health, careers, skills and youth work services were drawn into the development of the YPG. What became the YPG offer emerged from a

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<sup>53</sup> For example, it was reported (by interviewees from the Welsh Government) that initially there was some uncertainty about whether the YPG would provide the guarantee of a job or place in education or training or just the support to enable young people to access a place in education, employment or training. However, fairly early in the YPG's lifespan, the decision was made that the YPG would (and could only) focus upon the offer of support, as the offer of place in employment was not within the government's gift.

‘policy network’ based upon structures such as the YPG Programme Board, the YPG stakeholder group<sup>54</sup> and the Employability and Skills Plan Board (ESB)<sup>55</sup>. This level of cross departmental and external stakeholder involvement was aided by a number of factors, including:

- the perceived urgency of taking action (outlined above), coupled with the political importance of the YPG as a PfG commitment;
- the additional funding which helped bring people to the table; and
- the post-pandemic moves to meeting online, which made cross-departmental meeting and involving people from across Wales much easier and less time consuming than, for example, driving for several hours to meet in mid Wales.

6.16. As Figure 6.1 illustrates, the Phase 1 design of the YPG was relatively simple. It had a strong focus upon mobilising existing employability and skills provision. While [the ‘Feed Your Positivity’ campaign](#) (discussed further in Section 7<sup>56</sup>) was new, much of the plan, in effect, involved rebadging existing provision and programmes. Welsh Government interviewees explained that this reflected the need for urgent action and also the desire to ‘capitalise upon the strengths of the system we had’ and not to disrupt existing provision.

6.17. Alongside the focus upon mobilising existing provision, there was a desire to improve the integration of that provision. As Welsh Government interviewees observed, in 2021 provision formed a ‘very siloed system, [sometimes with programmes, services or providers] in competition with each other<sup>57</sup>’ and

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<sup>54</sup> Stakeholder group members included the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Wales TUC, Colegau Cymru, Careers Wales / Working Wales, National Federation of Training Providers – Wales, Universities Wales, HMPPS, Learning Disability Wales, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), RSPs, WLGA, CWVYS, Future Generations Wales, Youth Engagement & Progression Co-ordinator - Blaenau Gwent (LEA), Inspiring Skills, Young Farmers Club, GISDA, and WEN Cymru.

<sup>55</sup> The ESB has representation from the public and private sectors and meets quarterly. Members include employer representative bodies, employers from a range of sectors, the Wales TUC, and Welsh Government officials.

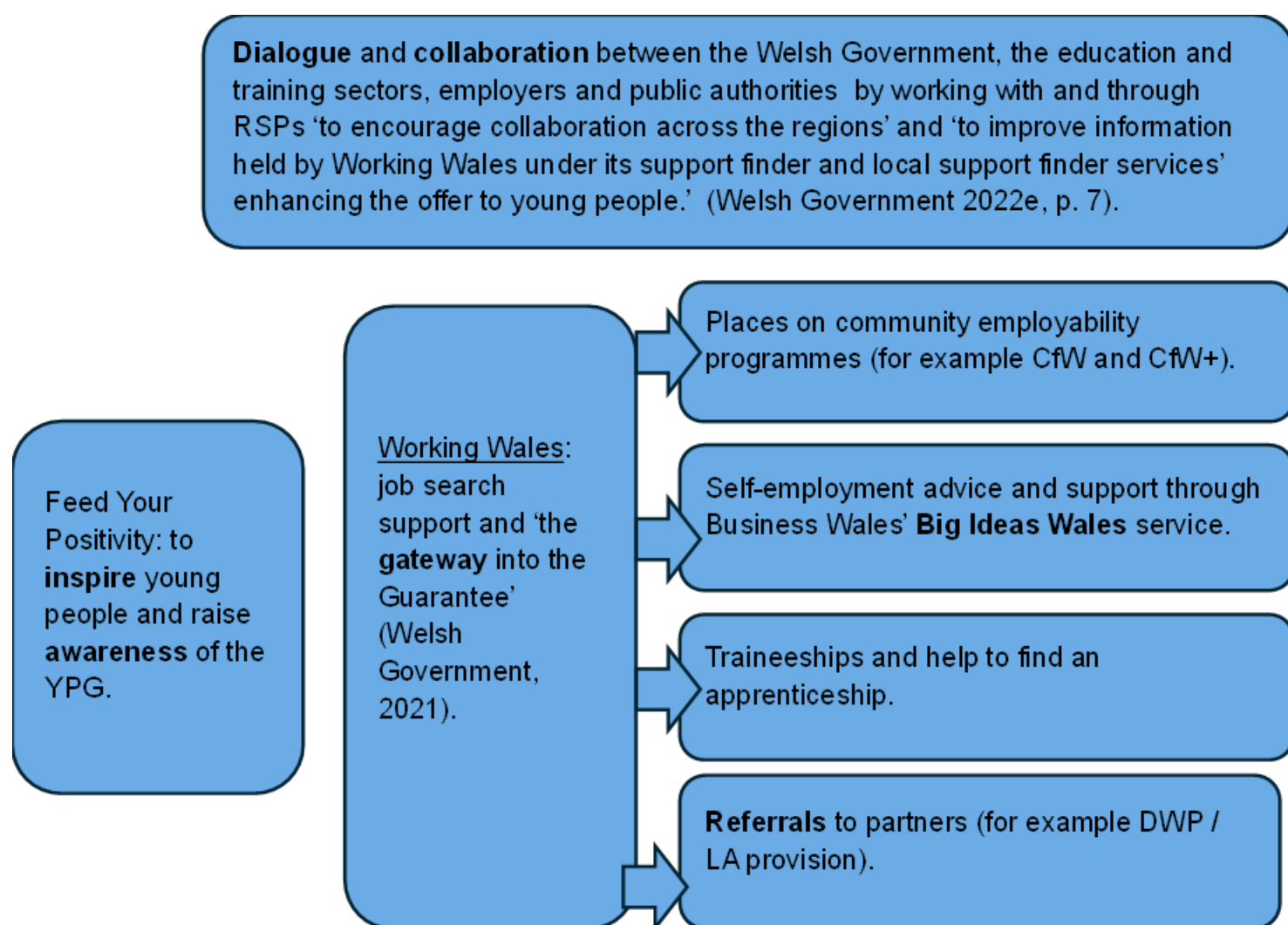
<sup>56</sup> The Feed Your Positivity campaign was developed ‘to raise awareness of the Young Person’s Guarantee and to encourage young people to be confident and motivated about their future’ (Welsh Government, 2021a, n. pag.). It is discussed later in this section.

<sup>57</sup> This could, for example, be school sixth forms and colleges who might compete for students at age 16 (see, for example, Estyn (2022a) or different employability support programmes, such as CfW and CfW+, who might feel they were in competition with other programmes for young people (see, for example, Welsh Government, 2024i).

there were also gaps in support that needed filling. Their vision was of the YPG as an ‘umbrella (...) to try and break down some of the competition between different providers [and] different settings’.

- 6.18. New investment, as outlined below, was planned for Phases 2 and 3 in the 2022 to 2023 and 2023 to 2024 financial years (Welsh Government, 2022a). As one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, the YPG ‘meant we could (...) look at those gaps [in provision] for the first time, and we had the funding to do something about it and the real drive around doing something about it’. A timeline outlining the evolution of the YPG in more detail is included in the appendices.

**Figure 6.1. Phase 1 design of the YPG**



Source: based on [Welsh Government, 2022e](#).

6.19. Under the YPG, young people could be referred via Working Wales to five key pathways:

- education, including referrals to colleges, universities and for PLAs;
- training, including referrals to JGW+, apprenticeships and ReAct+;
- employment support, including impartial advice and guidance and employability coaching from Working Wales and referrals to CfW+ and JCP;
- self-employment support through referrals to Business Wales' Big Ideas Wales Service; and
- other sources of support, when a young person has been assessed as not ready to take up the Guarantee (Welsh Government, 2022c, p. 9).

### **Accessing the YPG**

Working Wales was positioned as the gateway into the YPG to help ensure that young people who were unsure of their next step in terms of EET, had access to impartial careers IAG, strengthening accessibility and equity in terms of the opportunities available (Welsh Government, 2021a). As we outline in Section 7, this positioning of Working Wales in the marketing of the YPG was also designed to help ensure access to YPG support was straightforward for young people. However, it should be noted that IAG provided by staff in educational institutions has also helped young people access the support the YPG offers. In addition, the majority of the provision discussed in Section 7, that formed the YPG offer of support (see p. 12 of this report and Welsh Government 2021b), could also be accessed directly (that is to say, young people were not required to access it via Working Wales).<sup>58</sup>

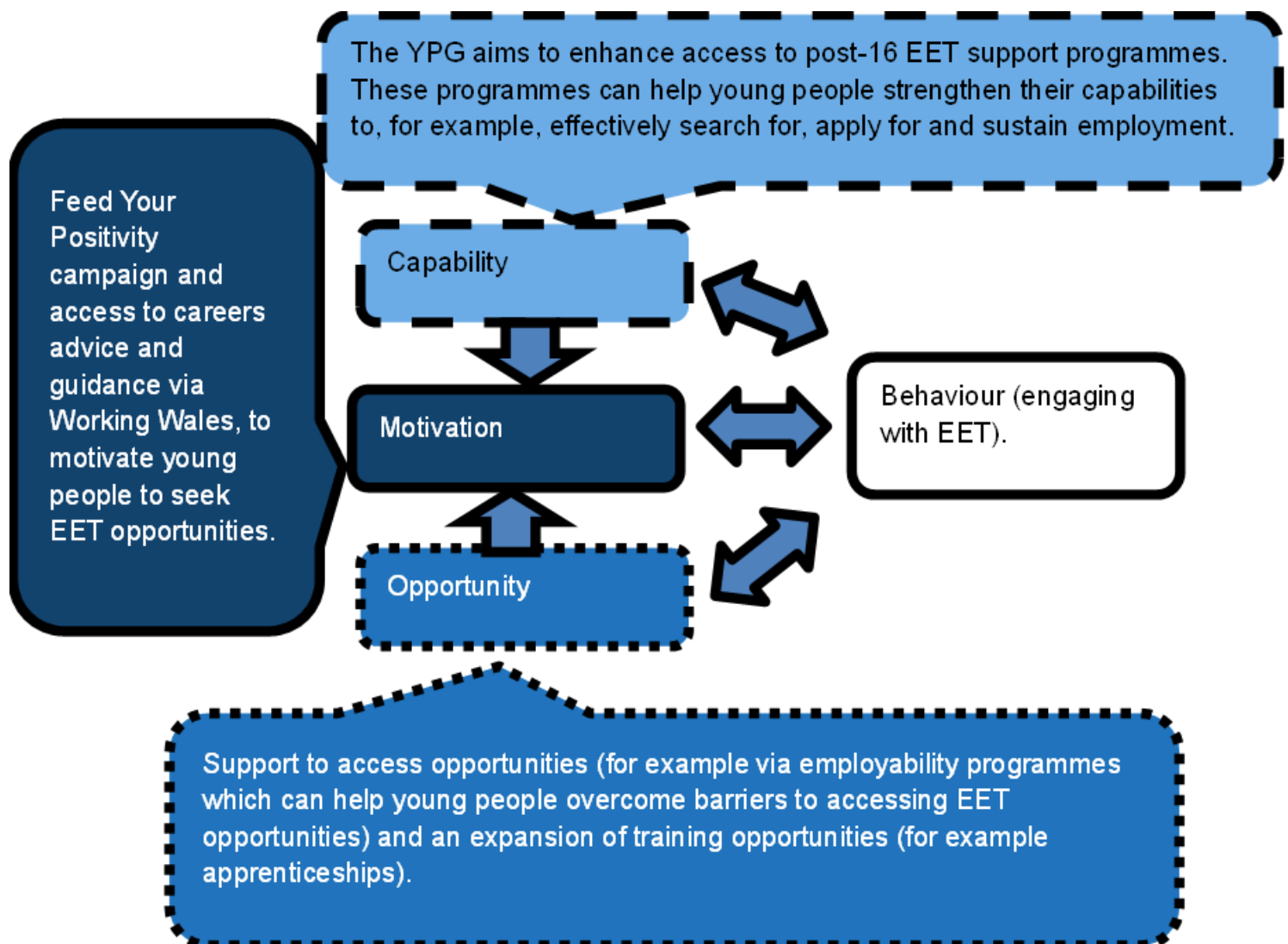
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<sup>58</sup> In addition, as we outline in Section 7 in Phase 2, self-referral and direct entry onto the JGW+ programme was enabled.

6.20. In relation to the behavioural change model, COM-B (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation-Behaviour) used for this evaluation (see Michie et al., 2011; Welsh Government, 2025a), as Figure 6.2 illustrates, the YPG's focus was primarily upon enhancing young people's:

- capability to access and sustain participation in post-16 EET by, for example, improving access to and extending support from programmes like JGW+ and CfW+;
- motivation via the Feed Your Positivity campaign and access to impartial advice and guidance from Working Wales; and
- access to opportunities through, for example, the investment in apprenticeships.

**Figure 6.2. Phase 1 of the YPG: contribution to young people's capabilities, motivation and access to opportunities**





6.21. As outlined above, the design of the YPG evolved in phases 2 and 3.

Elements of the original design were strengthened, for example:

- the core offer from existing employability programmes such as CfW+ and traineeships was strengthened with additional funding, and new successor programmes, such as JGW+ and ReAct+ were launched;
- support for self-employment was strengthened through investments in the Young Person Start Up Grant and EEBs, as well as delivery of Big Ideas Wales in schools through Careers Wales;
- a team of Disabled People's Employment Champions was recruited to promote the recruitment of disabled workers and the support available<sup>59</sup>, supported by Business Wales Disabled People's Employment Advisors<sup>60</sup>, in order to provide advice, information and support to employers across Wales; and
- additional investment was made in apprenticeships.

6.22. New elements were also added, including investments in:

- colleges and apprenticeships to support young people's mental health;
- transition support for young people in years 10 and 11 and in work placements (discussed further in Section 7); and
- additional financial support for learners through, for example, the EMA.

6.23. These new elements were added in response to the changing needs of young people but have complicated the original design and made it harder to define the boundaries of the YPG. As one workshop contributor observed, the YPG

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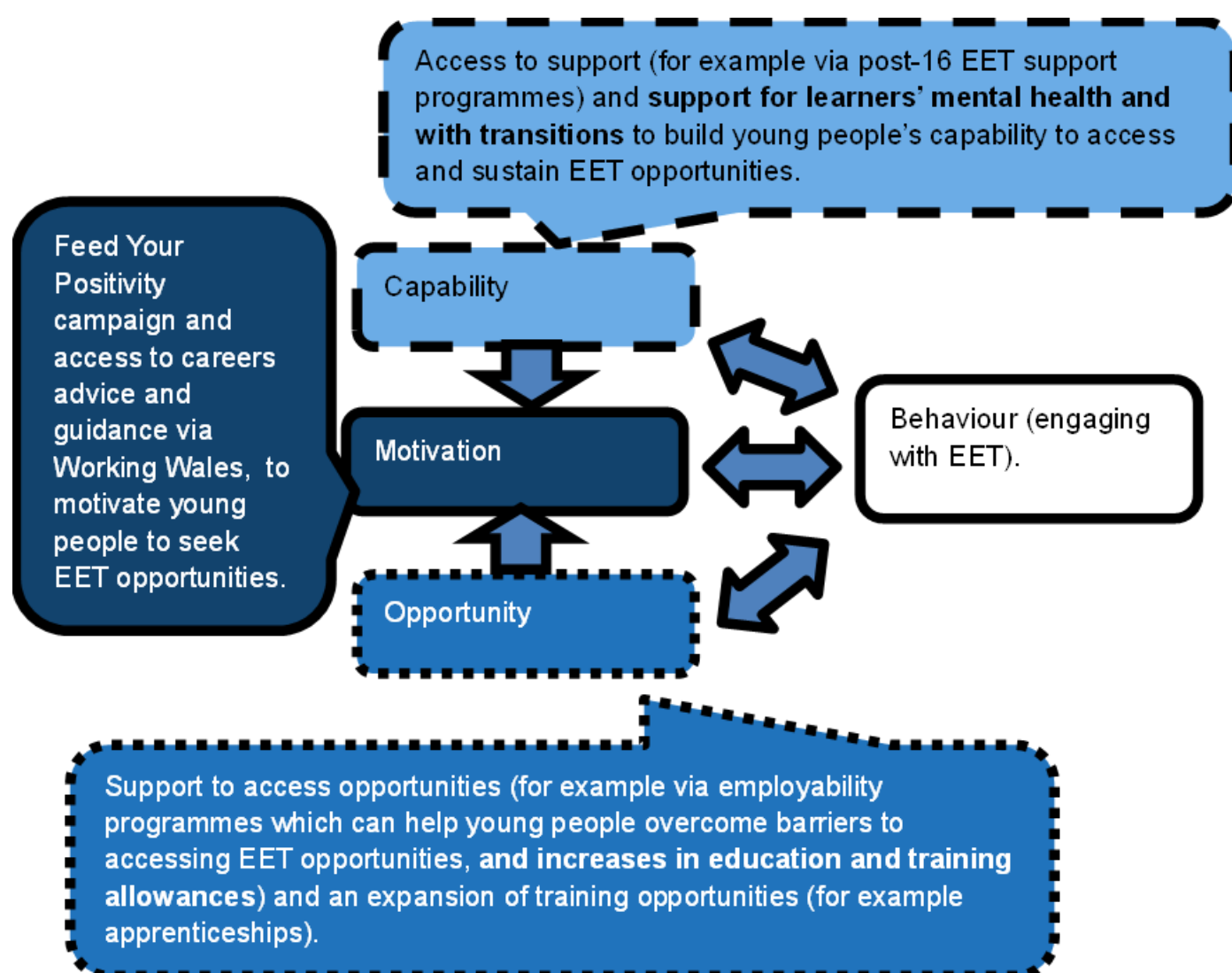
<sup>59</sup> The Disabled People's Employment Champions network in Wales was established in 2019 by the Welsh Government as part of the [Right to Independent Living Framework and Action Plan](#). This network aims to engage with employers to encourage more employment of disabled people. They focus on working with larger employers, employer representative bodies and public sector bodies and 'provide practical advice on all matters relating to the recruitment and retention of disabled workers. This includes information on financial support, advice on implementing reasonable adjustments, and guidance on how to become a Disability Confident Employer' (Business Wales, 2025a, n. pag).

<sup>60</sup> Business Wales Disabled People's Employment Advisors 'provide practical advice and guidance to SME's [Small and Medium Enterprises] and business start-ups on the recruitment of disabled workers'. They provide 'a point of referral for businesses and employers, helping businesses to formulate and adopt legally compliant processes and policies to ensure they attract, recruit, and retain disabled people in their business' (Business Wales, 2025a, n. pag.).

is a 'dynamic policy' that has evolved and developed in real time. Indeed, the YPG's potential to 'flex' as the context<sup>61</sup>, opportunities and challenges it faces change was identified by interviewees from the Welsh Government and workshop contributors (comprising Welsh Government officials and staff from partner organisations) as one of the strengths of the approach.

**Figure 6.3. Phases 2 and 3 of the YPG: contribution to young people's capabilities, motivation and access to opportunities**

The key changes, compared to the phase 1 design (Figure 5.2) are show in **bold text**.



### **The relationship between the YPG and YEPF**

- 6.24. The relationship between the YEPF, which in the period 2021 to 2022 covered young people aged 11 to 25, and the YPG, which covered young people aged 16 to 24, was initially not clearly articulated. However, the refreshed YEPF guidance issued in September 2022 helped clarify the relationship. This describes how ‘this Framework [the YEPF] and the YPG jointly provide a line of sight to support young people throughout their education journey and beyond until they move into employment or self-employment’ (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 6).
- 6.25. The roots of the overlap between the YPG and YEPF lie in the original YEPF implementation plan issued in 2013. This identified a similar challenge to that which the YPG aims to address: that while young people can access a range of support services, these services and the support they offer can be confusing for young people to navigate and effective coordination is often lacking (Welsh Government, 2013). In response, ‘brokerage’ is a key element of the YEPF, providing ‘access to an individual’ (a lead worker) for those ‘who are at risk of disengaging, or who have disengaged’ (ibid., p. 25). The lead worker’s role includes providing ‘consistent support and help[ing] coordinate support if a young person is also receiving support from other specialist support services’ (ibid.).

6.26. The 2013 implementation plan for the YEPF also predated the introduction of Working Wales in 2019<sup>62</sup>. Working Wales' role with young people aged 16 and over included:

- identifying the barriers preventing them from accessing education, employment or training; and
- identifying 'the most suitable support available to enable the individual to progress at the earliest opportunity' (Welsh Government, 2024e, p. 31).

6.27. Therefore, when first introduced in 2019, Working Wales' role potentially overlapped with the YEPF brokerage role for young people aged 16 to 24 (which as noted above, includes identifying appropriate support for them). However, as outlined above, the refreshed YEPF Handbook issued in 2022 (and updated in 2024), which provides detailed guidance on the implementation of the YEPF, identifies that when young people are 'work-ready', they should be referred to Working Wales. It also identifies that Working Wales should refer young people aged 16 to 18 who are not work ready to an EPC or appropriate tier 2 support<sup>63</sup> (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 74).

6.28. The refreshed YEPF handbook and the related YEPF Overview, also outline that, 'Working Wales provides young people with easy access to the YPG' (ibid., p. 16), and suggests that young people may be referred from the YEPF to Working Wales to access the YPG (Welsh Government, 2024r). Given this, the refreshed guidance describes how, for this age group, the Framework

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<sup>62</sup> Working Wales was introduced to provide 'advice and guidance on careers and jobs' (Welsh Government, 2019b, p. 25). It is a Welsh Government-funded service designed to provide streamlined and efficient employability support that is responsive to an individual's needs. The service provides free, impartial professional employability and careers advice across Wales, delivered for the Welsh Government by Careers Wales. Working Wales enables individuals to talk to professional careers advisers about employment and skills, their aims and aspirations, and any challenges that they face in obtaining and maintaining work, education or training or advancing their career. The service is discussed further in Section 7.

<sup>63</sup> Young people in Tier 2 are 'Young people known to Careers Wales who are NEET and are not ready or available to seek EET because they have 'significant or multiple barriers requiring intensive personal support' (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 31).

‘operates alongside’ the YPG and how the Framework and the YPG jointly provide ‘a safety net for young people at a key transition point in their lives’ (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 3). Informants from the Welsh Government explained that this should ensure that the YEPP and YPG complement each other (rather than overlapping). This is explored further in the next section, which also considers the extent to which young people supported through the YEPP are likely to have self-referred to Working Wales.

### **Comparison of the designs of the YEPP and YPG**

- 6.29. Despite sharing common aims and both policies contributing to the national milestone of at least 90% of 16 to 24 year-olds being in education, employment, or training by 2050, the YEPP is markedly different to the YPG. As one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, the ‘YEPP is (...) about trying to help identify young people, and YPG is more about the delivery of the ‘offer’’. However, as Table 6.1 outlines, this is only one of many differences.

**Table 6.1. Comparison of the YPG and YEPF**

	<b>The YPG</b>	<b>The YEPF</b>
Age range	16 to 24 (2021 to present)	11 to 24 (2013 to 2021) 11 to 18 (2022 to present)
Intended beneficiaries	Young people making transitions who need support.	Young people who are disengaged or judged to be at risk of disengaging from EET (and becoming NEET).
Engagement / access and offer of support	Access via Working Wales (the 'gateway' to the YPG) or directly; demand led (support for those who seek to access EET opportunities - in effect an opt in model); some in-EET support offered by some programmes (for example, CfW+).	Early identification and active outreach to young people (in effect an opt out model) - brokering access to support and provision and monitoring progression (including in-EET tracking and support).  Support, for those who need it, from a trusted adult who can help a young person overcome barriers to re-engagement. <sup>64</sup>
How are young people helped to navigate the post-16 landscape?	Working Wales, a single front door to access support, and which can help match a young person to the most appropriate provision.	Providing access to a lead worker who can provide consistent support and help coordinate support.

<sup>64</sup> As one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, 'there is nothing like this in the YPG'. Staff such as youth mentors on programmes like CfW+ can play the role of trusted adult. But, unlike a YEPF lead worker, their support is tied to a specific programme. In comparison, a lead worker can operate independently from the different programmes that may be supporting a young person and can continue to support that young person after they make transitions (although, as Section 7 outlines, in practice this may not always happen).

	<b>The YPG</b>	<b>The YEPF</b>
What is it and how will it change the system?	The YPG is ‘an umbrella structure that sits above all programmes for young people, aiming to fully utilise existing interventions, in order to create a straightforward journey for young people regardless of circumstances and background’ (Welsh Government, 2022e, p. 3).	The YEPF is a ‘blueprint for working together to co-ordinate resources’ and ‘a systematic mechanism to identify and respond to young people at risk of becoming NEET, who are NEET and/or who are at risk of being homeless’ (Welsh Government 2022b, pp. 3-6).
Delivery by	Post-16 education and training providers and support services. In addition, RSPs provide a focus for co-ordination and planning.	LAs, who ‘provide the strategic and operational leadership for implementing the Framework’ while ‘local partnerships’ <sup>65</sup> support its delivery (Welsh Government, 2022b, p. 8). Support for young people at risk of becoming NEET/who are NEET is co-ordinated by EPCs and delivered by Careers Wales, the Youth Service and other YEPF partners such as third sector organisations and LA pre-engagement programmes.
Scale for collaboration	Regional, via RSPs.	Local, via LA led partnerships.

Sources: [Welsh Government, 2022b](#), [2022e](#).

Intended outcomes: for both to contribute towards the national milestone ‘of at least 90% of 16 to 24 year-olds being in education, employment, or training by 2050’ (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 4).

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<sup>65</sup> Key partners should include the LA, Careers Wales, Working Wales, schools, (further education) colleges, WBL providers, EET support programmes such as CfW+ and JGW+ and the voluntary sector, including voluntary youth work organisations (Welsh Government, 2022b).

## 7. Implementation and delivery of the YPG

### Introduction

- 7.1. As outlined in Sections 4 and 5 and also in Figure 7.1 on the next page, the YPG is made up of a number of different component parts, and since its launch in November 2021 has supported over 48,500 young people (Welsh Government, 2025d). This section considers the implementation and delivery of the main YPG components against its strategic intent and intended outcomes.
- 7.2. As Figure 7.1 illustrates, responsibility for implementation and delivery of these different component parts is fragmented. Therefore, there is a need for the YPG team to exercise system leadership, shaping the way that others design, develop and deliver the different components. This role is discussed further in Section 8. Further detail on the performance of key programmes and services is included in the Appendices.

### Key to Figure 7.1. Responsibilities

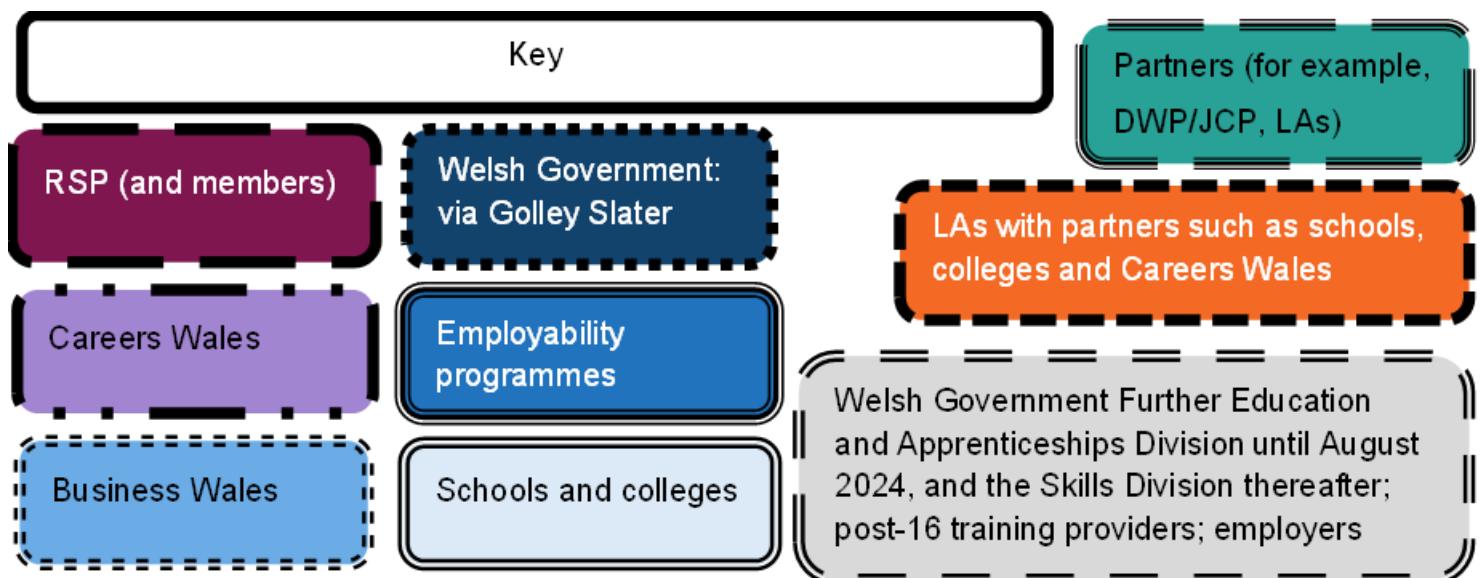
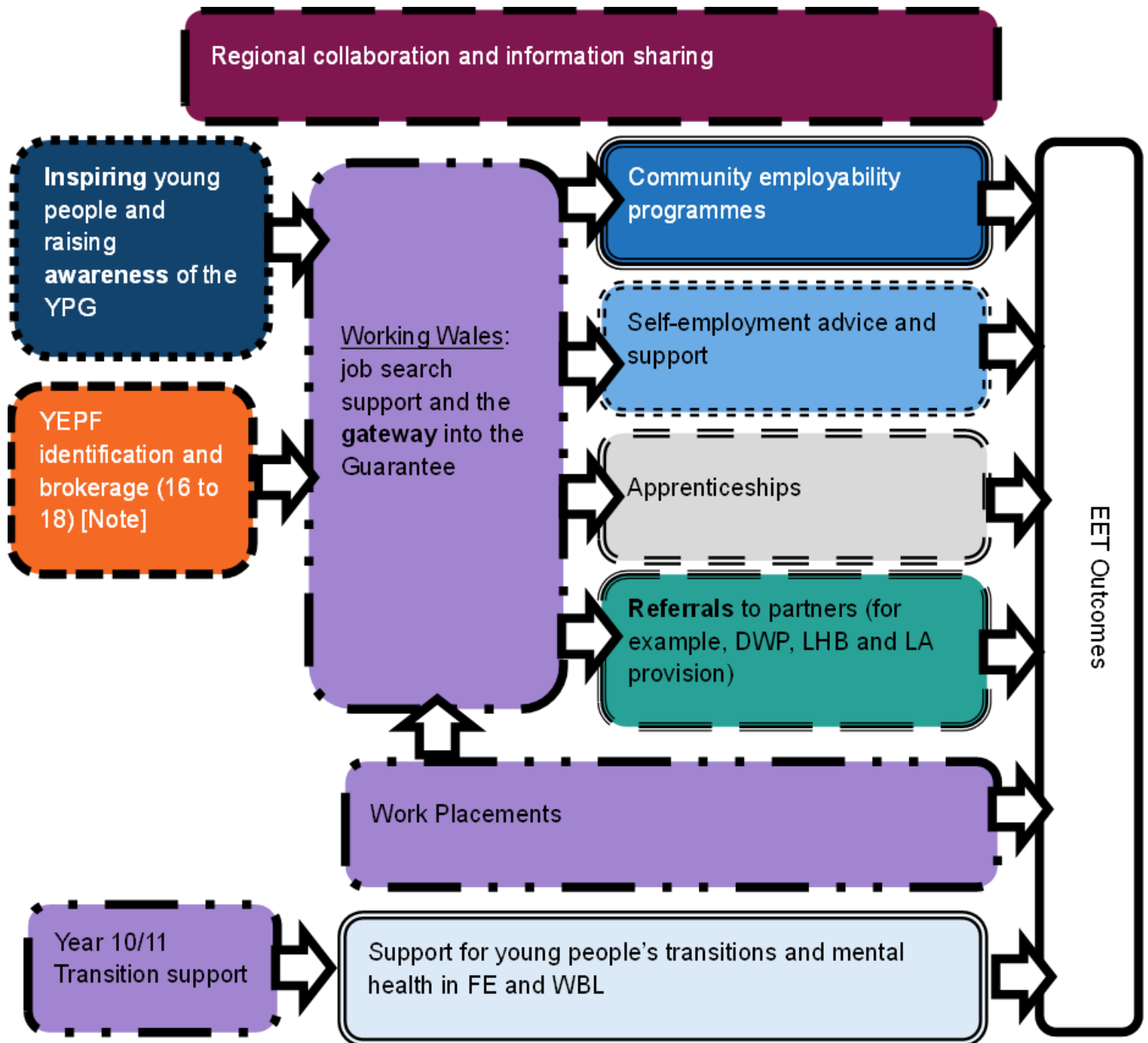




Figure 7.1. Responsibilities for different component parts of the YPG



Note: The YEPF is not part of the YPG but sits alongside and complements the YPG.

### Inspiring and motivating young people

7.3. Many interviewees from the Welsh Government reflected upon the negative impact of the pandemic upon young people's thinking and hopes for the future. For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it, 'young people at the time didn't believe that they had any future whatsoever',

‘so we wanted to bring in something that was very positive, gave some really, really good vibes’. In response, in October 2021, the Feed Your Positivity campaign was launched.<sup>66</sup>

7.4. The campaign aimed to reach all young people aged 16 to 24, particularly those ‘who are NEET or at risk of being NEET’ and their ‘influencers (their teachers, their parents, and their friends)’ (Golley Slater, 2024b, p. 5, emphasis omitted). Several interviewees from the Welsh Government highlighted the importance of this secondary target group. As one interviewee put it, it was vital to influence ‘who they [young people] turn to, their support networks, the people who influence them’.

7.5. The objectives of the campaign in 2023 to 2024 were to:

- ‘increase awareness of the Young Person’s Guarantee’ and the fact it is delivered by the Welsh Government’;
- ‘increase engagement with Working Wales as a single-entry point to access all features of the YPG’;
- ‘increase uplift in the Welsh Government support programmes offered as part of the Young Person’s Guarantee’ (Golley Slater, 2024b, p. 4, emphasis omitted).

7.6. The campaign strategy was to:

‘Get: Young NEETs in Wales who’ve given up on their goals

To: Feel optimistic about their future and seek support from the YPG

By: Enlisting the help of their friends and family to feed their positivity’

(Golley Slater, 2024b, p. 5).

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<sup>66</sup> As noted on page 76, it was intended to raise awareness of the Young Person’s Guarantee and to encourage young people to be confident and motivated about their future’ (Welsh Government, 2021a). It was intended to ‘get young people to feel optimistic about their future and access support, advice, and guidance via Working Wales’ (Golley Slater, 2024a).

7.7. It is reported that, in the period ending January 2023, amongst 16 to 24-year-olds:

1 in 5 were aware of the guarantee.

1 in 2 would take up the guarantee for themselves.

2 in 3 wanted to find out more about what the guarantee could offer them.

3 in 5 would encourage someone else under 25 to take up the offer or find out more. (Golley Slater, 2024a)

7.8. Interviewees from the Welsh Government were consistently positive about the campaign. For example, as one observed, 'We've definitely seen a spike in calls and appointments' following Feed Your Positivity campaigns.

Nevertheless, interviewees acknowledged that it was inherently difficult to evaluate the impact of marketing campaigns like this. For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, 'Sometimes the success is around pure numbers' (outlined above) - 'if numbers were high in terms of views'. However, as they explained, 'tracing the origins of someone's support, where they heard about it, it's a tricky one'.

7.9. It was acknowledged by Welsh Government interviewees that translating the YPG's abstract offer into something concrete for an individual young person could be difficult.<sup>67</sup> But Feed Your Positivity's simplicity of message was consistently reported by them to be a key strength. Some also described how the YPG relied upon Working Wales as the gateway to support and to translate (or communicate) what that offer meant to an individual young person (for example, which programme they could access for support and what their options were). As one Welsh Government interviewee put it (when challenged that the YPG was quite complex):

It's not such a complex message in reality (...). The message is, if you're looking for advice and guidance and looking for support, basically the

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<sup>67</sup> This reflects the difference between the simple idea of an offer of support and the more complicated concept of what that support actually means to an individual young person, given the range of programmes and offers that come under the YPG umbrella (outlined in Section 5).

message is really, really simple (...): you could do training, you can get on an apprenticeship programme, you can go to work, you could continue your education.

They went on to explain that ‘Working Wales (...) would be the kind of front door that would take you to the range of different programmes. The aim [of the campaign] is to drive [young people] to the website or to Working Wales’.

7.10. However, one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed that, while innovative, Welsh Government restrictions on the use of social media had limited the campaign somewhat and several interviewees reported that they felt that more could have been achieved with a bigger budget for marketing. For example, campaigns were aligned with the timing of GCSE and A-level results, to target those who were reconsidering their options because they had either under or over performed compared to their expectations. However, interviewees from the Welsh Government acknowledged that most young people had already made up their mind by this point, an issue we explore further in Section 8.

7.11. Moreover, awareness amongst young people who are NEET or at risk of being NEET (the key target group) is not measured and, as outlined below:

- engagement with Working Wales, particularly amongst young people who are NEET or at risk of being NEET, is low; and
- with the exception of CfW and CfW+, engagements with other support programmes like JGW+ and the OoWS were below target although, as we outline below, by 2024 engagements with JGW+ had increased.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Although the performance of JGW+ picked up in the summer of 2023, this is thought to be linked to ‘JGW+ becoming more established as a programme and the adjustments to the programme offer’ (Welsh Government, 2024g, pp. 47-48) and no reference is made to the Feed Your Positivity campaign in the interim or final evaluation reports. Indeed, the final report identifies that 35% of young people (out of a sample of 162 learners) heard about the programme by word of mouth, 33% were referred by another organisation, and 15% heard about it from school or college. In contrast, only 4% heard about it via an online or internet search and only 1% reported first hearing about it via an advert, poster or billboard (Welsh Government, 2025e, p. 69).

## **The pre- and post-16 education and training system**

### *Work placements for young people aged 14-16*

- 7.12. The feedback from young people in the National Conversation (Welsh Government, 2023d, 2024l), interviewees and workshop contributors all highlighted the importance of work placements in helping young people gain work-related skills and experience. The withdrawal of the role of Careers Wales in co-ordinating work placements in 2013 was reported to have contributed to a decline in placements (Senedd, 2018a).
- 7.13. In 2022, to address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and training, the Welsh Government asked Careers Wales to deliver a Tailored Work Experience (TWE) project, to re-engage KS4 learners with their GCSE studies and support positive post-16 transitions. Between September 2022 to March 2024, Careers Wales received an additional £517,000 to work with two schools from each of the 22 local authorities in Wales to offer 500 TWE placements. By the end of March 2024 636 young people had taken part in a TWE placement and the 2024 destinations data shows that 380 pupils completed their placement at the end of year 11. Of these 85% went on to a positive destination (49% were in college, 19% were on JGW+, 10% were in full or part time employment and 7% were on apprenticeships). In financial year 2024/25, Welsh Government provided Careers Wales with a further £250,000 to enable the project to continue on a smaller scale. Careers Wales were asked to offer 250 placements, across 12 Local Authorities. Over 260 young people were placed into a TWE. In financial year 2025/26 no further additional funding was identified, and Careers Wales were asked to continue an offer of TWE on a smaller scale within their core funding.
- 7.14. The inclusion of work placements in the YPG is somewhat anomalous, given its focus upon young people aged 14 to 16. Nevertheless, it reflects the need, that a number of interviewees from the Welsh Government identified, for earlier intervention (that is, with people younger than 16) to ensure that young people are work or career ready, if the national milestone 'of at least 90% of

16 to 24 year olds being in education, employment, or training by 2050' (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 4) is to be achieved. Interviewees from the Welsh Government considered the placements to be successful and it is reported that around 85% of young people who took up the placements secured a positive outcome<sup>69</sup> (Careers Wales, 2025).

*Post-16 pathways, information, advice and guidance*

- 7.15. As outlined in Section 4, there have been longstanding weaknesses in IAG provided by education and training settings about alternative options to those offered in these settings and a concern that too few learners know about, or properly consider, vocational pathways. Interviewees from the Welsh Government identified that the YPG has addressed this, primarily through:
- the Feed Your Positivity campaign (discussed above), which encourages young people to access impartial advice and guidance, via Working Wales; and
  - Inspiring Skills Excellence in Wales, that aims to raise awareness of vocational education and training and career pathways through skills competitions.
- 7.16. However, as outlined in Section 5, while the YPG helped bring together a focus upon both post- 16 support and post-16 education and training provision (including the IAG that Careers Wales and education and training settings offer), most of the focus of change was upon post-16 support programmes and services. Interviewees from the Welsh Government acknowledged that there was more work to be done around awareness and understanding of different pathways, with many echoing the findings of Estyn and others outlined in Section 4. They also acknowledged that the focus for much of the YPG had been upon young people who were NEET, rather than those in EET, who might be on a sub-optimal pathway. In this context, looking forward, a Welsh Government informant noted that 'the new Careers Wales offer of an impartial careers guidance interview to all young people before they leave

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<sup>69</sup> Defined as a positive post-16 destination, such as going to college, starting an apprenticeship, joining JGW+ or entering employment.

year 11 went live at the beginning of September 2024 and has been well received by learners, schools and parents’.

#### *Transition support for FE students*

- 7.17. In 2023/24, 13 FE providers received a share of £900,000 funding<sup>70</sup> to support young people at risk of becoming NEET and to help address the gaps in support created by the end of the ESF, which had enabled a range of support to students. There has not been an external evaluation of this funding. However, an unpublished internal review reported that the funding was welcomed by FE providers and that the main use of the funding was to ‘ensure staff were available to give more time to at risk learners, at a critical time, ensuring high risk learners did not become NEET’ (Welsh Government, n.d.). This included support to address barriers to entry to FE and barriers to continuing in FE. The funding was reported to give staff more time to get to know learners, enabling them to better understand and identify the difficulties learners faced and to provide support to reduce their risk of disengagement. However, there was also frustration that the funding was time limited.

#### *Employment and Enterprise Bureaux <sup>71</sup>*

- 7.18. Support for learners in FE was one of the gaps highlighted by stakeholders developing the YPG (see Section 5) and EEBs were established to ensure, as one Welsh Government interviewee put it, that in every college there was ‘a clear place [for students] to go to think about [their] next option’. Although data has been provided by colleges, it was not possible to use this to, for example, identify how many students had been supported<sup>72</sup> and an interviewee from Medr reported that:

‘they [colleges] have each taken the funding and done something slightly different with it. I think there's some real strengths across the sector, the

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<sup>70</sup> The amount each provider received ranged from £15,000 to £130,000.

<sup>71</sup> The EEBs are intended to offer ‘a package of opportunities for students, full and part-time, to build essential employability and enterprise skills’ (Business Wales, 2025b, n. pag.).

<sup>72</sup> In addition, to date this information has not featured in evaluations of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai in 2024 or Coleg Cambria in 2023 (no other Estyn inspections of FE colleges are reported in the period 2023-2025).

innovative stuff going on, but I'm not clear (...) how much of that they were doing anyway'.

In response, an evaluation of EEBs has been commissioned.

### *Apprenticeships*

- 7.19. Apprenticeships combine practical training in a job with study that leads to a recognised qualification. There are currently four different levels of apprenticeship offered in Wales: Foundation (Level 2), Apprenticeships (Level 3), Higher Level Apprenticeships (Level 4 and above) and Degree Level Apprenticeships (Level 6) (Welsh Government 2024m). As outlined in Section 4, the inclusion of apprenticeships in the YPG is somewhat anomalous. Interviewees from the Welsh Government pointed out that, while the Welsh Government funds apprenticeships, it relies upon employers to create them, and other types of post-16 education or training are not included in the YPG.
- 7.20. A Senedd review of apprenticeships in 2018 identified that the take-up of apprenticeships amongst some groups, such as disabled people, was too low and gender segregation remained a challenge (Senedd, 2018a). While progress has been made since in increasing the diversity of apprentices, barriers remain for some groups of young people (Welsh Government, 2024n). As we outline in the appendices, the picture is not simple. For example, amongst those aged 16 to 24:
- Overall, there were more male than female apprentices starting in 2023/24, and there remain stark differences across sectors, with disproportionate numbers of males or females on courses in some areas (Welsh Government, 2025a).
  - The percentage of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic apprentices increased from 2% starting in 2018/19 to 4% starting in 2023/24 (Welsh Government 2025b). However, this is considerably lower than the percentage within the working age population (Welsh Government, 2022h).



- Similarly, the percentage of apprentices with a ‘disability and/or learning difficulty’<sup>73</sup> increased from 11% starting in 2019/20 to 13% starting in 2023/24 (Welsh Government, 2025c). However, this is lower than the percentage of disabled people aged 16 to 24 in the Welsh population (Office for National Statistics, 2023).

7.21. In addition, the pandemic impacted the numbers of young people starting and completing apprenticeships. The number of young people aged 20 to 24 starting apprenticeships declined quite sharply in 2019/20, and declined again in 2023/24. The numbers of young people aged 18 to 19 starting an apprenticeship also declined in 2019/20 and 2020/21. However, while it remains lower than levels seen before the pandemic, the numbers have recovered somewhat from 2021/22 onwards. Similarly, following a decline in apprenticeship success rates in 2021/22 there has been a steady increase in the success rate (in 2022/23 and 2023/24), although it remains below pre-pandemic levels (76% in 2023/24, compared to 81% in 2018/19) (Medr, 2025).

7.22. Estyn’s latest annual report (2023-2024) identifies that ‘across the sector, providers and their sub-contractors had a comprehensive range of care, support and guidance procedures and protocols. The support available to learners was wide ranging with learners’ well-being being a constant focus’ (Estyn 2025, p. 3). However, in their previous annual report (2022-23) Estyn also point out that non-completion rates are high in some course areas, such as health and social care (Estyn, 2024c, p. 3). A respondent from the Welsh Government noted, however, that ‘the reasons behind this are complex and many stem from the economic reality of the labour market in this sector leading many people to leave the profession for other less skilled jobs which may have better pay and conditions’. The latest statistics identify that in 2022/23, the overall success rate of apprenticeships was 72%. Although this

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<sup>73</sup> This language does not reflect the social model of disability which the Welsh Government observes.

is a 5 percentage point increase compared to 2021/22, it remains lower than levels seen before the pandemic (Welsh Government, 2024v).

### *Higher Education*

- 7.23. Although support to access HE and support in HE is formally part of the YPG, HE was rarely discussed by interviewees and, when it was, it was to acknowledge that this had not been a focus of the YPG. For example, as one interviewee from Medr (formerly HEFCW) put it, the YPG was ‘really not on our [HEFCW’s] radar’.

### **The post-16 support system: the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework**

- 7.24. As outlined in Section 5, evaluation of the YEPF in the late 2010s identified that good progress continued to be made in developing early identification, brokerage and tracking for young people aged 11 to 18 (Welsh Government, 2019c). However, it also identified that this was markedly weaker for those aged 19 to 24. The evaluation found that the YEPF had ‘increased communication and co-ordination between stakeholders’, which meant that they had a better understanding of who those young people at risk of disengaging were (ibid., p. 23).
- 7.25. The Estyn review of the YEPF lead workers in 2023 and 2024 highlights the value of the role, identifying that
- in a young person’s life, the lead worker often served as the only consistent and reliable presence. They played a pivotal role in providing young people with personalised support in relation to their current situation and accessing progression opportunities. (Estyn, 2024b, p. 1)
- 7.26. However, Estyn also identified that, while young people making transitions at 16 from school to college or WBL were generally well supported, ‘collaboration between post-16 providers and lead workers was often lacking once a young person enrolled’, with many training providers being unaware of

the lead worker role and its benefits (ibid.).<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the Estyn review identifies that ‘effective lead worker support hinges on collaboration with all stakeholders’ (ibid., p. 24) and the strength of collaboration, access to provision and support, and lead workers’ knowledge and understanding of support and opportunities, varied<sup>75</sup> (ibid., p. 33).

- 7.27. Therefore, while the review identifies that the lead worker role complements the YPG, as young people who are classed as NEET, or at risk of becoming so ‘were unlikely to access the services and information available [through the YPG] without support from a lead worker who understands the needs of the young person, and the barriers they face’ (ibid., p. 8), it also identifies that ‘[m]any work-based learning and JGW+ providers [which are key elements of the YPG] had very limited engagement with lead workers’ (ibid., p. 28).

### **The post-16 support system: Working Wales**

- 7.28. The Working Wales service is open to all those aged 16+ living in Wales, including those within the secure prison estate and seeking sanctuary. Working Wales provides a range of support, including help with accessing training, upskilling, funding, CV writing and interview techniques. As an open access all age service, interviewees from the Welsh Government observed that it could support both a young person and their parents, giving it a ‘unique’ position in the support landscape. An informant from Welsh Government also reported that its ‘uniqueness’ was ‘the impartiality’ of Careers Wales, as ‘a service that keeps the young person at the centre’, which ‘has no hidden agenda’ and which ‘as a professionally qualified service<sup>76</sup> (...) will work with

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<sup>74</sup> The report identifies that ‘[a]s most colleges had a robust support and well-being infrastructure in place, it was often the case that young people were ‘handed over’ once they had enrolled in this provision. Smaller training providers did not typically have this same level of resource.’ (Estyn, 2024b, p. 29.)

<sup>75</sup> The report identifies that ‘[t]oo many lead workers supporting young people in tiers 2 and 3 had insufficient knowledge of post-16 routes available outside of traditional school and college options. This created challenges with raising awareness in schools about alternative routes such as apprenticeships, JGW+, and the voluntary sector’ (Estyn 2024a, p. 28). The Careers Wales five tier model of engagement (for post-16) and allocation of lead workers, is outlined below and presented on pages 5 to 7 of the aforementioned Estyn report.

<sup>76</sup> Careers advisers are qualified to level 6 and can provide professional guidance. In contrast, those with lower qualifications are unable to provide professional careers guidance.

each individual young person to empower them to take the best pathway for them at that point in time’.

- 7.29. As outlined in Section 6, Working Wales was envisaged as the gateway to the YPG for young people, given its role providing free personalised impartial careers and employability advice, guidance and coaching, to help young people choose from the range of pathways open to them. Nevertheless, there was no requirement for young people to access YPG provision via Working Wales, and as we discuss below, for example in the summer of 2022, the referral process of JGW+ was changed to enable young people were aged 16 to 18 to refer themselves directly to the programme without engaging with Working Wales to be assessed for entry to JGW+.<sup>77</sup>
- 7.30. It was also observed by interviewees from the Welsh Government that, while from a communications perspective (and the Feed Your Positivity campaign) it was vital to have a single gateway or ‘front door’ that young people could be directed to, in practice as long as young people accessed the right support, it did not matter if they went via Working Wales or not. Other interviewees from the Welsh Government were more cautious, however, observing that self or direct referral to programmes might mean that young people were not necessarily accessing the most appropriate provision for them, given the complexity of the support landscape.
- 7.31. The 2024 evaluation of Working Wales identifies that it is ‘an effective gateway for employability support across Wales’ due to ‘clear and effective lines of communication between Working Wales staff and other partners’ (Welsh Government, 2024e, p. 71). However, it also identifies that ‘staff reported that engaging young people can be challenging’ and that ‘vulnerable young people and young people who are NEET are difficult to engage because they do not typically engage with Working Wales outreach and are

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<sup>77</sup> This was done ‘to improve access to JGW+ for those young people who were the ‘hardest to reach’ and were not engaging through the Working Wales service’ (Welsh Government, 2024f, p. 39) and is discussed further below.

more socially isolated than other groups', meaning it is less effective with these groups (Welsh Government, 2024e, p. 51).

- 7.32. Equally as Section 6 outlines, in the context of the YEPF, and young people aged 16 to 18 (as distinct from those aged 19 to 24), an informant from the Welsh Government noted that while Careers Wales/Working Wales has responsibility for young people in Tier 3 (young people who are 'NEET or actively seeking EET but known to Careers Wales'), young people in tier 2 ('young people known to Careers Wales who are NEET and are not ready or available to seek EET') were not a target group for Working Wales.<sup>78</sup> They also explained, however, that Working Wales 'will support them when it is appropriate', usually when the leading organisation supporting that young person, such as the youth service has referred them to Working Wales.
- 7.33. Table 7.1 presents the status of young people aged 16 to 24 when joining Working Wales. It shows that over the last two years (2022 to 2024), 30% of those aged 16 to 18 and 58% of those aged 19 to 24 were unemployed, and a further 6% of those aged 16 to 18 and 3% of those aged 19 to 24 were economically inactive.

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<sup>78</sup> Careers Wales has a 5-tier model of engagement for young people aged 16 to 18, with Tier 5 referring to those who are engaged in EET, Tier 1 those unknown to Careers Wales, and the tiers in between being categories for young people requiring varying levels of support. See pages 30 to 31 in The [Youth Engagement and Progression Framework: handbook](#) for more details (Welsh Government, 2024r).

**Table 7.1. The status of young people aged 16 to 18 and 19 to 24 years resident in Wales at the point of joining Working Wales, calculated based upon an annual average over two financial years (2022 to 2023 and 2023 to 2024) [Note 1]**

Young people aged 16 to 18

Status at referral	(no.)	(%)
Unemployed	1968.5	30
Full-time further education	1895.5	29
Years 10 and 11 education	1087.5	16
Other WG employability or skills programme	501.5	8
Economically inactive	391.5	6
Employed full-time	288.5	4
Employed part-time	275.0	4
Not available for EET	107.0	2
Part-time further education	47.5	1
Higher education	33.0	0
Invalid status [Note 2]	30.0	0
Resides outside Wales [Note 3]	14.5	0
Self-employed	6.5	0
Not recorded [Note 2]	0.5	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,647</b>	<b>100</b>

## Young people aged 19 to 24

Status at referral	(no.)	(%)
Unemployed	3560.0	58
Employed full-time	671.5	11
Full-time further education	621.5	10
Employed part-time	447.0	7
Not available for EET	246.5	4
Economically inactive	190.5	3
Higher education	190.0	3
Other [Note 2]	135.0	2
Part-time further education	43.0	1
Self-employed	33.0	1
Invalid status [Note 2]	12	0
Resides outside Wales [Note 3]	5.5	0
Not recorded [Note 2]	2.5	0
Years 10 and 11 education	0.5	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,158.5</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Careers Wales: internal management information

[Note 1] Data is based upon an average over two years and presented to one decimal place.

[Note 2] It was reported by Careers Wales that in some cases customers will join Working Wales without a 'valid status', for example, if they are referred to Working Wales from a partner organisation, and their status is not known at this point. This can either mean that Careers Wales has no information on their status, it is 'not recorded' or where the customer is already known to Careers Wales, they have their last known status recorded.

[Note 3] It was reported by Careers Wales that some young people whose status is 'resides outside Wales' are included, even though those joiners with a postcode that does not map to a location within Wales were excluded. This was generally where Working Wales have updated address and contact data at the point the customer is referred to Working Wales (so their postcode is within Wales at joining) but Working Wales have not yet established a new status.

- 7.34. Although the evidence suggests that Working Wales is an effective gateway into the YPG for those young people who access it, given the number of young people who are estimated to be NEET,<sup>79</sup> only a minority of young people who are likely to need, or would benefit from, support (because they are NEET) appear to be accessing Working Wales. As noted above, young people aged 16 to 18 in tier 2, who are NEET, but who are not ready or available to seek EET, are not the target audience for Working Wales. This reflects the different responsibilities of Working Wales/Careers Wales, the youth service and EPCs under the YEPF, described in Section 6. As one informant from Welsh Government observed, this is intended to ensure that young people are ‘supported by the right organisation’ at the right time. This is one reason why, as the evaluation of Working Wales identified, only relatively small numbers of young people ‘who are at risk of disengaging, or who have disengaged’, engage with Working Wales (Welsh Government, 2024e).
- 7.35. Nevertheless, since the YEPF was refreshed in 2022 and refocused upon young people aged 11 to 18, this potentially leaves a gap in relation to engaging young people aged 19 to 24 who are not yet ready to engage with EET opportunities, because of the significant barriers they face. We discuss this further in section 10. In addition, as Section 6 outlines, there is no requirement that young people access the YPG via Working Wales. It was also reported by interviewees from the Welsh Government that Working Wales did not have the capacity to support every young person accessing the YPG. Nevertheless, if young people aged 19 to 24 are not engaging with Working Wales, they do not benefit from the impartial professional employability and careers advice it offers. This is important because of the complex support landscape that constitutes the YPG. We discuss this further in Section 11.
- 7.36. In 2021 Working Wales received additional funding to appoint a data tracking team. Their role was to follow up with young people who had accessed the

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<sup>79</sup> This is estimated to be 11,000 young people aged 16 to 18 and 35,100 young people aged 19 to 24 in 2023 (Welsh Government, 2025g).



YPG via Working Wales in order (as an informant from the Welsh Government explained) to:

- identify young people's outcomes at three and nine months; and
- enable Working Wales to track young people's progress, so that support could be offered if needed (for example, if after re-engaging with the support of YPG provision, they had disengaged).

7.37. However, as only a limited number of young people accessed YPG activity via Working Wales, this dataset did not provide a comprehensive picture of young people's progress. The tracking of outcomes of young people accessing the YPG via Working Wales ended on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 2024 due to limited funding. Although Working Wales has continued to collect data on young people accessing their service and referrals, they no longer have the capacity to carry out the three and nine month tracking.

**The post-16 support system: employability programmes: JGW+, CfW+, ReAct+ and the Out of Work Service (OoWS)**

*JGW+*

- 7.38. JGW+ is 'a training and development programme for 16 to 19 year-olds 'looking to progress to further education or employment'. It offers three levels of support:
- 'engagement', for those young people not sure what career path they want to follow;
  - 'advancement' for those young people who know what they want to do but need to gain skills and qualifications; and
  - 'employment', for those young people who know they want to do and are actively looking and ready to start work (Welsh Government, 2024f).
- 7.39. The national evaluation of JGW+ is very positive, given the positive feedback from delivery staff, wider stakeholders and participants on the JGW+ service delivery model (Welsh Government, 2025e, 2024g). Interviewees for this

study from the Welsh Government highlighted the value of the ‘flexibility’ of the JGW+ model, which is also highlighted by the evaluation. JGW+’s strong performance in relation to engaging young people with a ‘disability and/or learning difficulty’,<sup>80</sup> who (as outlined in Appendix B) make up a quarter of JGW+ participants, was also highlighted. Moreover, marketing and promotional activity associated with the programme was seen to be largely successful. Estyn inspections of JGW+ are similarly positive. They identify that ‘providers delivered programmes well’ and that ‘most participants accessed strong personal support from their tutors’ (Estyn, 2024c, p. 135). However, Estyn also identifies that ‘too few participants were accessing meaningful work-experience’ (ibid.).

- 7.40. The evaluation of JGW+ identifies that, particularly in the first 15 months of the programme, JGW+ under-performed relative to expectations in terms of engagements of young people. The evaluation attributes its weaker than anticipated initial performance primarily to the effects of the pandemic, subsequent cost-of-living crisis and the additional challenges placed on young people. However, the evaluation also identifies that the response to this weaker than expected performance, including ‘the enhancement of pre-engagement activities in response to barriers associated with anxiety, mental health, and social interaction appears to have been highly successful’ (Welsh Government, 2024g, p. 105). As a result of the improvements in engagements, the final report estimated that ‘JGW+ was supporting 30 to 40% of young people NEET in 2022’ (Welsh Government, 2025e, p. 67) and in 2024 the programme was reported by Welsh Government interviewees to be over-subscribed. This over-subscription is confirmed by the evaluation which notes that JGW+ contractors who deliver the programme have to manage the high levels of demand carefully to avoid running out of funding (ibid.).

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<sup>80</sup> This language does not reflect the social model of disability which the Welsh Government observes.

- 7.41. The higher than anticipated numbers of young people accessing the programme who had difficulties such as mental health issues and who were not ‘job ready’ suggests the JGW+ programme is reaching increasing numbers of young people with more complex needs (ibid.).<sup>81</sup> However, it also increases the risk that young people on the programme may struggle to progress to EET (as they are further from EET). As one interviewee from the programme observed, JGW+ contractors are ‘not mental health practitioners’, and there ‘needs to be stronger collaboration and connection with health; health have got to be part of this’. But this participant thought the pressures upon Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) were hampering this. Interviewees from the Welsh Government also expressed concerns that the extension of the programme to cover 16 to 19 years olds might simply delay a young person’s transition out of training (if it meant that they exited the programme at 19 without a positive outcome, instead of exiting at age 18).
- 7.42. In the context of the YPG, it is important to bear in mind that (as noted above) when originally launched in April 2022 the referral route to JGW+ was via Working Wales. As the evaluation of Working Wales identifies:

The rationale behind the referral model was that it enabled potential participants to talk to trained career advisors about employment and skills, their aims and aspirations, and any challenges that they face in obtaining and maintaining work, education or training (Welsh Government, 2024f, p. 38).

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<sup>81</sup> For example, the evaluation of JGW+ identifies that ‘over three quarters of participants are engaged in the engagement strand’ of the programme (intended for those who are not sure what career path they wish to follow and who need more support to help them engage with EET opportunities). The evaluation also identifies that for some participants, the engagement strand was felt to be ‘too advanced, with a view that more widespread usage of the (or another) pre-engagement offer (currently ‘Get Ready’) [was] necessary’. (Welsh Government, 2025e, p. 117.)

7.43. However, in the summer of 2022, direct referral to contractors was introduced as an alternative pathway to access JGW+. <sup>82</sup> The evaluation of Working Wales identifies that the change was made to ‘improve access to JGW+ for those young people who were the ‘hardest to reach’ and were not engaging through the Working Wales service.’ (ibid., p. 39). Estyn inspections identify that because referrals from Working Wales to JGW+ were much lower than anticipated, ‘providers had taken on responsibility for direct recruitment to ensure programme viability’ (Estyn, 2024c, p. 135).

7.44. Equally, an informant from the Welsh Government emphasised that Working Wales is impartial and would refer young people to the most appropriate provision or opportunities, noting that in the period after lockdown restrictions were eased in 2021, the labour market was growing (meaning young people may have opted for employment rather than JGW+). In addition, as noted above, it is notable that the evaluation of JGW+ identifies that a much smaller proportion of young people than expected were ‘work ready’ following the pandemic <sup>83</sup> (Welsh Government, 2025e). Therefore, this may also help explain the lower numbers coming from Working Wales, because as noted above, young people in tier 2, who are NEET but not yet ready or available to seek EET, are not a target audience for Working Wales.

7.45. The evaluation of JGW+ identifies that the change (allowing direct referral to contractors) was welcomed by most stakeholders (Welsh Government, 2024f, 2025e). Contractors ‘felt that it greatly increased the number of young people accessing the service’ and Welsh Government stakeholders suggested that it:

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<sup>82</sup> This meant that JGW+ contractors, rather than Working Wales, took responsibility for assessing a young person’s suitability and eligibility for JGW+ and identifying which strand of JGW+ would be most suitable, given the young person’s learning and/or developmental needs and any barriers they faced (Welsh Government, 2024f). This also raises questions about how best to engage young people who are not ready to re-engage with mainstream EET support services like JGW+.

<sup>83</sup> For example, the evaluation of JGW+ identifies that: ‘Candidates for support were deemed to have much more complex needs and barriers than had been anticipated, which Contractors and EPC staff concurred were a direct result of the detrimental effects on young people arising from COVID-19 lockdowns as well as their limited access to formal educational settings during this time’ (Welsh Government, 2025e, p. 40).

... gave prospective participants a simpler, faster route into the programme, reducing the risk of early disengagement. Conversely, it was felt that the early lack of a direct referral pathway potentially created a barrier for prospective learners because they had to be redirected to Working Wales before accessing JGW+ (Welsh Government, 2024f, p. 75).

- 7.46. However, it also identifies that ‘some stakeholders noted that those referred to the programme via Working Wales benefit from receiving impartial advice and guidance to ensure that they can make an informed decision as to which service to access’ (ibid., p. 74). Further, it states that direct referrals (rather than referral via Working Wales) might mean that young people did not fully understand their options and might mean that less information on a young person’s needs was available (ibid. p. 76). An informant from Welsh Government also observed that Working Wales’ remit is to provide impartial expert advice and they would refer young people to the most appropriate provision, which would not necessarily be JGW+.
- 7.47. In relation to the YEPF, the evaluation of Working Wales also identifies that after the change was made, direct referrals to JGW+ constituted 28% of all enrolments within the April 2022 to March 2023 financial year, whereas referrals from EPCs only amounted to one per cent of all referrals over the same time period. However, the evaluation also identifies that this is likely to be an under-estimate, as referrals from EPCs were sometimes recorded as ‘direct referrals’ by contractors (Welsh Government, 2024f, p. 49). This was confirmed by interviewees from the Welsh Government who reported that links between the YEPF and JGW+ were often poor, with few referrals.<sup>84</sup> However, it was also reported by these interviewees that work between the YEPF and JGW+ policy teams and EPCs had addressed this. Nevertheless, the final evaluation report on JGW+ notes that: ‘The role of EPCs in referrals

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<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, the Evaluation of JGW+ identifies that: ‘One Contractor identified that they had not received any EPC referrals, and suggested that this was because EPCs work with people who are particularly ‘hard to reach’ and, therefore, are less likely to engage in JGW+’ (Welsh Government, 2024f, p. 74).

has remained varied across Wales, as identified in the interim phase' (Welsh Government 2025e, p. 70).

#### *Communities for Work and Communities for Work+*

- 7.48. CfW was a joint Welsh Government and DWP ESF supported employment programme that started in 2015 and operated until March 2023. The programme offered employment advisory support and mentoring. Its operations included support for young people<sup>85</sup> who were NEET and living in 52 areas that were previously Communities First clusters across Wales. CfW+ was initially developed in 2018 to extend support to those (including young people) ineligible for either CfW or other regional ESF programmes and who were in, or at risk of, poverty (Welsh Government, 2023b). In 2024, the CfW+ eligibility criteria in relation to the age for service users and the complexity of their needs were raised.<sup>86</sup>
- 7.49. The evaluations of CfW and CfW+ identified that both programmes outperformed expectations in engaging and supporting young people into employment, despite the challenges created by the pandemic (Welsh Government, 2024h). The strong performance of CfW+, particularly following the expansion of the programme in 2021 - 2022 enabled by additional YPG funding, is illustrated by Figure 7.2. As also shown in Figure 7.2, this has coincided with the 'winding down' of CfW.
- 7.50. The evaluation of CfW and CfW+ also identified that 58% of CfW participants and 65% of CfW+ participants heard about the programme via JCP, and JCP was the main referral pipeline. In the context of the YPG, it is notable that Working Wales was not identified by young people as the source of information about CfW or CfW+, although 4% of CfW participants and 2% of CfW+ participants reported hearing about the programme from a Careers

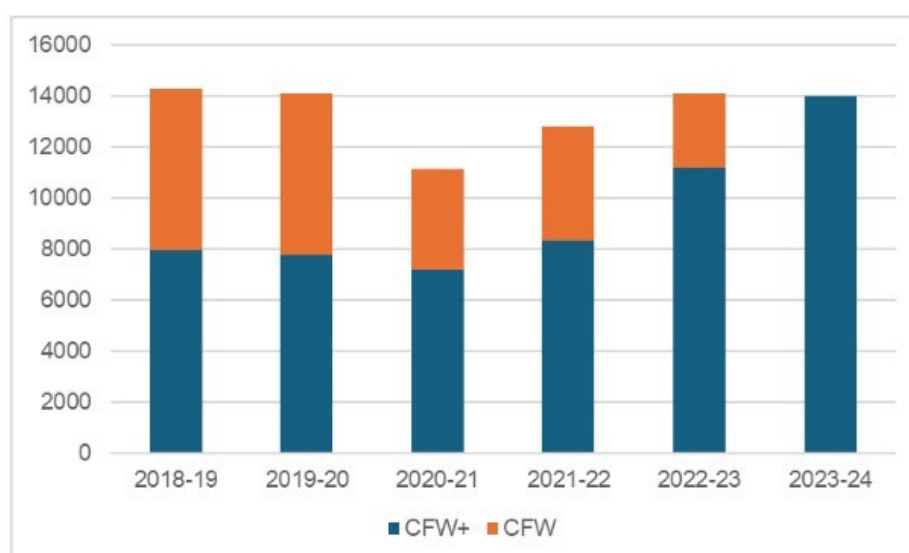
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<sup>85</sup> Priority 1 operations supported those aged 25 and over who were long term unemployed or economically inactive.

<sup>86</sup> In 2024, the age at which people could become eligible was raised from 16 to 20 and they now need to be 'not in education, employment, or training, and have a complex barrier to employment' (rather than being at risk of poverty).

Wales advisor<sup>87</sup> (Welsh Government, 2024b).<sup>88</sup> In part, as an informant from Welsh Government observed, this reflects differences in the target audience for Working Wales, which as noted above, would generally work with those ready to re-engage with post-16 education, training or employment and CfW and CfW+ which were more targeted at those who were not yet ready to re-engage with post-16 education, training or employment.<sup>89</sup> However, this then raises questions about Working Wales' positioning by the Welsh Government as 'the gateway' to the YPG, which we discuss further in Section 10.

**Figure 7.2. Bar chart showing changes in the number of participants (aged 16+) engaged by CfW+ in the financial years 2018-19 to 2023-2024 [Notes 1 and 2], and by CfW in the financial years 2018-19 to 2022-23 [Note 3]**



Sources: Welsh Government: CfW+ internal management information; [Welsh Government, 2024i](#)

[Note 1] Age breakdown of data is not available for years preceding 2023 to 2024.

[Note 2] Additional YPG funding for CfW+ was provided in 2022-23 and 2023-24.

[Note 3] CfW discontinued after April 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Working Wales is delivered by Careers Wales advisors.

<sup>88</sup> This applies to all participants and therefore includes those aged 25 and over and, unfortunately, a separate breakdown of referral routes is not available for those aged 16 to 24.

<sup>89</sup> Although CfW+'s eligibility criteria were wider than CfW and it could, for example, work with those in employment, but who were still at risk of experiencing poverty.

- 7.51. In the evaluation of CfW and CfW+, interviews with participants identified two broad groups of young people supported by the programme: ‘those who were somewhat directionless, but appeared to be capable of accessing employment opportunities, and who were therefore more likely to re-engage [with employment], and those facing more entrenched barriers, who appeared much less likely to re-engage without the support of CfW or CfW+’ (Welsh Government, 2024i, p. 53). The latter group included those who ‘faced complex barriers to engaging with education, training or employment and appeared unlikely to overcome them without the support of the project’. For most, this was linked to ‘mental health difficulties and/or disabilities<sup>90</sup>, or neurodevelopmental conditions, which limited their capability and also sapped their motivation to search for work’ (ibid., p. 56).
- 7.52. Interviewees from the Welsh Government reflected upon this and, like those involved in the JGW+ evaluation, commented specifically upon challenges for the programme linked to increasing numbers of young people supported by the programme who were experiencing mental health related issues.<sup>91</sup> For example, as one interviewee from the CfW+ programme put it, ‘post COVID, lots of the problems aren’t [directly] about employability’. Despite the challenges some participants faced, the evaluation of CfW and CfW+ also identified that the programmes were effective at supporting people into employment.
- 7.53. The evaluation of CfW and CfW+ also identified that young people’s experiences of working and the workplace were often difficult: ‘they included accounts of long and/or unsocial hours, poor pay and poor treatment, including bullying’ and, as one interviewee pithily put it, ‘crap jobs’, which meant that some ‘young people had cycled in and out of jobs’ (Welsh Government, 2024i, p. 65). The survey of participants conducted for the

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<sup>90</sup> This language does not reflect the social model of disability which the Welsh Government observes.

<sup>91</sup> Although the comment related specifically to the programme, the interviewee appeared to feel this reflected a wider societal trend (that is to say, as more young people experience mental health issues, the numbers of young people accessing CfW+ experiencing mental health issues had increased).



evaluation also suggested that ‘many of those entering work do so into lower wage, lower skilled and more insecure work’ (ibid.).<sup>92</sup>

- 7.54. CfW ended in March 2023 (as the ESF programme came to an end in Wales) and as noted above, the cut in funding for CfW+ in 2024 led to the eligibility age being raised to 20. This will reduce the numbers of young people aged 16 to 24 supported by CfW+, although this may be offset by increased numbers of young people aged 16 to 19 engaging with JGW+.

#### *ReAct+*

- 7.55. ReAct+, which was launched in June 2022, replaced ReAct3 and its predecessor programmes. ReAct+ currently (in April 2025) offers tailored support to those aged 20 and over trying to re-enter the labour market who have either been made redundant in the last six months, are under formal notice of redundancy, or who are an ex-offender or offenders serving community sentences.<sup>93</sup> The support aims to tackle barriers and provides funding for vocational training, travel and accommodation costs and care (including childcare) related to training (Welsh Government, 2024j).
- 7.56. Welsh Government redundancy support programmes historically have included a wage subsidy for employers to employ an eligible new recruit. In June 2022 an ‘uplift’ to the ReAct+ wage subsidy was made available to employers who recruited a young person aged 18 to 24. However, from April 2024 the eligibility for the ReAct+ wage subsidy was limited to employers recruiting a disabled person aged 20 or over who is at risk of redundancy, had recently been made redundant or was an ex-offender or an offender serving their sentence in the community.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Lower in this context would mean lower than the median wage for young people in Wales.

<sup>93</sup> ReAct+ was available to people aged 18+ (and predecessor programmes had a lower age limit of 16). However, from April 2024, the lower age limit was increased to 20. A Welsh Government informant advised that the reasons for this were low levels of demand from those aged 18 and 19 and to achieve better alignment with the other Welsh Government employability support programmes.

<sup>94</sup> Further details on the support and eligibility criteria is available at [ReAct Plus](#).

- 7.57. No evaluation of ReAct+ is available, and the performance data provided to date is limited, constraining the conclusions that can be drawn. However, looking forward, an evaluation of the programme is due to commence in 2025.

#### *The Out of Work Service*

- 7.58. The OoWS offers holistic support from peer mentors to 16 to 24 year olds who are NEET and those aged 25 and over who are long-term unemployed or economically inactive and have substance misuse or mental health issues or 'dual disorders' (defined as co-occurring substance misuse and mental health issues).<sup>95</sup> Unlike the other programmes discussed in this section, the OoWS was initially funded by ESF and Welsh Government with contributions from the Substance Misuse Area Planning Boards. The Area Planning Board contributions ended in 2021-22. The successor OoWS service which started in October 2022 is funded by Welsh Government only.
- 7.59. The evaluation of the OoWS identifies that 'participants were largely attracted to the OoWS initially to get support with health and wellbeing challenges and gaining employment and work-related training was a less common reason for joining the programme' (Welsh Government, 2023c, p. 43). The most common referral route was through external agencies, usually the Jobcentre (Welsh Government, 2023c, p. 43).<sup>96</sup>
- 7.60. The latest evaluation of the OoWS, covering the period 2020 to 2022, identifies that the programme performed well, coming close to achieving recruitment targets for both economically inactive and unemployed participants, despite the challenges created by the pandemic. However, performance in relation to outcome targets for young people aged 16 to 24

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<sup>95</sup> Because the evaluation of the OoWS covers both those aged 16 to 24 and those aged 25+, and young people aged 16 to 24 make up only about a quarter of the caseload, it is possible that some findings from the evaluation do not apply to young people in the 16 to 24 age category.

<sup>96</sup> The evaluation identifies that many referrals were 'inappropriate because the participants had high-level needs and were experiencing complex mental health problems and were, therefore, far-off from entering employment' (Welsh Government, 2023c, p. 44). It also identifies that the reluctance of the programme to turn people away may also have contributed to the lower than anticipated outcomes (ibid.).

was mixed, linked in part to high dropout rates. The evaluation also identifies some problems with implementation, most notably difficulties recruiting and retaining peer mentors during the pandemic (Welsh Government, 2023c, p. 35).<sup>97</sup>

### **Business Wales' Big Ideas Wales service**

- 7.61. Business Wales offers a range of support to young people aged under 25 years through the dedicated Big Ideas Wales service, which includes:
- early-stage engagement in enterprise in schools, colleges and universities;
  - support to build knowledge of business, with tools, information and help for those who want to start a business; and
  - financial grants.
- 7.62. Business Wales also supports businesses and employers to improve their growth potential and sustainability. Some of this involves employment practices linked back to working well with young people, including the work of Business Wales' Disabled People's Employment Advisors (discussed in Section 4).
- 7.63. Interviewees from Business Wales reported that, while the Big Ideas Wales service for young people predated the YPG, it had received funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) which ended in 2022. Consequently, the YPG funding introduced in 2022 allowed Business Wales to increase the number of young people who accessed self-employment and to provide a financial grant to assist them.

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<sup>97</sup> It was reported by a policy official from the Welsh Government that the difficulties related 'to the challenges experienced during Covid restrictions and as a result of challenges that Peer Mentors had with their own mental health (relapsing) during the pandemic. The Peer Mentors themselves had lived experiences of mental health [issues and] COVID and lockdowns were a very difficult time for them'. The evaluation identifies that the 'effect of recruitment and retention problems has been high caseloads, inconsistency in support and a lack of experienced peer mentors' (Welsh Government, 2023c, p. 35).

- 7.64. The Youth Entrepreneurship Programme 2016 to 2022 covered elements of Business Wales' offer to young people as part of the YPG, such as the Big Ideas Wales Campaign and Entrepreneurship Champions in FE and HE, and was evaluated in 2022 (Welsh Government, 2022f). The evaluation identified that engagement, particularly in schools, was strong but that 'the reach and coverage of this engagement is less consistent at FE and HE level' (ibid., p. 5). It also identified that support to 'equip' young people 'to take steps and make informed decisions about entrepreneurship' was expanding but that, compared to older entrepreneurs, young people typically needed longer to progress to start up (ibid.). The findings on the effectiveness of enabling work<sup>98</sup> in FE and HE were more mixed (ibid.).
- 7.65. Interviewees from Business Wales reported that having a dedicated brand for young people (Big Ideas Wales) enhanced the marketing of support to young people. They also reported that early-stage engagement work in, for example, education settings, was important in stimulating interest and fostering young people's skills. However, given the difficulties in accessing bank accounts and credit, self-employment was reported to generally only be an option for young people aged 18 years and over. Interviewees from Business Wales also reported that young people who were actively interested in self-employment would be referred by bodies such as Working Wales to Business Wales. However, there were concerns that young people who had not considered self-employment as an option might be missed, if it were not suggested to them as an option. They suggested that there could be more 'conversations (...) encouraging young people who haven't thought about it or expressed it [self-employment] in those terms'. Similarly, as another informant from Business Wales observed: 'Partners in the entrepreneurial ecosystem are key to amplifying the messages around self-employment and the support available to increase the reach of the Big Ideas Wales service'.

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<sup>98</sup> Enabling work focused upon 'connecting the eco-system and building capacity amongst partners and empowering others to deliver entrepreneurship' (Welsh Government, 2022f, p. 10).

7.66. Interviewees from Business Wales and other support programmes reported that self-employment can be particularly important in some parts of Wales such as Powys and for some groups, such as neurodivergent young people and those with health conditions, who can find it difficult to access employment. For example, an interviewee for a RSP reported that they had identified a

... large cohort of young people who are creators, they're makers, whatever they're doing, but they're not taking the next step. You know, they're remaining sort of on benefits or whatever they're doing. Just having that sort of cottage business going on, but they feel they don't have the support to go to the next step. So, there is room there, especially in mid Wales, there's a real culture of entrepreneurship in mid Wales.

7.67. However, interviewees from Business Wales and other support programmes also reported they also noted that self-employment is a 'tough gig', particularly for young people who may struggle to raise finance, to generate sufficient income to support themselves, and/or who may lack the confidence and skills that can come with age and experience. Given these challenges, these interviewees also observed that self-employment may not be viable for young people facing other difficulties in their lives.

7.68. Interviewees from Business Wales, like other support services, also reflected upon the impact of the pandemic upon young people. For example, as one observed:

If you look at those [young people] who are studying during the pandemic, I've got a lot that never actually finished their qualifications. They may have been granted the qualifications, but all of those things that define the end of the course and the knowledge that comes with that (...) which is surely going to impact on the way that they would approach starting a business. You know, being able to bring something to conclusion and to

understand the importance of completing tasks.

- 7.69. Other interviewees from Business Wales observed how the pandemic had also affected young people's mental health and communication skills. As an interviewee from Business Wales explained:

A lot of my clients, they didn't do work experience in schools because everything went online. (...) A lot of my clients have struggled communicating with (...) customers, you know, well they're quite shy and nervous now, so I think there's a lot of that. (...) But on the other side, (...) the digital elements have improved because they're now using Teams for meetings and things like that.

- 7.70. The Young Person's Start Up Grant of up to £2,000 aims to support 'young people not in education, employment or training to start their own business, create a social enterprise, become self-employed, a freelancer or social entrepreneur in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2024k). Interviewees from Business Wales described the difficulties young people, who may not have a strong credit or banking history, and who may find it difficult to save money, may have in accessing the finance necessary to start a business. Interviewees from Business Wales also highlighted the importance (in their experience) of the grant in getting young people's interest and attention, which enabled them to also provide advice and support. They reported that this advice and support could help young people, who often lacked experience of self-employment, to assess if their plans were 'viable' and could help them avoid mistakes, ranging from the small to potentially 'disastrous'.

### **Young people's experiences of Business Wales' Big Ideas Wales service**

Although as outlined in Section 3, young people pursuing self-employment were under-represented in our interview sample, case studies provided by Big Ideas Wales provide insight into young people's experiences, albeit of those who have succeeded. Among other things, they highlight:

- the importance of a scheme that is not tied to any setting; for example, as one young person observed 'I had already graduated [and therefore left university] and was surprised this scheme was available'.
- the value of the expert advice and support concerning entrepreneurship, including, for example, developing a business plan, conducting competitor research, identifying potential clients, and determining pricing and cost. For example, as Ellen described: 'While I had two years' worth of experience in growing and producing flowers, I had no idea how to run a business. I had so many questions, I didn't know where to begin. My weekly, virtual meetings with Niamh [her Business Wales advisor] were vital in helping me turn Firth Flock Flowers from a therapeutic hobby into a real business'.

The potential self-employment offers for those who struggle to find or sustain employment due to caring responsibilities, disablement and/or mental health issues. For example, one case study describes how: 'Leon, who has navigated multiple careers over the past nine years, found that many employers lacked the awareness to implement measures to support people like himself in a traditional workplace, and was often pushed into intense social situations that caused him a lot of anxiety. Feeling unheard in the workplace, he decided to build a business that supported his individual employment needs.'

Another case study describes how Caitlyn reported, 'After becoming a mother, I wanted more control over my time and schedule. I wanted to be home with my children, but I am also very driven. I didn't want to give up work completely.'

*Adapted from Case Studies provided by Business Wales*

## **Referrals to non-YPG partners**

- 7.71. EPCs, Working Wales and employability programmes such as JGW+ and CfW+ report referring young people to a range of non-YPG provision. This is reported to be vital in addressing the wider needs of young people in areas such as housing or health and is discussed further in Section 7. However, it is also consistently reported that, after a decade of austerity and increasing demand, many of the services they refer young people to, such as mental health services, are stretched. High thresholds for access to specialist services such as CAMHS and adult mental health services (AMHS) and weaknesses in primary mental health services (PMHS) mean that there are limited options for support for many young people (see, for example, HIW, Estyn and CIW, 2024; Senedd, 2018b, 2020).
- 7.72. The close working relationships between DWP/JCP and Careers Wales/Working Wales is seen by interviewees from both the DWP and Welsh Government as a key success,<sup>99</sup> albeit one that predated the YPG. An interviewee from DWP described the relationship as ‘fantastic’ and an interviewee from the Welsh Government explained that ‘we have established systems that allow cross referrals between Job Centre Plus and Working Wales and have a large presence in Job Centres across Wales’. Similarly, as an interviewee from the DWP put it, Working Wales advisors ‘are part of the fixtures and furnishings’ of JCP offices. As a result, around a third of Working Wales referrals come from JCP. However, a DWP interviewee also observed that the complexity of the YPG created challenges for work coaches,<sup>100</sup> as participation in some Welsh Government support programmes could affect entitlement to benefits. They felt it was therefore important, but also difficult, for work coaches to keep up with the changing post-16 support landscape. This issue is discussed further in Section 8.

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<sup>99</sup> It is also highlighted as a case study of effective partnership work in [the White Paper, Get Britain Working](#) (UK Government, 2024a).

<sup>100</sup> Work Coaches are the main point of contact for people accessing JCP+. Their primary role is to help individuals find suitable and sustainable employment. However, as an interviewee from the DWP observed, work coaches often have little time with clients, and a ‘demanding role and there’s quite a big churn of work coaches’. Crucially they observed, ‘the information claimants are going to receive is only going to be as good as the information that that work coach knows’.



- 7.73. Interviewees from both the Welsh Government and the DWP reported on improvements in data sharing between the DWP and Working Wales, particularly around young people aged 16 to 18, to support the YEPF. For example, as one interviewee from the DWP explained, overlaying the DWP information onto the Careers Wales information ‘enables Careers Wales to identify those young people they aren’t actively engaging with, who they now know are on benefits’. Interviewees from the Welsh Government suggested this demonstrated the potential for developing a data intelligence hub, to be able to track and to better understand young people’s transitions and pathways at ages 18 and over (see Welsh Government, 2022j for more details).
- 7.74. It was reported by an informant from Welsh Government, that when appropriate Working Wales will refer young people to the DWP/JCP. Nevertheless, the flow of referrals and information was reported by this informant to be very much one way, from DWP/JCP work coaches to Careers Wales/Working Wales. This is a potential concern, as despite its weaknesses, discussed further in the next Section (8), the DWP is one of the most important providers of employment support to young people (Wilson, 2021). Encouraging young people to take up DWP support is therefore important. For example, one informant from Careers Wales noted that Working Wales Advisers are Money and Pension Service accredited and should refer to financial inclusion support organisations, including JCP, where necessary.
- 7.75. However, as an informant from Welsh Government observed it was likely that many of the young people aged 18 or over,<sup>101</sup> who were not engaging with DWP/JCP were also not engaging with Working Wales. This is certainly very plausible, and could explain why there are so few referrals from Working Wales to the DWP/JCP. The informant also noted that there could be legal restrictions on sharing this data with DWP.

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<sup>101</sup> Very few young people aged 16 or 17 are eligible to claim employment related benefits.

7.76. As Section 8 outlines, it is thought that the main reason young people do not take up DWP support is because it comes with conditions (claimant commitments<sup>102</sup>) (although this may mean they still engage with Working Wales, because it does not have this conditionality). Estimates included in the [Rapid Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education, or training](#) (Welsh Government 2024t) were that only around half of young people aged 18 to 24 who are NEET and eligible for employment-related benefits take these up. This is important because, as one contributor to stakeholder workshops explained, if a young person opts out of the benefits system, the risk is that it is no-one's responsibility to identify and support and, if appropriate, challenge them to re-engage. More broadly, the fact that so many young people aged 19 to 24 who are NEET appear not to be engaging with either Working Wales nor JCP (and are no longer covered by the YEPF), illustrates the challenge of engaging this group of young people who will not benefit from the YPG's offer of support if they do not engage with support services like Working Wales.

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<sup>102</sup> Reporting on the Welfare Conditionality Project, Stewart and Wright (2018, p. 1) state that, in relation to unemployed adults (rather than young people specifically), 'Overall, welfare conditionality (in the form of benefit sanctions and mandatory appointments at Jobcentre Plus and contracted-out back-to-work agencies) did not prompt 'behaviour change'. Instead, 'benefit sanctions, and the threat of them, resulted overwhelmingly in negative impacts. Many participants reported that fear of being sanctioned was counterproductive and that it prioritised compliance with meaningless activities that were ineffective for finding work'.

## **8. Shaping the system of EET support for young people aged 16 to 24**

### **Introduction**

- 8.1. As Section 6 outlines, in order to achieve its twin aims of providing an offer of support to all young people and a simple system to access opportunities, the YPG needed to mobilise and strengthen existing provision and increase collaboration between providers to support young people as part of the Guarantee.
- 8.2. As Sections 6 and 7 outline, the YPG is a complex cross departmental policy. This section outlines how delivery, and therefore what became the YPG offer, was driven not from the centre in top-down hierarchal ways, but by the decisions of multiple different policy officials in different teams and departments. We characterise this as a ‘policy network’<sup>103</sup> that can be best understood as a ‘system’<sup>104</sup> in which the actions of, and relationships between, different members of the system in effect created the YPG in practice. To put it another way, the YPG we observe ‘emerged’ from this system.

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<sup>103</sup> A policy network is a group of actors who interact and collaborate to influence the development and/or implementation of public policies on a specific issue (Sutton, 1999).

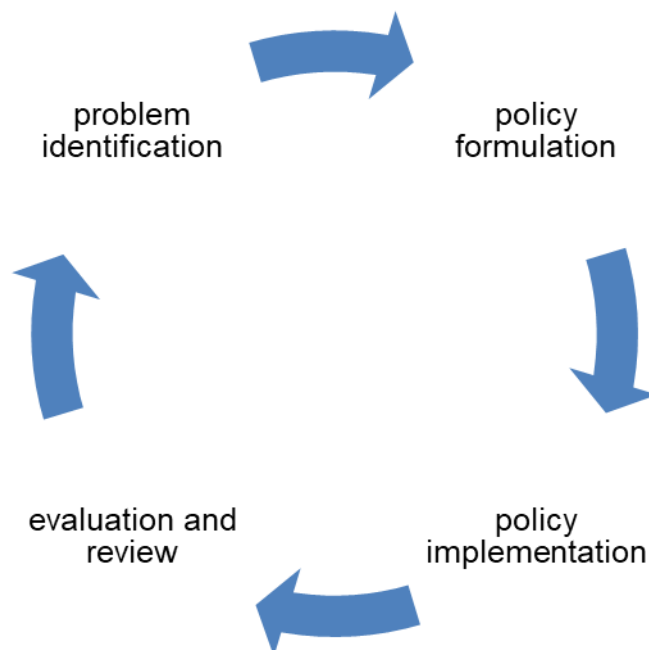
<sup>104</sup> A ‘system’ embodies the idea of a set of different elements connected together to form a whole, with its properties created by the operation of the whole system, rather than just the individual parts (Checkland, 1981, p. 3).

### **The emergence of the YPG**

8.3. As Section 6 indicates, the YPG in practice - the assemblage of programmes, services and policies that collectively constitute the YPG offer we observe today (described in Section 7) - was not created by a purely linear and 'rational' process of decision making, illustrated by Figure 8.1. However, it certainly has elements of this, such as:

- problem identification – the concerns about a forecast massive rise in youth unemployment, discussed in Sections 4 and 5;
- policy formulation – the development of plans for the YPG, as the PfG commitment was translated into plans for action, discussed in Section 6;
- policy implementation, discussed in Section 7; and
- evaluation and review – the focus of this report.

**Figure 8.1. A simplified representation of the policy making cycle**



8.4. However, in important ways practice deviated from this ideal type model. For example, as outlined in Section 6:

- there were overlapping and/or non-linear stages, such as the announcement of the policy before the detail was worked out.
- there was an abbreviated policy making cycle, given widespread concerns about the prospects for mass youth unemployment (with consequent risk of ‘scarring’ a generation of young people), coupled with the urgency of action, given the rapid changes in the economic outlook following the introduction of the first COVID-19 lockdown.
- the YPG has a lack of definition; as outlined in the boxed text below, it has very few targets, other than its contribution to 2050 milestones<sup>105</sup> and few governing documents (as outlined below, there is, for example, no overarching policy document, no guidance to those charged with delivery). As a result, beating the bounds and trying to establish what is and what is not part of the YPG was a key challenge for the Evaluability Assessment (Welsh Government, 2025a).
- the YPG has been and remains a ‘dynamic’ policy that continues to flex and evolve in response to external factors (such as the rise in economic inactivity rather than unemployment amongst young people, outlined in Section 4) and developments in policy elsewhere, for example, as the result of decisions by the DWP and other Welsh Government teams, including the development of the YEPF, and the budgetary pressures the Welsh Government has faced.
- implementation was through a distributed model of delivery,<sup>106</sup> dependent upon the actions of multiple stakeholders working in different departments and teams (for example, Welsh Government education, employability, health, skills) at different levels (national – regional – local).<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Most notably the milestone that at least 90% of 16 to 24 year olds will be in education, employment, or training by 2050.

<sup>106</sup> For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it, you ‘might say the model is kind of you’re drawing those strands together at a high level of directors of the different programmes, (...) and then it’s their responsibility to kind of drive that through their own organisations’.

<sup>107</sup> As Lipsky (1980) and others have observed, much policy is actually made by those charged with implementing the policy, rather than those who devised or wrote the policy.

### **The YPG's targets**

One striking feature of the YPG as a programme is that, apart from the contribution to the national milestones which relate to 2050, it has no specific quantitative targets or performance measures. Moreover, while there are documents describing the intent of the YPG (see, for example, Welsh Government, 2022a) and providing some detail of its different components and how they are expected to fit together, there is no detailed plan.

Therefore, as one contributor to a workshop asked: 'What is the YPG Plan (...) this is how it's going to happen, this is what we'll do, these are the performance measures, this is how we'll deliver?' Equally, it was observed by workshop contributors that the lack of a detailed blueprint has provided a degree of flexibility in delivery of the YPG. This has been valuable, particularly as the effects of the pandemic played out in unexpected ways, most notably the rise in economic inactivity rather than unemployment amongst young people.

Workshop contributors (comprising Welsh Government officials and staff from partner organisations) also observed that the fragmentation of data across multiple programmes made it difficult to understand how the YPG as a whole was performing. In response, the Evaluability Assessment for the YPG proposes a series of KPIs (Welsh Government, 2025a).

- 8.5. As outlined in Section 6, those charged with developing the YPG recognised that the different teams and departments whose responsibility was delivery of different elements of the post-16 support and post-16 education and training systems worked in silos. Moreover, many of those silos sat outside the Employability and Skills Division charged with delivery, meaning that the central YPG team had no line authority over them. As one interviewee from Medr (who was formerly based in the Welsh Government working on tertiary education) described it, they are 'the other side of the house' and as another

interviewee from the Welsh Government asked rhetorically, 'does one department know what another is doing?'

- 8.6. In this context, interviewees from the Welsh Government consistently reported that the YPG had encouraged greater collaboration between different policy teams with responsibility in areas like employability, youth work (and the YEPF), post-16 education and training and self-employment around a shared agenda. For example, as one Welsh Government interviewee put it: 'In the past there's much more we could have done to work more closely. And I think YPG brought that into focus.' Another observed: 'The challenges young people faced kept changing, as we moved from the pandemic lockdowns, through the mental health and cost of living crisis, and the YPG provided a focus and structure for responding to these' - a co-ordinated focus upon young people aged 16 to 24 which did not exist before.
- 8.7. Therefore, the YPG provided a focus for discussion in the Welsh Government, helping break down the silos separating:
- the Employability and Skills and Tertiary Education areas;
  - the silos within these divisional areas of work, and
  - those separating the Welsh Government and external stakeholders, around young people who were NEET.
- 8.8. As a result, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government described it, unlike some policy areas of policies, the YPG was 'used as a [genuine] vehicle for the cross-government delivery of a [PfG] commitment'.
- 8.9. However, interviewees from Welsh Government and Medr were also clear that individual teams and divisions could still make their own decisions, and these decisions shaped the YPG. It was reported, for example, that some decisions about funding for elements of the YPG provided by education and health divisions were still made unilaterally and then 'reported back' to the

YPG Board (rather than, for example, being made through Board discussions).

### **Funding and simplification of the system**

Additional YPG funding has usually enhanced existing provision, such as CfW+, Big Ideas Wales and apprenticeships and helped make up for the cuts in funding following the end of the ESF in Wales. The latter were described by one interviewee from the Welsh government as potential ‘pinch points’, which could have disrupted or undermined support for young people. However, this focus upon augmenting existing provision, particularly in phase 1 of the YPG, meant that there was little evidence of simplifying the system by, for example, decommissioning or merging services. Arguably though, the cuts in YPG funding in 2024 have helped simplify the system of support for 16 to 19 year-olds, as they are no longer eligible for support from CfW+.

- 8.10. This is not to say that the YPG team was unable to use levers like funding and research to influence the actions of other actors, and some interviewees from the Welsh Government forcefully made the point that as a PfG commitment, the YPG shaped departmental funding decisions (which is not disputed).<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, the data collected for the evaluation indicates that the YPG we observe today, and which is experienced by young people, was the product of the decisions of a range of stakeholders with sometimes differing goals and interests, rather than the product of decisions and directives from the central YPG team.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, the YPG was a PfG priority and that made it ‘clear’ to other departments that ‘this was the priority’ and meant that money flowed to this.

<sup>109</sup> In a similar vein, as outlined below, it is important to recognise that some of the policy changes that followed the introduction of the YPG, happened indirectly, rather than as a direct result of the work of the YPG team.



In this policy network, the power to shape the YPG rested upon a number of different factors, including:

- staff seniority and the authority to control and direct how financial capital would be used and how programmes would be delivered;
- the ability to convene (and reach across silos) and to work effectively with, and to persuade, others<sup>110</sup>;
- expertise and links or networks (with some stakeholders appearing to exercise influence greater than their seniority would suggest, given their expertise and social capital); and
- political capital (for example, as noted, it was seen as important that the YPG was a PfG commitment).

### **A systems wide lens**

8.11. The breadth of the YPG poses challenges in areas such as policy design, implementation and evaluation, but also creates opportunities. In particular, interviewees from the Welsh Government described how the system-wide lens the YPG provided helped them:

- identify gaps in provision; and
- widen their lens to look beyond their focus on post-16 support to other parts of the system, such as post-16 education and training (most notably, school sixth forms and colleges).

As one Welsh Government interviewee reported, their vantage point and involvement in the YPG meant that: ‘I understood how all the different components were already working together or not’.

8.12. This systems-wide focus supported new developments, such the expansion and development of EEBs in colleges (discussed in Section 6). Nevertheless, as interviewees from the Welsh Government observed, most of the focus in terms of change was on post-16 support while, conversely, most of the money

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<sup>110</sup> For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it, it was about ‘creating networks’ and bringing people together around a shared agenda and exploring how they could support each other. As they went on to explain: ‘I wouldn’t dare tell other people how to run their programmes’.

(that contributed to the YPG) came from the post-16 education and training budget.

### **Communication**

- 8.13. As the Welsh Audit Office identifies, '[c]ommunicating a clear purpose for public services that inspires and empowers people to work together' is vital for cross-departmental initiatives like the YPG (Welsh Audit Office, 2019, p. 6). Both the YEPF and YPG provide this clear purpose and as we discuss further below, have inspired and empowered people to work together at national, regional and/or local authority levels.
- 8.14. Interviews and discussions with those involved in the design and delivery of the programme suggest that the central offer of the YPG, of support to young people aged 16 to 24, has been clearly articulated and understood. It was generally felt to be primarily for young people who are, or are at risk of becoming, NEET rather than being a universal offer. However, the evolution of the YPG design, outlined in Section 5, coupled with the lack of a blueprint or governing document (as outlined above and in stark contrast to the detailed guidance underpinning the YEPF), meant that beyond the core offer of support, many interviewees struggled to define the YPG.<sup>111</sup> It was acknowledged by interviewees from across the Welsh Government and in partner agencies that explaining what the YPG was, beyond the simple top line of an offer of 'help and support for young people to gain a place in education or training and to get into work or self-employment' (Welsh Government, 2025b) was complicated.
- 8.15. The lack of detail may have weakened the sense of purpose the YPG is intended to provide and hampers monitoring and evaluation of the progress made. This links to a wider challenge around the weaknesses and gaps in

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<sup>111</sup> For example, as a Welsh Government workshop participant put it, 'It is complex' and as another observed, 'One of the problems is that the YPG is not an entity but is made up of lots and lots of elements'.

data, which the Evaluability Assessment seeks to address<sup>112</sup> (Welsh Government, 2025a), and the danger that a target, such as reducing the numbers of young people who are NEET, which cannot be achieved by any one service, is not owned by any one service.

- 8.16. The distributed model of development and delivery, outlined above, meant that much of the work communicating what the YPG was and what it meant to the different programmes that collectively made up the YPG, rested not with the central YPG team, but with those leading and managing the different programmes. As one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, there was a need to ‘be in the loop’ and ‘to be continually communicating’ with their teams, as the YPG kept evolving, and it could be a ‘real challenge’ to keep up with the changes. Similarly, as an interviewee from the DWP put it, understanding the different programmes that make up the YPG is one of ‘the hardest things for my operational colleagues to get their heads around’. They explained that it was not enough for work coaches to simply know that Working Wales was the ‘gateway’ to the YPG and to not worry about the programme that sits behind it, as young people’s participation in different programmes could ‘impact on their claimant commitment<sup>113</sup> and their eligibility for different benefits’.

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<sup>112</sup> The Evaluability Assessment seeks to address this by distinguishing between system level measures, such as the percentage of young people who are NEET, which services are collectively accountable for, and performance measures which individual services are accountable for (Welsh Government, 2025).

<sup>113</sup> For those claiming employment related benefits, Work Coaches work with them to create and agree a ‘Claimant Commitment’, outlining the specific actions the individual will take to prepare for and find work.

### **The development of the different elements of the YPG**

8.17. The main impact of the YPG, reported by interviewees upon programmes, was linked to funding for existing or new programmes (discussed in Section 6). This was clearest in relation to:

- CfW+, where the YPG funding was reported by interviewees from the Welsh Government to have ‘stopped the funding dropping off a cliff at the end of the COVID-19 commitment’.<sup>114</sup> The impact of this is illustrated in Section 7, which shows how CfW+ increased the number of people it worked with, as CfW wound down. It was also reported by interviewees from the Welsh Government that the additional funding enabled them to ‘experiment with novel approaches’ to engaging and supporting young people; and
- Business Wales, where interviewees from the Welsh Government described how the YPG funding helped replace ERDF funding, which ended in 2022. This was reported to be ‘key to maintaining their focus upon young people’, which they felt would ‘probably be lost’ without this investment. These interviewees also reported that their role in the YPG provided ‘the basis to get more involved in conversations within [Welsh] Government’ about the role of Business Wales in supporting young people. This, in turn, was reported to have had ‘a big impact’ upon how self-employment was viewed within different Welsh Government teams.

In contrast, interviewees from programmes or policy areas that had not received additional YPG funding, or which had not co-funded YPG activity, were much less likely to report any direct impact of the YPG upon their area of work. Instead, they tended to describe their programme as supporting the delivery of the YPG, although as outlined above, it was also observed that the YPG, and to a lesser degree the YEPF, provided these programmes with ‘justification’ when, for example, they were making the case for funding.

8.18. Amongst those interviewees from the Welsh Government most involved in the development of the YPG, there was also recognition of how important and

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<sup>114</sup> CfW+ received additional funding to support the Welsh Government’s response to the pandemic.

valuable their involvement in the development of the YPG was in shaping the specific programmes for which they were responsible. This was seen as particularly important in working out the relationship between the YPG and YEPF, in relation to support for young people aged 16 to 18. Other stakeholders reflected on how, for example, insights from the National Conversation and young person's stakeholder groups had helped develop a 'rich understanding' of the issues. For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it: 'getting to work' has always been on our agenda, 'but in particular, it [the National Conversation] gave us that right. This is what the YPG told us. This is what people have said. Young people have said we need to do something', giving them the platform to raise and discuss the issues with Transport for Wales.

- 8.19. Interviews with those involved in delivering programmes suggest that, as might be expected, at the level of operational staff, they were generally primarily focused upon the programmes they delivered rather than the wider system.<sup>115</sup> The main exceptions to this were concerns about referral partners and what were thought of as potential competitors (other programmes that might also engage young people that operational staff were seeking to target).<sup>116</sup>

### **The DWP**

- 8.20. The DWP has overall responsibility for delivering a range of working-age, disability and ill-health benefits in the UK. As outlined in Section 6, the DWP is one of the most important providers of employment support in Wales (Wilson, 2021) (and the UK). It aims to provide comprehensive employment support to help people of working age access and progress in employment. It offers support from work coaches in Jobcentres and through targeted programmes

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<sup>115</sup> This focus upon programmes rather than the wider system is also reflected in evaluation reports covering individual programmes, which rarely mention the YPG. Where it is mentioned, it is usually referenced in a discussion of the policy context, rather than in discussion of the delivery of programmes.

<sup>116</sup> For example, an interviewee from the Welsh Government observed that when people were signposted or referred from one programme (such as Working Wales) to another, there 'should be a warm handover, not just a phone call' or giving someone a 'list of telephone numbers or websites' and relying upon them to follow up and make contact.

like [Access to Work](#), which provides additional support for disabled people and those with a health condition.

8.21. However, the [White Paper, Get Britain Working](#), identifies a number of weaknesses in the current (DWP) employment support system, which it describes as ‘set up to deal with the problems of the past, not the challenges of today or the opportunities of the future’, because it is:

- ‘too narrowly focused on unemployment, with too little support in particular for disabled people and people who have health conditions, and young people who are too often written off before their careers have even begun
- too centralised and siloed, both across central government and in the relationships between national and local government [and]
- too focused on benefits and compliance, which can push people away from support at the expense of real help that meets their needs’<sup>117</sup> (UK Government, 2024a, p. 7).

Therefore, reforms of the system, including a range of action to support young people, such as the establishment of trailblazers<sup>118</sup> and youth hubs<sup>119</sup> (and in England, the development of a Youth Guarantee<sup>120</sup>) are either planned or being further developed. These reforms aim to address increases in youth unemployment since 2022 and the longer-term increase in the proportion of young people who are economically inactive because of health conditions and disabilities in the UK (ibid., p. 41).<sup>121</sup> The new DWP employment support

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<sup>117</sup> Several informants from the Welsh Government picked up on this point in particular, identifying how claimant commitments associated with employment related benefits can discourage young people from engaging with DWP provision, a challenge which is discussed in further in Section 7 of this report.

<sup>118</sup> ‘Place-based trailblazers [will be established] in eight areas in England and Wales to run during 2025/2026. These trailblazers will be at the forefront of designing how a model of locally joined-up work, health and skills support will work in practice’ (UK Government, 2024a, para. 73).

<sup>119</sup> The DWP’s expanded Youth Offer provides access to the Youth Employability Programme, Youth Employability Coaches, and Youth Hubs delivered with partner organisations, where DWP work coaches provide support alongside other services (UK Government, 2024a).

<sup>120</sup> This aims to bring together ‘existing entitlements and provision’ for 18 to 21-year-olds in England (ibid., p 46.).

<sup>121</sup> Trends in youth unemployment and economic inactivity in Wales are discussed in the appendices to this report.

system will cover all of the UK, but is intended to be ‘flexible, operating differently in different areas to reflect local systems and needs’ including the devolution of responsibilities in areas such as skills, health and careers in Wales (and also Scotland) (ibid. p. 55).

*DWP involvement in design and delivery of the YPG*

- 8.22. Given the DWP’s importance as a provider of employment support to young people, it is vitally important that Welsh Government and DWP policy is ‘coherent’ and ‘complementary’ (Wilson, 2021). As Section 5 outlines, there are examples of effective partnerships in the design and delivery of programmes like CfW, and in the operational relationship between Careers Wales, Working Wales and the DWP and JCP. Nevertheless, as Section 5 outlines, the disruption caused by the pandemic and the subsequent scramble in both the UK and Welsh Governments to respond created a more complex landscape within which some coherence and complementarity was lost. For example, DWP programmes like Restart were introduced by the DWP without adequate co-ordination or consultation with the Welsh Government, leading to some duplication of and competition with existing Welsh Government support programmes like CfW and CfW+ (Welsh Government 2024j). Conversely, it was reported by interviewees from the DWP that Welsh Government programmes like JGW+ were designed without adequate co-ordination or consultation with the DWP, meaning that participants’ benefits could be negatively impacted by JGW+ training allowances.
- 8.23. However, it was also reported by interviewees from the Welsh Government and DWP that after the initial disruption caused by the pandemic, working relationships between the DWP and Welsh Government had strengthened, although they acknowledged that this ‘took time to re-establish’. Looking forward, as outlined above, [the White Paper on Welfare Reform, Getting Britain Working](#) (UK Government, 2024a) and the commitment to work with partners like the Welsh Government, provide opportunities to further strengthen this relationship, while also highlighting its importance to ensure coherence and complementarity of DWP and Welsh Government policies.

### **Regional collaboration**

- 8.24. As outlined in Section 5, at a local level, LAs and EPCs have a key role in co-ordinating support for those aged 11 to 18 through the YEPF, while RSPs have been charged with helping co-ordinate the YPG at a regional level.

#### *The impact of the end of the ESF and start of the SPF upon collaboration*

- 8.25. There was widespread disappointment amongst those interviewed that the level of funding through the SPF was felt to be lower than that provided through the ESF. There was also frustration at the replacement of what were seen as more strategic regional projects with more local provision, which was difficult for the Welsh Government to influence and increased the risk of duplication. As a result, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed:

I remember we were trying to keep on top of that [which SPF projects were funded] as best we could (...) but it was so complicated (...) as the timelines for approval were shifting (...). We just we had to take a step back and to be honest, I'm not sure I fully understand quite what SPF provision there is.

- 8.26. Equally, interviewees from the Welsh Government observed that the end of ESF had given programmes more flexibility, and this had helped programmes like JGW+ pivot to new challenges. As one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed it had been 'ludicrous' in their view that young people could not be supported by two (or more) European funded projects at the same time, particularly when they might have complex needs and need support from different services. They also acknowledged that there was space for local level programmes focused upon local needs, such as support for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups in Cardiff
- 8.27. The development of new local provision has also been driven by the evolving post-pandemic needs of young people, discussed in Section 4 (and also, the needs of older age groups, such as adults aged 25 and over, as young people may be supported by services for adults, rather than services specifically for



young people). There is, for example, focus upon support for those not yet ready to engage with the YPG's offer of EET support via mainstream programmes like JGW+ and CfW+. There is also a focus upon building young people's confidence and improving access to mental health support.<sup>122</sup> This wider offer of support, which also encompasses social support in areas such as gender identity and sexual orientation and homelessness, is sometimes provided by the voluntary sector. However, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, while 'in theory' it should mean that there 'is a now a broader range of provision', they did not know enough about it to assess if it added value to YPG provision.

### *Local authorities*

- 8.28. As outlined in Section 5, consultation to inform the refresh of the YEPF identified concerns from LAs that they are seen as primarily accountable for the level of NEETs and that this was not appropriately shared with other partner organisations. The refreshed YEPF guidance was intended to reinvigorate co-ordination at LA level. Interviews with staff from programmes suggested a strong focus at a LA level upon two areas: the YEPF and education and upon support for workless people of all ages. Because as outlined in Section 4, relatively few young people aged 16 to 18 enter employment, there is little overlap between the two systems.
- 8.29. The development of all age employability services is reflected in the development of a range of LA employability services such as [Into Work Cardiff](#), [Swansea Working](#) and [Gwaith Gwynedd](#) delivering Welsh Government provision like CfW+, but also delivering projects part-funded by the SPF. As one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, it was therefore often not possible to disentangle what support was funded by the YPG and what was funded by the SPF.

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<sup>122</sup> This reflects the difficulties young people experience accessing support from health services, such as PMHS, CAMHS and AMHS (see, for example, HIW, Estyn and CW, 2024).

### *Regional collaboration*

- 8.30. At regional level in 2021, as part of the YPG, RSPs were commissioned to conduct research to set out the landscape across each region in terms of stakeholder and employer networks, scoping current education, employment, training and well-being support and provision. RSPs were expected to work with stakeholders, including young people and employers ‘to encourage collaboration across the region to support young people as part of the guarantee’ (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 6). This was also intended to ‘provide the opportunity to improve information held by Working Wales under its support finder and local support finder services, enhancing the offer to young people’ (ibid., pp. 5-6). It is also notable, although perhaps unsurprising, given the differences in scale,<sup>123</sup> that the YEPF has rarely been mentioned during interviews with representatives from RSPs for this evaluation, when exploring the role of regional collaboration around the YPG.

Interviews and discussions with those involved in the design and delivery of the YPG suggest that it (the YPG) has helped foster a shared sense of mission and encouraged those working at a regional level to think about their part in, and contribution to, the wider system. However, in line with the RSPs’ remit to drive investment in skills, they tend to be more focused upon the post-16 education and skills system (that is, education settings and training providers) rather than the post-16 support system (including the YPG, but also, for example the YEPF and LA and third sector provision) discussed in Section 5. With the partial exception of the Cardiff Capital Region, there is relatively little evidence of RSPs (in Mid Wales, South West Wales and North Wales) moving beyond information sharing around sectors and opportunities to actively supporting or facilitating the shaping of the regional YPG post-16 support offer. The challenges and opportunities created by the YPG’s

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<sup>123</sup> RSPs have a key role in co-ordinating provision, while at LA level, EPCs and LAs have a lead role in co-ordinating provision for those aged 16 to 18.

decentralised model of delivery, discussed above in relation to national leadership, apply equally to a regional level.<sup>124</sup> Moreover:

- RSPs were established as ‘advisory, rather than decision-making bodies, with influence (based on quality of evidence) rather than control’<sup>125</sup> (Business Wales, 2019, p. 25);
- as Estyn (2024c) identifies, RSPs vary in terms of maturity<sup>126</sup>, meaning their capacity to take on this role differs.

### **Fair work and employer engagement**

8.31. As outlined in Section 1, it was identified that the YPG would contribute to the National Milestone: to ‘Eradicate the gap between the employment rate in Wales and the UK by 2050, with a focus on fair work and raising labour market participation of under-represented groups’ (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 4).

8.32. As one Welsh Government interviewee reported: ‘There’s been a lot of discussion in Welsh Government about what levers Welsh Government have to encourage employers to implement the Fair Work Commission recommendations, to pay the real living wage and to promote employment for disabled young people’. These levers include engagement with employers, using the Welsh Government’s influence over the public sector, its convening power, and financial levers (Senedd, 2022). However, as an informant for this study (from the Welsh Government) observed, the Welsh Government’s legislative power (in relation to fair work) is limited<sup>127</sup> and its focus is primarily upon promotion, encouragement and awareness-raising.

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<sup>124</sup> As outlined in Section 5, different component parts of the YPG are managed and delivered by different staff/services operating at different scales, not all of whom are represented on RSPs and no-one has overall authority to direct change.

<sup>125</sup> For example, as one interviewee from an RSP put it, ‘We don’t actually deliver anything on the ground. We’re more of a coordinating body’.

<sup>126</sup> The RSP in Mid Wales was established later than the others.

<sup>127</sup> For example, the fair work duties in the [Social Partnership and Public Procurement \(Wales\) Act 2023](#) only apply to public sector organisations (and not private or voluntary sector bodies).

- 8.33. In the context of the YPG, the strategy to promote fair work appears to have been taken forward primarily through:
- legislation (such as the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act; see, for example, Senedd Research, 2023);
  - the Welsh Government's Social Partnership, Employability, and Fair Work Directorate (which has responsibility for taking forward the recommendations of the Fair Work Commission), and which as outlined below, has for example, engaged with employability programmes like JGW+; and
  - the work of different bodies and groups delivering the YPG (which was the focus of this evaluation), such as:
    - Business Wales (whose role is discussed above);
    - the Welsh Government's Disabled People's Employment Champions (whose role is to work with employers to promote inclusive recruitment and retention practices);
    - RSPs (which provide a focus upon employers and post-16 education and training); and
    - the JGW+ and CfW+ programmes which have employer liaison officers.
- 8.34. However, the capacity of these different bodies and groups to take forward the fair work agenda was often felt to be limited. For example, there are only five Disabled People's Employment Champions and as one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed we could do with 'an army of them'. It was also notable that unlike the other National Milestone focused upon increasing the proportion of young people in education and training the YPG contributes to,<sup>128</sup> the second National Milestone, focused upon fair work and raising participation of under-represented groups<sup>129</sup> was rarely raised by interviewees when discussing the YPG.

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<sup>128</sup> The milestone that at least 90% of 16 to 24 year olds will be in education, employment, or training by 2050.

<sup>129</sup> The milestone to 'Eradicate the gap between the employment rate in Wales and the UK by 2050, with a focus on fair work and raising labour market participation of under-represented groups' (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 4).

- 8.35. Some interviewees from the Welsh Government also reported that they felt that the Fair Work team had not been fully included in the development of the YPG, meaning that opportunities to fully embed fair work in the YPG had been missed. This is a potential weakness given the importance of fair work in motivating young people to seek work, and as we discuss in Section 8, the perception that work opportunities were not fair discouraged some young people.
- 8.36. However, this assessment was challenged by an informant from the Welsh Government, who reported that in addition to their wider work in developing and promoting fair work resources, such as [A Guide to Fair Work](#), the Fair Work Division:
- was represented at Deputy Director level on the YPG Board and the Disabled People's Employment Champions, who sit within the Fair Work Division, were also members of the YPG Board;
  - produced a policy paper outlining opportunities for alignment between fair work policy and the YPG, that was presented to the YPG Board;
  - reviewed the programme specification and resources for JGW+ to ensure they embedded the principles of fair work and engaged with those leading on the CfW project to influence changes to the programme; and
  - produced bespoke fair work guidance for the Further Education Employment Bureaux.

#### *Employer engagement*

- 8.37. One of the objectives of the YPG is to ensure that 'employers have the confidence and support to recruit 16 to 24 year olds into quality jobs and apprenticeships' (ibid., p. 9). In workshops with Welsh Government staff and staff from partner agencies (discussed in Section 3), concerns were raised about the relationship between employers and young people. It was said that employers report that young people are not job ready and that they are still complaining that they 'can't get the right people', people who 'turn up on time, stay after the first day, keep going'. Some workshop contributors opined that 'something's gone wrong in [young people's] attitudes'. Others observed that

‘young people are less mature as a result of the pandemic (...) - lack of self-regulation, not as socially developed’, which made it difficult for them to flourish in the workplace.

8.38. In part, the challenges discussed in workshops reflect concerns (raised during interviews):

- that education settings were not doing enough to prepare young people for a transition to employment. As one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it there is a ‘huge’ need to develop young people’s ‘career readiness’ and ensure that young people are ‘better prepared’ for the world of work - although it was also hoped that the new Curriculum for Wales, which recognises the value of Careers and Work-Related Experiences (CWRE), would help; and
- the extent to which employability support programmes, like JGW+ and CfW+, which are part of the YPG (and which are discussed in Section 6) can ensure that young people are ‘work ready’.

8.39. Although those involved in delivering programmes often saw helping ensure that young people are work or career ready as part of their role, interviewees from the Welsh Government and programmes also reflected the view that, as society changes (a theme discussed in Section 4), employers might need to adjust their expectations of young people. For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it:

I guess what we're thinking about it is there's a lot of emphasis around making sure we have creative, more employable [young people, who have] (...) got skills, [good] attitudes and so on, but there is also an argument that maybe there's work to be done with employers as well about their expectations of young people and how they could be more flexible, accommodating or adjustments that might be made for young people who may, for example, have mental health difficulties or whatever it is.

8.40. Some interviewees from the Welsh Government linked this to work around promoting reasonable adjustments for disabled young people. They did acknowledge, however, that although the principle might be similar, there were of course differences between reasonable adjustments required under the Equality Act and other adjustments that employers might make for non-disabled young people who might face barriers to accessing and/or sustaining employment. For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it, the aim was to ‘get an employer to think differently’, for example, looking at starting times, if you like, shift work (...). If you say 8.15 rather than 8:00, there’s a bus that could drop everyone off, that kind of thing’.

8.41. An interviewee from a RSP also suggested that it could be in employers’ interest to make adjustments; they observed that:

There's a shortage of skills and there's a certain amount of education to be done with employers around inclusivity of employment and expanding the range of people that they will interview and employ so we're looking at possibly doing something (...), running a number of events about inclusive recruitment, around gender, taking on young people who do have mental health issues, and the support that employers have around employing a young person who potentially may have a few barriers. We're also running a business engagement event in March, which is around the employment of people and young people who've been through the criminal justice system. We're asking employers to expand their horizons: “You haven't got enough people applying for jobs. But there are people there. You just need to open your eyes and give somebody a chance”. So, from our point of view, we've got some education to do there [with employers] as well.

8.42. This in turn, raised (unanswered) questions about how employers’ expectations of young people might be changed, particularly in sectors such as construction where recruitment was challenging, and how in-work support could be strengthened. A Welsh Government interviewee suggested that, as support to young people from programmes was ‘tapered off’, this ‘needs to almost be matched by an increased support with [by] the employer’.

8.43. Given this, a number of interviewees from the Welsh Government reflected that the employer engagement strand of the YPG was under-developed. As one interviewee summed it up, ‘we need to do more’, to ‘go out to advocate for young people’ with employers, something which could also help support the promotion of fair work (discussed above). Equally though, others highlighted the challenges created by the structure of employers in Wales and of working with small and medium enterprises (SMEs) who might, for example, not have human resources staff or departments.<sup>130</sup>

### **The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act**

As the boxed text below outlines, the WBFGA identifies five ways of working necessary for specified ‘public bodies’ such as the Welsh Government: to apply the ‘sustainable development principle’ (Welsh Government, 2015, p. 4).

#### **The WBFGA: The Five Ways of Working<sup>1</sup>**

- Collaboration’: ‘acting in collaboration with any other person (or different parts of the body itself) that could help the body to meet its well-being objectives’;
- ‘Integration’: ‘considering how the public body’s well-being objectives may impact upon each of the well-being goals, on their other objectives, or on the objectives of other public bodies’ [that is, systems thinking and thinking about all the well-being goals];
- ‘Involvement’: ‘the importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the well-being goals, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the area which the body serves’;
- ‘Long Term’: ‘the importance of balancing short-term needs with the need to safeguard the long-term needs’; and
- ‘Prevention’: ‘how acting to prevent problems occurring or getting worse may help public bodies meet their objectives’ (Welsh Government, 2015 p. 5).

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<sup>130</sup> The majority of active enterprises in Wales are SMEs who accounted for 99% of all enterprises in Wales in 2023, while micro enterprises (with 0 to 9 employees) accounted for almost 95% of the total enterprises in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023f).



### *Collaboration, integration and involvement*

- 8.44. At an operational level, partnership work, particularly between services with markedly different cultures and working practices, such as EET support services and mental health services, is easy to advocate for, but difficult to execute in practice (see, for example, House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2024; Pathways to Work Commission, 2024).<sup>131</sup> These underlying institutional differences and frictions have been compounded by the pressure services face as a result of rising demand alongside cuts in funding due to austerity, meaning that CAMHS, AMHS and PMHS services are increasingly difficult for young people to access (HIW, Estyn and CIW, 2024; Senedd, 2020, 2018a).<sup>132</sup>
- 8.45. As outlined above, collaboration, involvement and integration were all central to the development and delivery of the YPG, and were generally reported to be strong at a strategic level, although it was acknowledged that ‘silos’ had not yet been broken down. At an operational level, as outlined in Section 6, strong links between Working Wales, local provision and the DWP were reported by interviewees from both the Welsh Government and DWP. It was also reported that trust between YEPF EPCs and JGW+ providers had been built, and the numbers of direct referrals from EPCs to JGW+ providers had increased as a result. Nevertheless, one interviewee from the Welsh Government reported that there needed to be stronger links between LAs, which as noted have tended to focus upon the YEPF (covering young people aged 11 to 18) and employability services for those aged 16 and over, and the YPG (which provides an offer of support for young people aged 16 to 24).

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<sup>131</sup> Although the specific issues and scale may differ today, these are not fundamentally new challenges and, as the 2001 CAMHS strategy, Everybody’s Business identified over twenty years ago, ‘good joint working is the Holy Grail of all attempts to improve delivery of health, education and social services. It is easy to see its vital importance, but it has been very difficult to achieve’ (Welsh Assembly Government, 2001, p. 23).

<sup>132</sup> CfW+ and JGW+ were designed to address deficiencies in young people’s capabilities, such as their ‘know how’ (skills and confidence), and/or barriers linked to access to opportunities, such as situational barriers like childcare. However, they were not designed to support young people with complex mental health-related needs, unlike, for example, the OoWS. Although core YPG programmes’ capacity to work with these groups is reported to have increased, they are still very reliant upon external partners (including both public and voluntary sector services) to provide mental health support for programme participants.

8.46. As a consequence, despite the progress, it was reported by interviewees from the Welsh Government that there could still be silos at a local level, particularly between services working with and for young people, and particularly those aged 16 to 18, and those sometimes (wrongly) perceived as being for older adults (that is to say those aged 25+), like CfW+. This may be illustrative of a broader challenge to collaboration and integration, as there appear to be different sometimes overlapping subsystems which bring together different groups of collaborators around, for example:

- education and support for young people aged 11 to 18 who are, or who are at risk of becoming NEET, centred upon the YEPF at LA level;
- support for young people aged 16 and over, in education or training, provided by education settings and training providers;
- support for young people aged 18 to 19 and over, who are NEET, centred upon Welsh Government provision (such as CfW+) and SPF funded LA provision; and
- employability support for young people aged 18 to 24 claiming benefits centred upon the DWP and JCP.

#### *Young people's involvement*

8.47. In terms of the extent to which young people were involved in the design and development of the YPG (research question 17), this involvement was structured in three main ways:

- direct involvement in discussions, via the Young Person's Advisory Group, facilitated by Children in Wales and established to provide guidance and advice to Welsh Government on the progress being made under the YPG;
- consultation through the National Conversation (Welsh Government 2023d, 2024l); and
- involvement in the different programmes that are either part of or complement the YPG. For example, the consultation on the refresh of the YEPF included 'facilitated focus groups, one-to-one interviews and an online consultation portal' (LWI 2021a, p. 8) and evaluations of programmes like CfW+ and JGW+ involved research with young people.

- 8.48. Moreover, as outlined in Section 7, the YPG was informed by policy officials' institutional knowledge, built through a wide range of programmes and policies that have supported young people's transitions.
- 8.49. As outlined above, both the Young Person's Advisory Group and National Conversation were identified by interviewees from the Welsh Government as having important impacts upon policy and programme development. For example, these activities spotlighted issues like poor transport and provided reassurance that campaigns like Feed Your Positivity were appropriate for their target audiences. Similarly, the stakeholder consultation that informed the reform of the YEPF was identified as valuable. As one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it, some of the feedback from young people was a 'real eye opener', which led them to rethink their position and showed 'the importance of asking young people directly'.
- 8.50. However, looking specifically at the Advisory Group, it is also important to bear in mind that the group of young people aged 16 to 24 who regularly attend the Group is small (reported to be four to six people) and their lived experiences cannot represent those of all young people in Wales. Therefore, as one member of the Group observed, 'it's probably not giving you an accurate picture'. This is not to question the value of the Group – and Welsh Government officials clearly valued it - simply to recognise its limitations and the importance of considering feedback from the Advisory Group alongside other evidence, such as that gathered by the National Conversation and evaluations of programmes that make up the YPG.

#### *Prevention and a long-term focus*

- 8.51. As Sections 5 and 6 illustrate, the YPG and YEPF have a strong focus upon trying to prevent the scarring effects associated with disengagement from employment, education or training. However, one of the criticisms or concerns raised about the YPG has been whether intervening at age 16 is too late. For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, the 'YPG is almost the last chance saloon, but for some young people it's too late'.

8.52. As Section 6 outlines, the YPG's focus upon the national milestones suggests a long-term focus. However, as Sections 5 and 7 illustrate, although youth unemployment or economic inactivity is not a new problem, it could also be argued that the YPG was developed in response to what was a medium-term crisis (the pandemic) rather than long-term trends and challenges. It also took time for long-term planning to identify the change needed to achieve the 2050 milestone to begin. In workshops in 2024, it was evident that stakeholders were not clear on how the milestone would be realised. However, as part of the function of the ESB, work has begun to explore a roadmap towards the national milestone for 'at least 90% of 16 to 24 year olds being in education, employment and training by 2050'.

### **Conclusion**

8.53. As this Section, along with Sections 6 and 7, illustrates, the YPG has shaped the system of post-16 EET support for young people, although in many cases, the YPG helped sustain or expand existing provision, such as JGW+ and CFW+ that made up the system, rather than transforming it. Because the YPG offer, as it is experienced by young people, is delivered by a wide range of programmes, this shaping of the system was not simply driven from the centre in top-down hierarchal ways. Instead, the changes 'emerged' as the result of the decisions of multiple different policy officials in different teams and departments, who interacted with each other through a policy network that the YPG helped form and strengthen. This in turn helped ensure the YPG promoted integration and collaboration (in line with two of the WBFGA's ways of working).

## 9. Young people's experiences of transitions at age 16 and 18

### Introduction

- 9.1. As outlined in Section 4, most young people (around 90% of young people aged 16 to 18 and around 85% of young people aged 19 to 24) make successful transitions and are in employment, education or training. As this section outlines, the post-16 education and training and support systems may not be perfect, but they are working for these young people. This is identified by the evaluations of programmes like JGW+ and CfW+ (Welsh Government 2025e and 2024i) which highlight young people's generally positive experiences of support.
- 9.2. Although as Section 3 outlines, the sample of 81 young people interviewed for this study did not seek to include young people involved in programmes like JGW+ and CfW+ (where evaluation of the programmes suggested experiences were generally very positive<sup>133</sup>), it included young people with a range of support experiences. For example, Emily who was preparing for the transition from school to sixth form commented:

Yeah, I have a guidance counsellor that I can speak to. I have a lot of teachers that I can trust that I can talk to as well. I feel like my school is definitely very supportive when it comes to that type of thing [support with making decisions]. My teachers are all open to, open to questions and things, and my head of year talks about [options after GCSEs] a lot.

- 9.3. Others such as Jack, who identified as neurodivergent, described the importance of more enhanced support from what they called a 'mentor' in supporting their transitions:

I don't [know] at which point I met the [autism] mentor (....) [but] I kept in contact with them from then up until I started college. And then after I

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<sup>133</sup> For example, the Evaluation of JGW+ identifies that 'learners reported a wide range of positive outcomes and benefits as a result of their participation in the JGW+ programme' (Welsh Government, 2025e, p. 95).

started college, you know, they were there to help a lot. So, we had the open day, and then (...) if you're interested in a course, they do like a taster day where you can go and experience a day in that course, and she was there with me. She came to the class with me and sat with me. And so, she was there to support me on the taster day, which I think was very helpful because I spoke to no one but her. Yeah, I [would have] felt very alone without her.

- 9.4. As Adrian's account illustrates, when asked about the impact of student support services in FE, they felt that the impact could be profound:

[The impact was] a lot, because if I didn't have support from them, I would not get counselling, I would not be able to open up more. If I didn't have their support, I wouldn't be able to look for jobs. I wouldn't even know there's an apprenticeship available. I would think my only available option is level three theory, which is not for me. (...) [So, I wouldn't like [have] come on [to the apprenticeship] if I didn't have any of this support. To be honest, I would not even have my boyfriend, my friends or any say, not really anyone. [I would have] my teachers, yeah, but I would be really cold and close minded and lonely and sad because I had to be with my family. And I did open up about [that] in college, and they really helped me with that - counselling and everything, and my friends and my boyfriend, a lot, a lot, a lot.

- 9.5. Nevertheless, despite these successes, as Section 5 outlines, there have been longstanding concerns about the difficulties a minority of young people experience when making post-16 education, training and employment transitions. As Section 5 also outlines, there have been concerns that some young people end up on sub-optimal pathways and may struggle to progress to 'fair work'. As Section 6 outlines, the YPG aims to address this by ensuring that every young person has an offer of support and a simple system they can use to gain access to the range of opportunities available to them.

9.6. In order to explore these challenges further, the remainder of this section discusses the experiences of the young people interviewed for this study and how their accounts of their capabilities, motivations and access to opportunities can help us understand the post-16 education, training or employment transitions they made, with a focus on the challenges and difficulties they faced. Analysis of wider research (outlined in Section 4 and 5) and interviews with young people point to two distinct phases of transition. We focus upon these two phases in this section:

- the transition at age 16 at the end of year 11; and
- the transition at age 18 at the end of year 13 for the majority of young people who continue in school or sixth form.<sup>134</sup>

9.7. Further information on the factors young people identified as shaping their capabilities, motivations and access to opportunities are provided in Appendix C.

### **The transition at 16 and the education lazy river**

9.8. The data (discussed in Section 5 and Appendix A) suggests that over 90% of young people in Wales continue in education in either school sixth form or college. The interviews with young people (discussed in this section) suggest that, for most young people, this transition at 16 is best understood not as the result of an active choice (or agency) on the part of the young person, but more like a default choice. This is unlikely to be a new phenomenon, but it may have been accentuated by the impact of the pandemic upon young people. In particular, many of the young people interviewed highlighted the impact of the pandemic upon their confidence when entering an unfamiliar setting, like a college. For example, as Catherine put it, when describing why she chose to stay on in sixth form:

I think it was more like familiarity. Familiarity of, like, being there and, like, I think a lot of my friends were staying there to do A-levels. I remember not many people in my year did go to college due to the fact, like we'd just

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<sup>134</sup> The focus of this section is upon those young people in mainstream settings. The timing of transitions for young people in special schools (who typically transition at 19) will be different.

gone through COVID. Not many people wanted to leave and like, try and make new friends because we've had them, like for the same, like seven years of school. So not many people wanted to leave. So, I think I just followed the crowd anyway.

- 9.9. We use the metaphor of a “lazy river”<sup>135</sup> to illustrate and explore why this is a default choice. We describe how most young people aged 14 to 16 are carried along with the flow in school, and then at the end of year 11, they enter a gentle whirlpool and are then carried along by the current down one or other of two main channels: sixth form or college, with small numbers taking a WBL channel, entering employment, or exiting education and becoming NEET. The concern here, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed is that the ‘reality is (...) if you get lost from the system, it’s really hard to get you back’. This reflects the ‘scarring’ effects associated with disengagement from employment, education or training, effects which tend to calcify more the longer the period of disengagement (Welsh Government, 2024o).

### **Struggling in school**

The description of most young people aged 14 to 16 being carried along by the flow in school does not mean that it was all smooth sailing. Many of the young people we interviewed described difficult experiences in school, linked to adverse childhood experiences such as bullying or being in care, what they felt were unmet additional learning needs, and/or physical and mental health difficulties. For example, as Max, a care experienced young person, described:

“I wasn’t very good in school anyway. As soon as I hit secondary school I either spent all my time in isolation or in detention. No one would ever give me any support with anything at all. It didn’t help that when I went into year 7, I was in foster care as well, so it was just a bit of a crap time really.”

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<sup>135</sup> This metaphor differs with the language of ‘pathways’ used in the context of the YPG but is used as it provides a clearer illustration of the issues. The metaphor has parallels to Roberts’ (1995) metaphor of how different groups of young people used to catch a ‘train’ together at 16 to, for example, sixth form or work in the pit or steel works.



The disruption to their education caused by the pandemic and policy responses like lockdown was also frequently raised. For example, as Jack described:

“School was really, really bad, I mean, after COVID because it was such a violent change. When school reopened after COVID, everything was very different. And I was really feeling the change, but it didn't appear as if anyone else was. And there was no-one who really understood or wanted to help with how I was feeling. So, I ended up quitting school after COVID and I only went back to sit my GCSEs. And I went the last two years of high school without education.”

As a result, some young people opted out of school through truancy and a handful of those we interviewed were home educated. Those who were home educated, had quite different experiences of education (which we discuss below), compared to the other young people interviewed. However, these were the exceptions, rather than the rule, and most of the young people we interviewed were in school between the ages of 14 and 16 and then continued, or planned to continue, their education in either sixth form or college.

### **The role trusted adults play**

- 9.10. Continuing the metaphor of the lazy river, we liken trusted adults in young people's lives, such as teachers, parents and careers advisors, to “lifeguards” who help direct and make sure that young people in that whirlpool at the end of year 11, get into the right channel and continue their journey; for example, Malik described why he had chosen the sixth form:

The school did play a part in staying, of course, they didn't talk about other colleges. They just said the positives in staying with the sixth form is that, you know, the teachers there, you know how the school's run. You would just be more comfortable in the place you've already stayed up for a certain number of years. So vice versa, if you go to college, you wouldn't know anybody there, and the environment is completely new. You wouldn't maintain as much contact as you would maybe like with people you've already built relationships with.

9.11. Similarly, Dominic explained how a teacher guided him to college:

My teacher and I used to always have conversations about what I was good at. And he suggested that I was definitely a better choice for college than sixth form because I, to be honest, I wasn't a good student in school. It was more of a too strict of a system. I prefer college [because it is] a lot more laid back, and it just makes more sense to me. I can learn in different ways in college than I did in school.

9.12. Several young people talked about their parents' influence over their choices. For example, as Rebekkah described:

My mother helped me a lot and influenced my direction, influenced the direction I wanted to go down. Like (...) she helped me work out that going to college was a lot more lenient, and it would be a lot more helpful for my disability as well with, like, acceptance and all that kind of thing. And I wanted to specifically do one course and one course only. So, I realised that was the right choice for me.

9.13. In some young people's accounts, the role of lifeguards seemed critical. For example, as Lydia explained:

I wanted to go and look at [name omitted] College, last week, I think Thursday right after I was here. And I talked to a lot of the staff there and they were really nice and very like, well we can get you on this programme and have you do this, and you can do this just so you can actually get into college, because I don't have any GCSEs. Yeah, not going to have any. So, they're like no, no we can just put you through this and you can get equivalents and yeah, you'll be all right. And I'm like, oh thank God. I was so like genuinely stressed. And then we also talked to the special needs advisor there as well. And she was really supportive and nice. And she's like, can I have your phone number? And I'm like, okay. So, I've had her texting me repeatedly for probably about the last

few days, yeah, which is comforting that she cares enough that she's spamming my phone.

- 9.14. However, there were also plentiful examples of young people who did not receive any advice or guidance from lifeguards. For example, as Omar explained:

Well, for me in particular at GCSE level, like I said, no careers advisor meeting for me. No teachers that came to talk about my options. But everyone else was; everyone else had people coming to them, but no one came to me. And when I came to them, it was more of a 'oh yeah, we'll get it done'. But it never got done. (...) It made me more aware of like if, if I'm just one of the many students attending this school, who else is a bit confused about their career, and yet they're too afraid or too anxious to go step up and seek that advice? Me, I could have easily just gone out of my way to be like, look, I want some help. I really need this help, I'd like a career meeting, but like I said, I wasn't too fussed because I already had an idea in mind. So, it makes me think to the people who don't have an idea in mind, which there are a lot of people. What happened to them? Who comes to them?

- 9.15. Several young people also described difficulties accessing support. For example, Gwen states:

I find it really difficult because you had, you know, careers advisors never answering your emails or my high school never having it [careers advice]. And it just was just difficult to access anything and get that help.

- 9.16. Another interviewee described how changes in the way Business Wales was funded and supported meant that they [felt they] were now much less accessible, as there were no longer pop up stands in university sites that they could visit, and instead, they had to try to access the service via telephone or email. This reflected the differences we found in young people's preferences

about how to access support and illustrates the point that not all young people preferred online contact.

### **Experiences of college**

- 9.17. For those young people who made the transition to college, it was often reported that this was hard at first but that they had grown as a result. For example, as Georgia explained:

I think it's definitely been tough. I think I'd be lying if I said it was easy. I think I've gotten a lot better at managing work at home than I did when I was in high school, because when I came back from COVID in high school, it was like constantly trying to play a game of catch up. When coming to college it's sort of like a fresh slate, and I don't really have to worry about what happened during COVID because it's not impacting it now, because I haven't missed any of my college lessons because of something.

- 9.18. Similarly, when asked, compared to school, 'how different was the college environment for you?' Rhiannon told us that:

[They] actually treat us like adults. School claimed to treat us like adults, but really, just, like, they would treat us we were in primary [school].

- 9.19. Some young people described how the new setting gave young people new opportunities which enabled them to strengthen their capabilities by learning new skills (including self-confidence), thereby strengthening their ability to navigate the next transition at the end of year 13 more successfully. For example, Catherine commented:

I think definitely, like you were treated a lot more grown up [in college]. Like there knowing no one. So, it was like, you have to learn like new skills of like meeting new people.

- 9.20. Young people's accounts of support in college were mixed. Most, like Adrian's account (discussed in paragraph 9.4), were positive, describing how the support in college had been 'really reliable and really skilled' and therefore 'really helpful' in helping them make the transition from school to college. As outlined in Section 5, this is broadly consistent with other evidence. For example: as Francesca who is in FE provision described it: 'There's a wellbeing person there so if I get overwhelmed or I am having a bad day I can go in her office and talk to her about it'. Nevertheless, there were also those who reported negative experiences; for example, as Eleri explained:

The support really was, like, especially with like college, like if you weren't doing very well you or, like if you were into it. If you were doing really well, they wouldn't give you support. But if you were doing like really like bad as well, they would give you [support]. So, like people who were like all right, but [who] needed that extra push didn't really get that support. And especially I found that with my animal care course, it was just very much that [for me] because I wasn't doing amazing, but I wasn't doing, like, really bad. I didn't really get many catch up, not catch up sessions, check-in sessions with the tutors and that.

- 9.21. One young person also described what they characterised as 'traumatic' experiences of work placements (as part of their college course), where there was little or no support from college staff (as they were on a placement with a business, rather than in college).

### **Support for young people who get into difficulties after making the transition at 16**

- 9.22. As outlined above, although most young people aged 16 to 18 end up in either a college or school sixth form channel, some young people will struggle or get into difficulties. Given the support in education settings and training providers, there is a good chance that a lifeguard will spot this and reach out to help them. If they are lucky, that lifeguard can help them keep going, or even change channels, so that even if they are not a strong swimmer, they can still keep going. For example, as Jack described:

The first day [at college] was difficult because, you know, I'm not, I'm not the biggest fan of change. And, you know, I was going into what felt like a whole new world. And, you know, I didn't know, didn't know anyone. I never really got on with anyone at school. So, I cut them all off after school. So, I was going into college blind. I didn't know anyone, didn't know what I was doing. And I felt a lot more comforted and welcomed because of the support. And without, I don't think I'd have lasted there very long. Yeah, no, I feel as if I received the help on my first year. On the second year, I was coping a bit better, so I stopped accessing the help as often. And now I'm on my third year. I'm struggling to access the help again because I've kind of backed away from it and I'm struggling to actually get back in because I've had it before. So, I'm struggling to access the help again now.

- 9.23. Nevertheless, as the example above also illustrates, even with help, some young people will struggle. For some, even with the lifeguard's help, they may drop out and become NEET. Max, a care experienced young person explained how this happened to him:

I did a year of college but after that I sacked it off and went and did other things.

[Interviewer asks: What didn't suit you with college?]

It suited me, but it was a bit of a difficult time all together because everything was changing all the time with care and other things. I moved away from where I was living to go live with my dad.

### **Swimming with and against the current**

- 9.24. Because they are carried along by the current, young people we interviewed who were happy to go with the flow at the end of year 11 did not need to be strong swimmers. For example, Emily described why she had chosen the sixth form:

I just feel like I'll be more supported [in sixth form] because I know all the teachers. I'll have friends like I have people there that I already know, so I don't have to worry about going to a new place and adapting to that place.

9.25. However, the strength of the current young people found themselves in and the direction (advice and guidance) from lifeguards meant that young people who did not want to accept the default choice, and instead wanted to make an active choice, had to swim against the current and potentially defy the lifeguards. To do this (or perform this behaviour, and make a different transition) they needed:

- the motivation to do this;
- the capability to do this (in our metaphor they needed the strength to swim against the flow and/or the confidence to defy the lifeguards); and
- the opportunity to do this; for example, they needed to have not missed the start of a course (or, in our metaphor, to not discover that the channel they wanted to swim down is now closed).

9.26. As Helen, contemplating the choice between sixth form and college, which they felt would be a better fit for them academically, described:

Going to college, none of my close friends are going to college so I, you know, I wouldn't be moving up with them, they'd be staying in sixth form. (...) So, it's a bit scary, I wouldn't know anyone at college, and I would be moving up alone.

9.27. In contrast, the choice was easier for those who went to college with friends. For example, as Josh described it: 'Because it's when you have friends, it's not like a new environment' and as another young person, Samir put it:

The transition from me going from school to college is not that hard because most of my college, most people from my college are from the school I used to go to nice. So, I still got friends.

- 9.28. Only a handful of the young people we interviewed had swum against the current and/or defied the advice of lifeguards. More had considered it, but as Malik's account illustrates, had not felt capable and/or motivated enough to do so at the time:

So, regarding apprenticeships, of course he [a careers advisor] did make the option available to us. However, I know a lot of people, including myself, maybe at the time that believed it was quite a high barrier to entry, type of route. So mentally you'd think there's no point of even trying because you'd just be wasting your time and effort.

- 9.29. As a result, sometimes young people looked back with regret at the channels not taken. For example, Tyler explained:

At the time I didn't really think I could go into employment, so I just picked out the first course that caught my eye.

[Interviewer asks, do you think looking back now if you knew you could have gone straight into employment would you have done that instead of going to college?]

Yeah, 100%.

### **Getting in the wrong channel**

- 9.30. As outlined above, some young people felt they had taken the wrong channel at 16, or that things had not worked out as they expected and were now anxious and unsure about what to do next. For example, as Josh explained:

I don't, I don't know what to do, really. I only joined the course because I knew I could get the placement. So now I'm without placement. I don't know whether I'll stay on the course or not. Yeah, but if I don't, I won't have any income again, which isn't great because I'm struggling for money at the moment. And, you know, they've left me in a bad place.



### **Drifting out of education**

- 9.31. As outlined above, while most young people were carried along by the current to sixth form or college, small numbers drifted out the main currents and exited education at the end of year 11. Ffion states:

I wasn't like naughty in school, but because I didn't enjoy school, I thought I'd be the exact same in college. So, I thought I'd rather just... And like nothing in college interested me apart from like, obviously, animal care. So, I was like, I don't really want to start doing something in college when it don't interest me one bit for like then the outcome to be like, I don't want to do this anyway. Yeah, like I wanted to just start work, earn a bit of money for myself and then see where that path leads me. Like, obviously with animal care, I have tried applying, or I also applied with [name of youth worker omitted], for nanny as well. So, I have tried doing like animal care, but with school I felt like we had a Careers Wales person in school as well, and she was like helping us apply for college, blah blah blah. And like, she spoke to us a few times about it, but it was just mainly about like your options for college, what you can do. And I told her, like, I don't think I'm going to like, apply for it because it's just nothing interested me.

- 9.32. Disengaging from school appeared to increase the risks that young people became lost and adrift. For example, as Jack described:

We spoke to someone once around a month or two before the GCSEs started from Careers Wales. But up to that, I didn't even know it existed. So, I had no plan. I had no idea what I was doing. I wasn't going to school. Yeah, I was just completely lost, really.

- 9.33. Some of the young people interviewed who had disengaged from education at 16 were drawn back into education with (what appeared to be) the support of the YEPF. For example, as Megan explained:

So, I think I was, I think when I came out of the school system, I think my name, kind of, I just kind of went into some records. So, so they must

have, yeah, had access to my details in that way, and, I think they do support from 16 to 25, so, yeah, they, yeah, they kind of came at my door. I think I was, how old was I? 17, 18, I think. So, yeah. So, they asked, you know, we can provide support if there's anything you want, anything you need. And I was very tempted to say no. You know, I'd kind of been a bit of a, a homebody, someone who didn't really leave much. That's a bit sad, actually. So, I was very tempted to say no, but then I was like, there's something in me that's like, I'm kind of sick of this, I want to do something. So, I said, yeah. And we started kind of having like weekly, like meetups at the local library, me and my worker. And sometimes we go for little walks, just having a chat about things like mental health, things like aspirations. We did some, like, paperwork, like paperwork, but, like, maybe talking about, like, my goals, kind of where I'm at in different avenues, like mental health, [how] you're doing mental health wise, how are you doing education wise, things like that. And I remember he told me a lot about the five ways to wellbeing. So, that would be, yeah. So that was, that was quite, quite good, actually. And, he also like, always kind of offered if they were like doing like activities and stuff. We did some rock climbing. We did this little, like, art project thing. So, I managed to meet a couple of people, as well. And it was nice to be able to just, have something to like, do and try different things out. Yeah, I think we did cycling as well. That was fun. Mountain biking. So, yeah, that was, it was really nice support. And he helped me contact the college. Helped me, like, course search. So, he looked around for what was available at the local college and what kind of, how I could get my GCSEs. Yeah. Yeah, he did a lot of support for me. Yeah, it was, it was very good, actually.

9.34. Megan goes on to explain:

I actually got a knock at the door from Youth Gwynedd. So that's like an organisation, you know, in my county that, kind of checks in on people, young people that may be struggling with education, out of education, those kinds of things. So, I was getting a bit of support from them, you know, having check-ins, maybe going out on little day trips and stuff. And I

kind of mentioned how, you know, I was home-schooled, and I never actually did end up getting any like qualifications or GCSEs. So, I mentioned that I kind of at least wanted to get my English and maths. And my worker at the time suggested going to college because where I live, we don't have any sixth form in schools. You have to go to college for any 16 plus education. So, he recommended doing a year in college. So, I ended up doing a course, a pre-vocational course. It was quite a simple one. They kind of let you try different, different subjects out. Level one. And yeah, I used that kind of to readjust myself getting back into education. Kind of readjusting to, you know, being more active after being sick for so long. And then I got my English and Maths GCSEs. So, I did a year of that. And then after that I, I wanted to study the thing that I do, which is music. So, I've ended up doing a level three course, for the last couple of years. So, yeah, I moved from that to what I'm doing now, which is music.

### **Young people with caring responsibilities**

It is estimated that around one in five young people have caring responsibilities\* and this was highlighted as a risk factor associated with being NEET, particularly for young mothers, in many of the studies included in the [Rapid Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education, or training](#). Some young people aged 16 to 25 also care for a friend or family member who has an illness, disability, a mental health issue or an addiction.

Research identifies that young carers have an elevated risk of poor outcomes, including being NEET and experiencing mental health issues themselves. As a result, they may need extra support to access and progress in post-16 employment, education or training (Carers Trust, 2024; Carers Trust and NIACE, 2015; UCAS, 2024). Unfortunately, as outlined in Section 3, young people with caring responsibilities were one of the groups under-represented in our sample, and therefore their distinctive experiences of making transitions and seeking support may also be under-represented.

As outlined in Section 4, there has been a sustained decline in the number of young women who are economically inactive due to caring responsibilities. Research suggests that the likelihood of being a young mother intersects with education levels. Young women aged 16 to 24 with lower levels of education, are more likely to start a family at a younger age, than young women aged 16 to 24 with higher levels of education. Therefore, young women aged 16 to 24 with lower levels of education, are more likely to be economically inactive for a period of time while they care for young children, compared to young women aged 16 to 24 with higher levels of education (Holmes et al., 2021). Analysis of APS and LFS data suggests that a majority of economically inactive parents (of all ages) do not want to work. However, for those who want to re-engage with EET, childcare responsibilities can hold them back and support to help them identify how to arrange informal and/or formal (paid) childcare can help them re-engage (Welsh Government, 2023g).

\* This is based upon National Survey for Wales data covering the period April 2019 to March 2020, discussed in Welsh Government (2024o).

### **Experiences of home education**

- 9.35. Those young people we spoke to who were home educated appeared to be at particular at risk of exiting education at 16. They were outside the main channels (discussed above), and, as Megan described it, trying to get back into the channel most young people were in (school or college) could be very difficult:

I was homeschooled throughout my secondary school years and, at the time, so when I was about 16, which is when most people, you know, you know, finish school, go into further education, I'd gotten quite, gotten quite sick. So, I didn't really do anything at that that time. So, yeah, about two years, like, very, very sick. And I wasn't quite sure what to do. I didn't really know that much about further education, to be honest, as well. I live in quite a rural area, so, you know, information is a bit sparse, especially if you're not in the school system.

9.36. She goes on to say:

I was like, scouring the internet, like, what do I do? I was like looking at, like, parent forums, like on homeschooling and how did they get their exams? And it was like, college never like popped up for some reason. I don't know if I was just bad at searching, but yeah, I kind of wish there was, because when you're at home, like, like I was and, to be honest, my parents aren't the most up-to-date on things, nor are they the most... I think when I got taken out of school, it was like I was a very studious child. So, it was like, yeah, just leave this one to do its own thing. Yeah, I was kind of left on my own accord and, you know, not, not a great idea. Yeah. And I've got, like, four younger siblings. So, they're like too busy trying to, like, look after them. So, you know, I was kind of just left to my own devices, really. So, it was like, I don't know how the world works. I don't know how anything works. How do I do anything? So yeah, I can't. Yeah, I kind of maybe. Maybe if we had, like, letters or something through the door. I don't know, but, you know, people aren't really supposed to go out of education and not know anything. So, you know, you know, it's not really how this area is built. You know, people go to school, they go to college, and you kind of know about it. But for someone like me who just kind of got pulled out of all of it, it's like, oh, well, I can't, I don't really have a way of finding things.

### **Transitions at the end of year 13**

9.37. At the end of year 13, the metaphorical current starts to speed, and young people find themselves in a much faster whirlpool, with many more exits or channels they can take. For some, the current (or flow) will still carry them on, and they may, for example, go to university, along with their friends, in effect as the default option. However, others will get caught in the whirlpool and be forced to make an active choice. As before, to make an active choice, they need:

- the motivation;
- the capability, the strength to swim against the flow and escape the whirlpool; and

- the opportunity, for example, they might need to be able, and have the means, to travel (or in our metaphor, to be able to get to the channel they want to swim down).

9.38. Because the current is both stronger and more unpredictable at this stage of the river (in the sense that it is no longer carrying most young people to either sixth form or college), young people need to exercise more agency at this point. In our metaphor they now need to be stronger swimmers, as they cannot rely upon being carried along by the current. Therefore, any factors that constrain their capabilities, such as those relating to mental health issues, poor literacy and numeracy skills, or ALN, will have a bigger impact than they did before. For example, as Eleri described:

During the school years, I struggled a lot with my mental health, and so that had a major impact on my GCSEs, which I then struggled to get qualification and grades. I needed to progress, really. I left school then after year 11, and my parents basically told me to go to college to try and get a trade behind me or just to do something I wanted. So, I started off, going to [name of college omitted] and doing animal care because I wanted to become a veterinary nurse. Yeah. But then I kind of, like, talked myself out of it, thinking I wouldn't be good enough to progress at that. So, then I went and got beauty therapy behind me and nails. And then I thought a lot about it, and I was like, I'm going to go to university, try and get qualifications for a career. And I got in on a policing course. I dropped out then because I struggled a lot with my mental health.

### **The role of lifeguards in supporting those aged 19 to 24**

9.39. As adults, those aged 19 to 24 will generally be expected to exercise more independence and agency. Inevitably, some young people will struggle at this point, to make the transition from education or training to employment because they:

- struggle to choose which channel to take;
- choose, but find themselves in the wrong channel and struggle to swim against the current; and/or
- drift out of education, employment or training and become NEET.

9.40. As outlined in Section 5, there are lifeguards to help those who get into difficulties, such as student support services and support services like JGW+, and the YPG aims to strengthen this network of support.

9.41. Some young interviewed for this study people welcomed active offers of support. For example, as Daniel explained:

A great thing about university when it comes to like that stage, you don't even need to look for support. They'll come to you providing you support without you even needing to go to them. Yeah. When it comes to like employability and such, like just before you graduate, they'll email you or they'll ask. They'll ask you to come for a meeting essentially to see if you would like to find a job or if you're okay with finding a job yourself.

9.42. However, with young people aged 19 and over, there is generally more expectation that the young people will actively ask for help if they need it, which some young people struggle to do. For example, as Omar explained:

I don't think this independence is better because there's a lot of people who hate the idea of going to someone for help. And that's more than ..., that's fairly reasonable. You know, people have their own anxieties and all sorts, but it's not fair to people who are in that type of position where they

feel pressured to ask for help. (...) It would work a lot better if the teachers were to come out of their way to check up on their students and be like, look, you know, why don't we schedule a meeting? We could have a little talk, discussion as adults, not as a student to teacher, but as adults. And we could talk about your future and your time here, you know.

- 9.43. Sian described how because they had initially been reluctant to disclose their difficulties, they had not been supported – and it was only when they did so, that they got the support they needed to succeed. As they described it:

The college were really good when they found out, because I tried to hide my issues in the beginning because I was like, 'Oh, it's nothing'. And I've since learned that I am very good at putting, 'Oh, it's fine' when actually the world is on fire, and it got to the point where I couldn't hide it anymore and it became very clear, and the uni and the college were great. (...) They were really supportive (...) [and] I got learning support, if, for example, if I couldn't be there because I had a medical appointment, they were flexible around that, and the college were great. When I was open with them, the university is a different one because [at] uni I qualify for disabled students allowance, so that eases a lot of the things for me. However, in the uni you get as much support as you need, but you have to advocate for it. You can't just lie there and expect them to give it you.<sup>136</sup>

### *Experiences of support*

- 9.44. Most young people taking up post-16 employment support provided as part of the YPG were positive about it (as we outlined below, experiences of DWP provision were more mixed). For example, Ffion, described support through the YEPP and then CfW+:

I started with [name of Community Employability Mentor omitted], then Communities for Work[+]. Yeah. We've done a teaching course (...) [but] I

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<sup>136</sup> They explained this was because the responsibility for, and also the costs associated with applying for, disability student allowances rested with the young person not the university.



went to a school for one day, and then I realized that I can't actually rely on this job because it was only (...) [a zero hours contract]. They told me when they need me. Yeah, they could not need me for a whole week and then I get nothing for the whole week. (...) So, then we looked for something else and we looked into the NHS. I worked in the NHS for 12 weeks not getting paid, just experience. And then like after it, I was like, it's just, it's not for me because I don't know, it was like mainly like picking up the phone, answering, taking appointments. And I don't feel like I had the confidence for that, even though I know I could have done it... Yeah, but then we stopped that and then I went to see [name of Community Employability Mentor omitted]. We applied for like, the Tesco's, Home Bargains, Iceland. And then that's when I got the job, then two weeks later in Home Bargains and that's where I am now.

9.45. As Ffion put it, her Community Employability Mentor

'Really helped me (...) and I don't think I'd be where I am now without [name of Community Employability Mentor omitted]. We done my CV. Me and [Community Employability Mentor] together. I went up to [employment centre] about 4 or 5 times, applying for different jobs to make sure I was doing the application right. It made me feel good because I knew I had someone I could call and be there. (...) Because I used to hate, like, interviews, I just used to hate, like, the roll up [period of time before an interview] to the job. I just used to hate all that. But I felt fine talking to [Community Employability Mentor] about it'.

9.46. This positivity about the support offered, is consistent with the feedback from young people gathered through evaluations of programmes like JGW+ and CfW+ (see, for example, Welsh Government 2025e, 2024i). Nevertheless, as the evaluations of these programmes also identify, this is no guarantee that young people could re-engage. For example, as Steven put it, 'It's good support but it's [the problem is] the area that I live in, because there's no jobs available'.

### *Experiences of those not taking up support*

- 9.47. Perhaps the most fundamental challenge, as we discuss below, was that some young people did not know who to go to for support, while others were fearful or mistrustful of support services. As a result, some drifted out of education, employment or training and went home, retiring to their bedrooms (and becoming NEET). Although they might be supported financially by their parents, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, 'at some point they will need to join the world of work – and the older they get, the harder it will become'.

### *Informational barriers*

- 9.48. For some young people, not knowing what support was available (such as that offered by Working Wales) and/or how to access it appeared to be their main barrier. As Gwen described:

I reckon there should be, I don't know if there's, just like career advisors just out there, but it would be nice. Just like even for like young adults, to have that career advisor, even if you're not in uni or college or school, just be nice to be able to reach out for some, reach out to someone or something, even if you're working. Because like, I'm 20 and I really don't know what I want to be when I'm older.

### *Mistrust, stigma and fear*

- 9.49. Mistrust of services was a key barrier for some young people. For example, when asked, 'Do you know where you would start in reaching out for that support?' Lydia replied, 'probably like CAMHS or something, yeah. And I am in CAMHS but not regularly and not mental health because I don't trust them'.
- 9.50. Mistrust was therefore a theme in relation to mental health support and undermined some young people's confidence in reaching out for help. For example, as Jessica who had experienced mental health issues described:

I had a really hard time...

[Interviewer responds, 'And were you able to access help with that at all?']

I was, I was offered to see a counsellor but, it didn't really, I didn't feel like I could trust her.

- 9.51. When asked, 'What would improve access to support?' another young person, Sophie, who had also experienced mental health issues, suggested: 'Make it more personal is I think that would really improve it because it just seems quite scary'. Similarly, albeit in a starker way, Lauren explained that:

I'm always very unconfident anyway. Like last week, last week on Thursday when I was coming here, which I don't usually do, so they made me a mentor [supporting others] because I'm very talkative. I was [profanity for extremely anxious omitted], even though I've been here consistently for probably about a year now. Yeah. Still wanted to vomit like. It's, it's like anything changes I want to throw up. Yeah. I don't know if I need to go to like therapy or something. I need like mental health support before I go anywhere.

- 9.52. As Sian described, despite being disabled, and being entitled to support, she was reluctant to approach the Job Centre for help, as 'certain members of my family (...) always said that only people that are bone idle and don't care or don't want to work go to the job centre'. She explained that it was only when her mental health issues worsened that she finally approached the Job Centre and was then signed up to the Work and Health programme, which then provided her with financial help and support.

- 9.53. Hence, a perceived stigma about seeking help, was not limited to those young people who disclosed mental health difficulties. Nor did the reluctance to seek support appear only driven by perceptions of the stigma that could be associated with claiming welfare benefits. For example, Sophie described how her perception of JCP, which appeared to be shaped by both societal discourses and her own experiences, undermined her motivation to access support:

Well, I've not really had much of an experience with it, but, coming from the people around me who have spoken about it, it seems very daunting to try and find someone. Yeah. Especially, like going to the job centre. I've always been really, really nervous whenever I've just accompanied someone there. It's always just been really daunting. Because it's very, it just seems very paperwork and very, very businessy rather than, we're here and we want to help you. It seems a lot more just like someone's just doing their job. They're just listening to you because they have to, not because they want to.

- 9.54. Sophie's account illustrates the importance, outlined in Section 4, of understanding capabilities such as 'self-confidence' in context and the ways in which there can be organisational and perceptual barriers to accessing services, especially for some groups such as women from working-class backgrounds: she felt intimidated by the business-type environment of the Job Centre, which she was not familiar with nor comfortable in.

### **The experiences of neurodivergent young people**

- 9.55. Some of the young people we interviewed identified as neurodivergent. The numbers of young people diagnosed with neurodevelopmental conditions (NDCs) such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism has been increasing over the last ten to fifteen years (Welsh Government, 2022i, 2019d). These NDCs can limit people's social and communication skills, and may, for example, mean they find it more difficult to navigate change and transitions. This is likely to contribute to the high rates of unemployment amongst autistic adults, which is amongst the highest of all disabled groups (UK Government, 2024b). Although 'reasonable adjustments' may help reduce the impact of these impairments (and the level of disability experienced), autistic adults and parents and carers frequently express little confidence that they will be made (Welsh Government, forthcoming). This lack of help and/or reasonable adjustments was also reported by some of the neurodivergent young people we spoke to. For example, when talking about trying to find support within a work placement for his college course, Jack states:

I definitely think someone more understanding [would help me], because I do feel as if, you know, a lot of the things I'm saying fall upon deaf ears. So, I'll say I need this support. And then, like, I'll go on and then [the college] they'll just ignore that because they can't physically do anything themselves. It just disappears.

- 9.56. NDCs often co-occur with mental health issues and/or learning disabilities (Welsh Government, 2022i), compounding the difficulties these young people may face by further constraining their capability to make transitions. This is illustrated by Tyler's account: 'I got a mental disability, I'm [on] the ASD spectrum and I have been diagnosed with depression and anxiety, that has stopped me from applying to some jobs'.

- 9.57. Some young people were in settings where reasonable adjustments were being made, but leaving supportive settings could be daunting. As one neurodivergent young person, Lauren described:

I've got currently a dual diagnosis of ADHD and autism, and they fight each other so much, it's so hard to actually get, like, to a point where I feel like I can learn and then get the resources up, and it takes a lot more out of me than I expected it to. But I'm doing better than I was in school. And then obviously I come to the [name of the third sector learning programme omitted], which was for, for socialisation and, like, poor confidence, pretty much. Yeah. So, I, I wasn't really given a choice, but I was more it was more like, well, you're going to go here and it's going to help, hopefully. And if it doesn't, you can just leave. And it did. And I liked it too much. And now I can't leave.

- 9.58. Similarly, as Sian, another neurodivergent young person explained: 'There was support for that sort of stuff [support for neurodivergent people in university], but as soon as your course ends, it [the support] ends'.

### **Experiences of young people looking for employment**

- 9.59. While most of the young people aged 16 to 18 were focused upon education or training, amongst those aged 19 and over, many more were looking for employment. The experiences of those who found work are discussed below, but for most, it was seen as difficult, particularly for those dependent upon public transport. For example, as Steven and Max explained:

I can't get any jobs out of this town because I have got no transport to get there, and public transport would be too expensive for me every day.

You can get a bus, but it won't get you where you want to go. Trains stop at a certain time, buses stop at a certain time. (...) I think if you don't have a car, you're not going to get around here.

- 9.60. Other young people we interviewed focused upon the weakness of local labour markets as the key barrier. For example, as Lauren explained when the interviewer asked if there were 'any options for employment more locally around here':

Depends. Do you want to work at night shift at Mackies? [McDonalds] I personally don't (...). It's very hard to find a job around here. Like if, if I was going back to where I used to live, like [name of place omitted], then you have, like, so many jobs. But here, because it's bit by bit to another bit, it's got little jobs.

- 9.61. Similarly, Max a young person living in a rural area explained:

It's going to sound really bad but a lot of the young lads who want to get into farming and stuff like that, first of all if you're not born into a farm or you haven't got multimillions there's no way to realistically start farming. You don't want to say that to a kid. But also, a lot of the farmers around here, if you haven't got a Welsh accent or you're not Welsh they don't want you. So there needs to be more places like [omitted third sector organisation] or something like that, that can get young people into

farming, give them that experience. Because you get a hell of a lot of young lads from the Midlands or Shrewsbury and no one wants them.

- 9.62. Sian, a neurodivergent young person described her experience of what appeared to be unlawful discrimination:

If I declare that I have a disability so I can get extra time in the assessments for some of the jobs I was going for. I get discriminated against because of, but if I don't declare them then I can't perform necessarily to the best of my ability, and it was this catch 22 that we fell into. I'm very sad to say even some branches of [public sector organisation] that I applied for, when I asked for feedback, I'd got really quite far in the recruitment process, and then I got told no. And I really, I pushed for them to give me this in writing, [and] the actual line was "we'd rather have a non-disabled person than you".

- 9.63. In addition, as outlined above, a number of young people felt their mental health issues were holding them back. These challenges left some young people feeling despondent and demotivated, but others were more confident in their capabilities, despite the challenges such as the limited opportunities that confronted them. This meant that they were more highly motivated. For example, as Omar explained:

You just have to go looking for it. Yeah, although I love the idea of instead of us looking for it, it comes to us, that's not how the world works, unfortunately. But it's sort of a comfort that even though you may be at a really, really disadvantaged point in your life, there are still ways to pull through. And with enough grit and with enough work ethic, you can pull through.

### **Experiences of employment**

- 9.64. Many young people who had made a transition into employment contrasted their experiences of employment with education or training (which for them, was a recent experience). For example, Malik described:

When you move from an environment, an environment like a school to, a very, very much more professional environment as a workplace, you meet a lot of different people and they may not, obviously they, they won't act as teachers to you. You are an employee of that workplace, and it's a completely different relationship.

And as Gwen described:

[With] university, you don't have to go to the lectures. The lecturers don't really care if you're there or not. But with work, if you don't show up, you're fired. So yeah, you've got to go.

- 9.65. The experiences of young people who had made a transition into employment were also mixed; some were very positive, others less so. This reflects questions about how effective the YPG has been in advancing the Welsh Government's Fair Work strategy, discussed in Section 7. For example, as Ffion explained:

[I] started working in McDonald's straight after school as soon as I left. And then I worked there for a year, and I, like, got to the point where I was really not myself and I was so mentally rundown. I had to go on the sick for about for about two months because I had like cold sores on my all over my mouth and everything. I just really ruined myself.

- 9.66. Nevertheless, as noted in Section 7, the Welsh Government has limited power in relation to fair work, in terms of directing businesses to change their practice and, instead, is more reliant upon promotion, encouragement and awareness-raising.
- 9.67. Some young people also reflected on feeling unprepared for the transition to employment and independent life. For example, as one young person explained, in school 'they called it, PAL lessons: Preparation for Adult Life. I still argue I should get a refund for those hours because they were useless'.

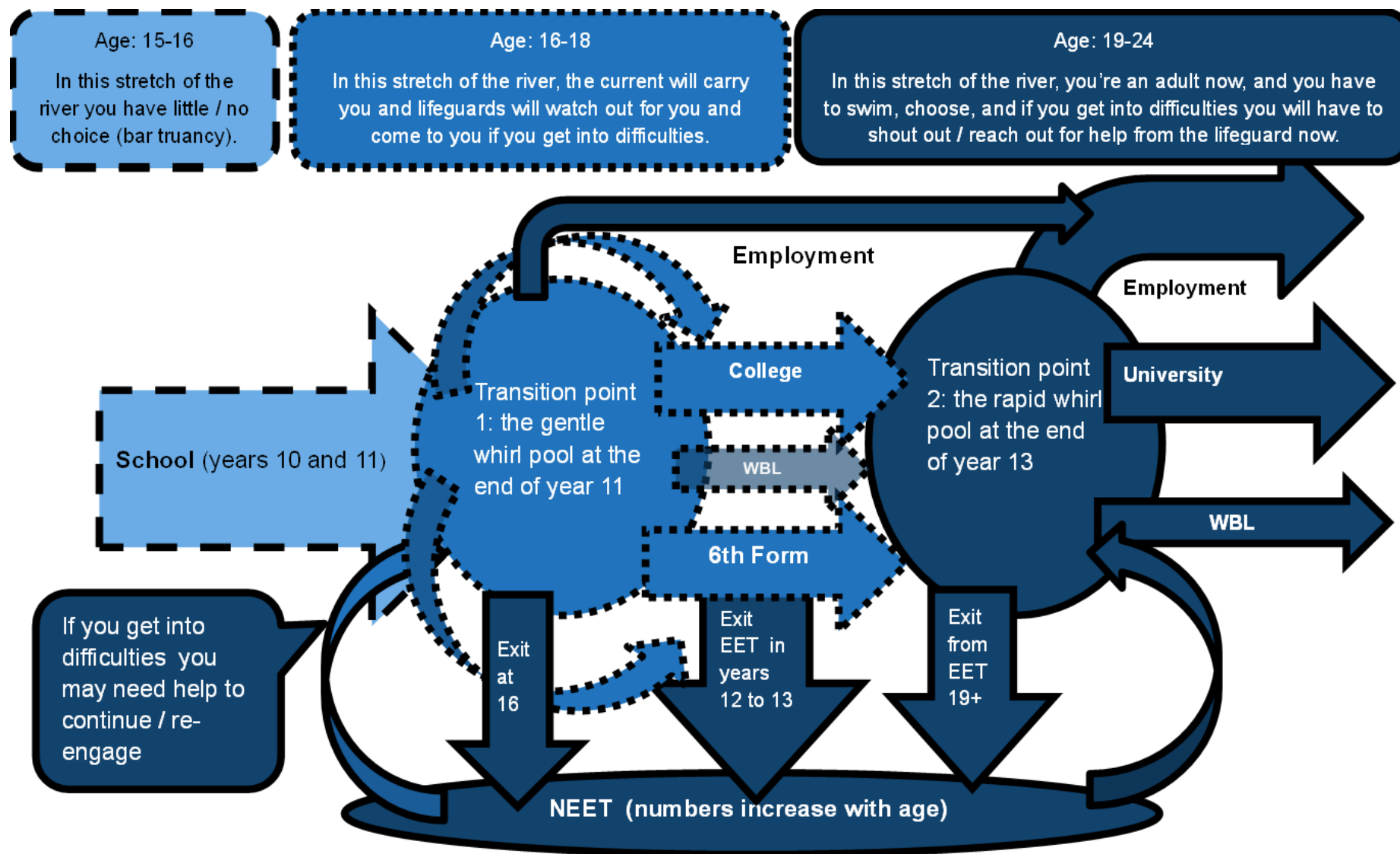


As Section 7 outlines, this concern, that too many young people were not 'work ready', was shared by many of the policy makers and practitioners delivering the YPG or YEPF, who contributed to this evaluation through interviews or workshops.

### **Visualising the post- 16 river**

- 9.68. This metaphorical journey down the post-16 river is presented in Figure 9.1. In the figure, the increasing speed and strength of the current, which increases the risk that young people get into difficulties, is represented by the darkening of the colour blue. The size of arrows aims to roughly suggest the proportions making different types of transitions at each stage, but are not drawn to scale. Further details on the proportion of young people making different types of transitions at 16 and 18 are outlined in Section 4.

**Figure 9.1. The post-16 river course**



### **Young people's experiences and the COM-B model**

- 9.69. As this section outlines, we use the metaphor of young people initially drifting down the 'lazy river' before encountering more rapid waters and channels, which requires them to exercise greater agency, to illustrate the COM-B model. As the current in our metaphorical river gets stronger and divides into different channels, young people need the capability to swim against the current and the opportunity and motivation to choose between different channels. The metaphor of lifeguards also illustrates the relational nature of capabilities, discussed in Section 4, by showing how young people, who may struggle to swim against the current on their own, due to constrained capabilities, can be supported, so they can successfully navigate the rapids and choose a channel that enables them to progress to the next stage.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Although, it should also be noted that the lifeguard metaphor may be misleading, in that it may obscure the time needed for relationships to develop. As Section 9 outlines, relationships can take time to develop, and time may be needed to encourage young people to reach out for support from trusted adults. It can also take time for the support and, where appropriate, challenge, trusted adults offer to be accepted by young people.

## 10. Discussion: an offer of support for all young people?

10.1. As Section 1 outlines, one of the two stated aims of the YPG is ‘to provide 16 to 24 year-olds in Wales with support to gain a place in education or training, or support to get into work or self-employment’ (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 3). As outlined in Section 5 and Appendix A, most young people (around 90% of young people aged 16 to 18 and around 85% of young people aged 19 to 24) make successful transitions and are in employment, education or training. Moreover:

- not all young people will need or want support; and
- evaluations of programmes such as JGW+ (Welsh Government, 2025e) and CfW and CfW+ (Welsh Government, 2024i) identify that large numbers of young people have taken up support, and that most young people who do so, very much value the support they get.

10.2. Nevertheless, as Section 7 outlines, only a minority of young people, particularly those aged 19 to 24, appear to be taking up the offer of support from the YPG. Although not directly comparable, data discussed in Appendices A and B also suggests while large numbers of young people are accessing different types of support that make up the YPG (see Appendix B), the numbers are still lower than the estimates of the numbers of young people who are NEET in Wales (see Appendix A).<sup>138</sup> Given the scarring effects associated with youth unemployment discussed in Section 6, the numbers of young people aged 19 to 24 who are NEET is a key concern. The YPG aimed to address this by increasing access to EET support and increasing the numbers of young people taking up this support.

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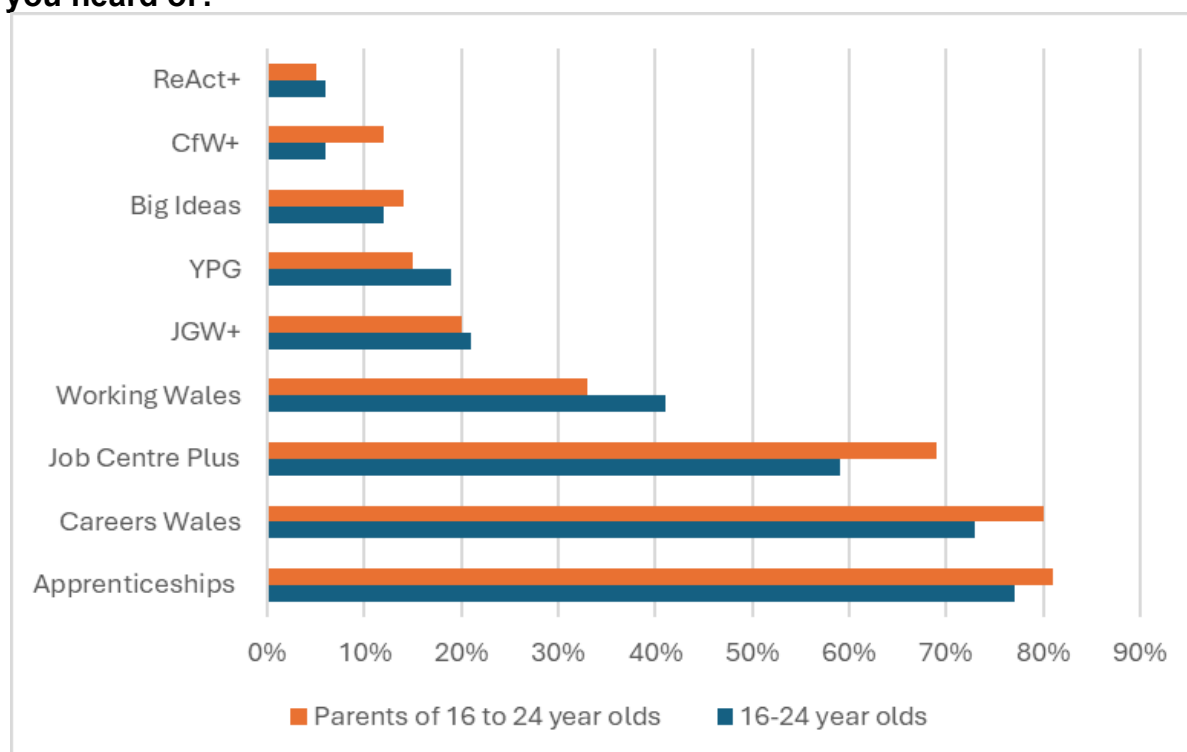
<sup>138</sup> The comparison between the number of young people, who are NEET and numbers of young people who are supported by programmes, is often made (see e.g. Welsh Government 2025e) but is not necessarily straightforward. Although most young people who are NEET who engage with post-16 EET programmes would still be recorded as unemployed (if they were actively seeking work), small numbers who were, for example, doing paid work as part of the Employment strand of JGW+ would be counted as employed in labour market statistics.

10.3. In part this gap between the numbers of young people who are NEET and the numbers of young people who are taking up support appears to be linked to low levels of awareness, despite campaigns like Feed Your Positivity. For example, as Figure 10.1 shows, data from the National Conversation Omnibus survey<sup>139</sup> indicates that in 2023, around two in five young people they surveyed had heard of Working Wales. This is important because, as outlined in Section 6, Working Wales was envisaged as the ‘gateway’ to the YPG. Although Working Wales itself was not a new programme (as outlined in Section 6, it was established in 2019), an informant from Careers Wales observed that the Feed Your Positivity marketing campaign, discussed in Section 7, was a new one, and it was therefore likely that it would take time for awareness of the Working Wales’ role as the gateway to the YPG to build amongst young people. Awareness of the other core programmes that comprise the YPG, such as JGW+ and CfW+, was lower still, and as Section 9 outlines, there are different levels of understanding and awareness of support among young people.

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<sup>139</sup> ‘The Wales Omnibus is designed to be representative of the adult population resident in Wales aged 16 and over and consists of a sample of 1000 respondents. Questions for the YPG National Conversation report were asked as part of the Omnibus in both January 2023 and June 2023 and answered by 154 and 107 individuals aged 16 to 24 years at each data collection point respectively. For the June 2023 wave, ‘some questions were also answered by 160 parents of 16 to 24 year-olds’ (Welsh Government, 2024l, p. 5).

**Figure 10.1. National Conversation Omnibus Survey 2023 responses to the question ‘and which if any of the following programmes/ interventions that can help support young people with their education, training or employment have you heard of?’**

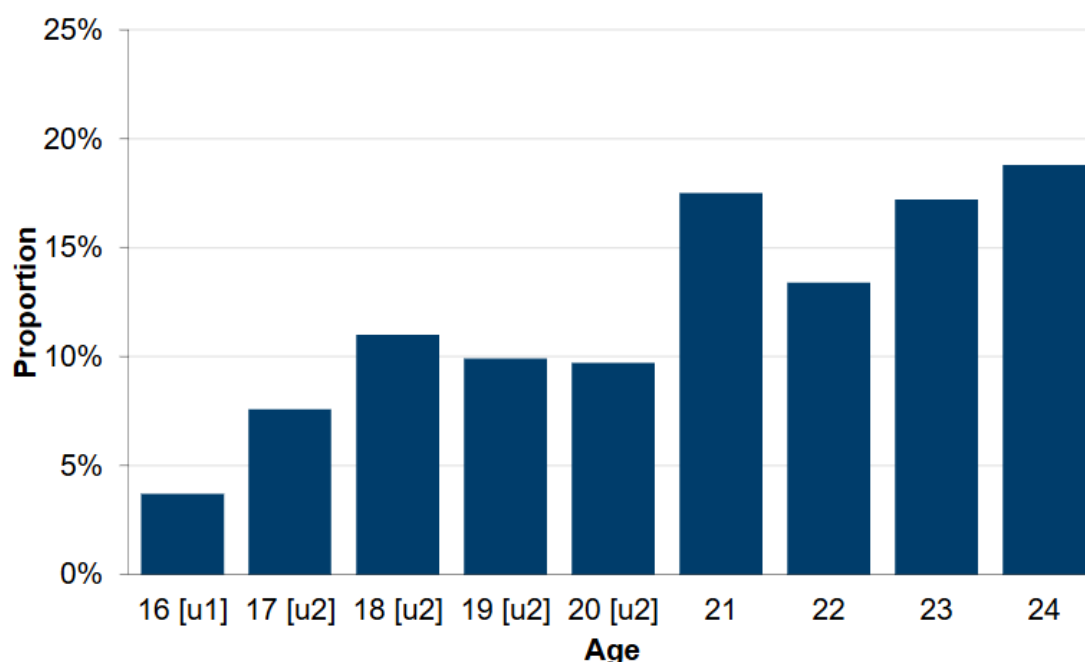


Source: [Welsh Government, 2023a](#)

#### *Engaging young people aged 19 to 24*

- 10.4. As outlined in Section 7, while the YEPF is judged to have been relatively effective at identifying and reaching young people aged 16 to 18 who have disengaged or who are at risk of disengaging, there is much less confidence that this is happening for those aged 19 to 24. This concern is broadly consistent with the increases in the numbers of young people who are NEET as they get older, illustrated by Figure 10.2, which shows the estimated numbers of young people who are NEET by age group.

**Figure 10.2. Young people not in education, employment or training in Wales by age, three-year period ending September 2024**



Source: [Young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\): October 2023 to September 2024 \(Statistics, Document\), Welsh Government](#)

‘Note [u1]: The data item for those aged 16 is based on between 10 and 24 responses and is categorised as being of low quality’ (Welsh Government, 2024q, p. 7).

‘Note [u2]: The data items for those aged 17, 18, 19 and 20 are based on between 25 and 39 responses and is categorised as being of limited quality’ (Welsh Government, 2024q, p. 8).

10.5. As outlined in Section 7, many young people aged 18 to 24 who are NEET are not claiming benefits and are therefore neither receiving support nor being monitored by the DWP. Improvements in data sharing have been reported including, for example, those enabled by the DWP and Welsh Government partnership which delivered CfW (Welsh Government, 2023b) and by the close working relationship between Careers Wales and Working Wales and the DWP, discussed in Section 8. In addition, the Welsh Government and Careers Wales have invested in ‘a data hub prototype’ to make better use of

tertiary education and employment data and to help inform evaluations of policy and programmes to support young people (Huxley, 2024).

- 10.6. Nevertheless, interviewees from the Welsh Government and from other programmes that make up the YPG reported that information sharing between the DWP and other support services has often been difficult. An informant from Careers Wales also reported that ‘new legislation may also be needed to allow for some of this data to be shared’. These challenges have made identifying young people aged 19 to 24 who have disengaged from EET more difficult. Nevertheless, as many young people who are NEET are not engaging with JCP either, addressing data sharing between the DWP and Careers Wales, would not necessarily be a panacea to the problems associated with identifying young people aged 19 to 24 who are NEET.

#### *The YEPF and YPG approaches*

- 10.7. As Section 6 outlines, despite sharing similar goals, the YEPF and YPG represent quite different models and approaches. For example, the YEPF in effect operates an ‘opt out’ model, with active outreach and an offer of support that young people have to decline. In contrast, the YPG is much more of an ‘opt in’ model, that requires young people to seek support.<sup>140</sup>
- 10.8. The experience of the first iteration of the YEPF, discussed in Section 6, illustrates the difficulties, such as tracking and data sharing, of trying to operate an ‘opt out’ model with those aged 18 to 24. This may be a systemic challenge. As a Wales Audit Office report in 2014 identified, the Welsh Government is well placed to reduce the number of young people aged 16 to 18 who are NEET, but less well placed to reduce the number of 19 to 24 year-olds who are NEET, as it lacks control over many of the levers, such as DWP provision (Welsh Audit Office, 2014). Therefore, as we outline in the conclusions (Section 12), further strengthening partnership work between the

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<sup>140</sup> There are exceptions to this; for example, some JGW+ providers report actively reaching out to young people.



Welsh Government and DWP is likely to be an important part of future developments in this area.

10.9. In contrast, an opt in model, such as the YPG, avoids the difficulties of trying to track young people aged 18 to 24, but it relies upon young people choosing to seek out and to engage with the support offered via the YPG. While very large numbers of young people do choose to access support – and the latest figures suggest over 50,000 have taken up the offer of support via the YPG – as outlined above, a substantial minority of young people, particularly those aged 19 to 24, are not taking up the offer of support from the YPG and are economically inactive, and not actively looking for work.

10.10. This challenge is highlighted in many of the evaluations of the programmes (discussed in Section 7) and emerged as a key concern in stakeholder workshops. For example, as one contributor to the workshop conducted with staff from the Welsh Government and partner organisations put it:

[The] biggest challenge [is] those who [have] pulled out of the system, if they are on the cusp we can get them, but once they [have] gone it's difficult. [The] longer they [are] out of the system, the harder it gets and when they become an adult, [there are] different systems in place.

10.11. The problem, as another contributor observed, was that 'unless we engage with young people, we have nothing to deliver' (that is, unless young people engage with the YPG's offer of support, they will not be supported). Another interviewee from the Welsh Government observed that offering support is not enough; as they put it, 'you can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink'. These concerns are also reflected in the young people's accounts presented in Section 9. These challenges in turn raise questions about:

- the refocusing of the YEPF upon those aged 11 to 18 (rather than those aged 11 to 24), given the difficulties tracking and identifying young people

aged 18+ who have disengaged (discussed in Section 6 and also above); and

- the relatively low numbers of young people who are NEET engaging with Working Wales (discussed in Section 7 and also above), as Working Wales was positioned as the main, albeit not the only, gateway to the YPG.

10.12. The positioning of Working Wales as the ‘gateway’ to the YPG became a key line of inquiry in the evaluation and the study identified clear advantages to this positioning. For example, while young people can access YPG provision like JGW+ and CfW+ directly,<sup>141</sup> there was a strong case for positioning Working Wales as the gateway to the YPG because, as we outline in:

- Sections 6 and 7, and explore further in the next Section (11), the complexity of the YPG offer means that Working Wales’ capacity to provide impartial and professional advice and guidance to young people is valuable in enabling young people to make informed choices with the awareness of all of their options;
- Section 7, the positioning of Working Wales as the gateway to the YPG in the Feed Your Positivity campaign was consistently reported to be a key strength of the campaign; and
- Section 6, the YPG was developed at pace, in response to an urgent need for action, and it was logical to mobilise existing programmes such as Working Wales. Indeed, as the evaluation of Working Wales (discussed in Section 7) identifies, Working Wales is ‘an effective gateway for employability support across Wales’ (Welsh Government, 2024e, p. 71).

10.13. However, as Section 7 outlines, the evaluation of Working Wales also reports that Working Wales staff identified young people as one of the groups they found it difficult to engage, particularly young people who had left formal education and/or other support (Welsh Government, 2024e). Similarly,

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<sup>141</sup> In addition, as para 7.41 outlines, when originally launched in April 2022 the referral route to JGW+ was via Working Wales, and direct recruitment to JGW+ was only introduced later, in part because the numbers of referrals from Working Wales were lower than anticipated.

stakeholders pointed to Working Wales' difficulties engaging young people who were NEET 'because they do not typically engage with Working Wales outreach and are more socially isolated than other groups' (ibid, p. 51). This obviously raises questions about positioning Working Wales as the gateway to the YPG and is not straightforward to answer. As we outline in Sections 5 and 6, in relation to young people aged 16 to 18, under the YEPF (rather than YPG *per se*) Careers Wales/Working Wales does not have responsibility for engaging young people who are NEET who are not EET ready. Instead, responsibility rests with EPCs and lead workers, who the YEPF guidance suggests might then refer young people to Working Wales when they were ready to engage with EET (Welsh Government, 2024r). Therefore, in many ways the model of YEPF plus YPG answers this question in relation to those aged 16 to 18. However, given the refocusing of the YEPF and the difficulties cited around tracking, this still leaves a question about which services are able to reach and engage young people aged 19 to 24 who are not engaging with DWP provision,<sup>142</sup> if they are not ready to engage with EET (or Working Wales) – and how they will access the YPG.

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<sup>142</sup> If we use take up of employment related benefits as a proxy measure for engagement with DWP provision, estimates included in the [Rapid Evidence Review on the thinking and behaviour of young people](#) (Welsh Government 2024t) were that only around half of young people aged 18 to 24 who are NEET and eligible for employment-related benefits take these up.

*Is the YPG offer sufficient for young people who are furthest from EET?*

10.14. Alongside concern about engaging young people with EET support services, there was also a concern in stakeholder workshops that even if engaged, the YPG support offer might not be sufficient for some groups. As one workshop contributor put it, the 'YPG [support offer] doesn't come close' to addressing the needs of some young people. Groups referred to included:

- young people who had disengaged and become economically inactive, and who, during the pandemic, had withdrawn to their bedrooms, and who often lacked both the motivation and capacity, in terms of confidence and skills, to engage with EET support services or EET opportunities;
- young people with unmet additional learning needs (ALN) and/or who were neurodivergent, which could limit their capabilities and also access to opportunities if they experienced discrimination linked to mental health conditions;
- young people with complex needs,<sup>143</sup> such as interlinked problems with drug and substance misuse and mental health issues, which severely constrain both their capability and motivation to engage<sup>144</sup>; and
- young people who struggled to access EET support services and/or EET opportunities, due to problems linked to rurality,<sup>145</sup> public transport or childcare.

10.15. These difficulties were evident in the accounts of many of the young people interviewed for this study (discussed in Section 9).

*Is the offer of support coming too late in young people's lives?*

10.16. The concern about reaching the most disengaged young people was linked to a broader concern amongst a number of contributors to workshops and interviewees from the Welsh Government and partner organisations that the YPG's focus upon those aged 16 and over meant that opportunities for earlier

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<sup>143</sup> In 2005, the Social Exclusion unit defined 'complex needs' as 'interlocking problems where the total represents more than the sum of the parts' ([ODPM, 2005](#), p. 8).

<sup>144</sup> Although, as outlined in Section 7, the OoWS should have a key role here.

<sup>145</sup> One contributor observed, in their view, 'young people living in rural Wales have been forgotten'.

intervention were being missed. As one interviewee observed, ‘young people don’t suddenly become NEET at 16’. Instead, they suggested that it is usually the culmination of a process of increasing disengagement from education. Understanding disengagement as a process rather than event is supported by the [Rapid Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education, or training](#). This discusses the evidence showing, for example, how increasing disengagement can create vicious cycles that over time create ‘scarring’ effects upon young people, which make it harder for them to re-engage with EET (Welsh Government, 2024o).

10.17. However, it should be noted that early identification of young people is a key rationale for the YEPF which is intended to complement the YPG. As outlined in Section 4, the YEPF focuses upon identifying young people aged 11 to 18 who are at risk of disengagement, and new guidance on this has recently been published (Welsh Government, 2024p).

## **Conclusion**

10.18. As outlined in Sections 7 and 8, the YPG contributed to changes in the nature and extent of EET support for young people. In response, the number of young people aged 16 to 18 taking up support from programmes like JGW+ has been very strong and this may have contributed to the reductions in the proportion of young people aged 16 to 18 who are NEET (Welsh Government 2025e). However, as this section explores, it is less clear if the changes in the offer of support contributed to as large a change as desired in the behaviour of young people aged 19 to 24 in relation to:

- the take up of the offer of EET support; and
- consequently, their participation in EET.

10.19. The data discussed in this section also suggests that the impact upon young people’s behaviour has been uneven. For example, despite stronger representation in programmes like JGW+, overall, there is evidence of continuing under-representation of key groups of young people, such as disabled young people, in both EET support programmes and in EET.

## **11. Discussion: a simple system to access support and opportunities for young people?**

### **Introduction**

- 11.1. As Section 1 outlines, the second of the two stated aims of the YPG is to 'ensure a more coherent, simple and accessible system for (...) young people to gain access [to] the range of opportunities available to them' (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 3). In this section we discuss to what extent this intent was achieved.

### **Navigating a complex landscape**

- 11.2. As Section 6 outlines, in many ways the support landscape increased in complexity after 2020, with first the development of programmes in response to the pandemic, and then the transition from ESF to SPF funding streams. As one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, in 2021, when the YPG was launched, provision was 'fragmented – not joined up' and there was 'competition [between programmes] in terms of delivery and target groups'. In response, as Section 8 outlines, both the YEPP and YPG policy teams identified an important part of their role as helping join up support at local, regional and national levels.
- 11.3. As Section 8 outlines, the YPG has encouraged a focus upon the system of support for young people aged 16 to 24 at a national and regional level, which was particularly important given the refocusing of the YEPP upon 11 to 18 year-olds, which would have left a gap for those aged 19 to 24. However, interviewees from the Welsh Government and contributors to workshops identified that the YPG has tended to focus upon:
- filling gaps in provision in areas such as work placements;
  - sustaining and, in some cases, expanding programmes like Business Wales' Big Ideas Wales service, that relied upon the ESF or ERDF, and which would have been reduced in scale without YPG funding;

- or funding the expansion of programmes like CfW+ that had previously complemented ESF funded programmes like CfW, which ended in 2023.

11.4. Similarly, it was reported in interviews with staff in local and regional programmes that LA SPF supported programmes and projects had also tended to focus upon filling gaps in provision by, for example, strengthening pre-engagement work, rather than simplifying provision by, for example, merging or decommissioning support.<sup>146</sup> As a result, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government summed it up, ‘It’s a complex landscape (...) and whenever you start to map out who works in this space it becomes quite cumbersome and clumsy – you get lost in the forest’.

11.5. Therefore, as Section 6 outlines, rather than trying to simplify the system, attention has tended to focus upon helping young people navigate the system of support and opportunities. This includes:

- the role YEPF lead workers play in supporting young people aged 16 to 18; and
- the role of Working Wales as the ‘gateway’ to the YPG’s offer of support and opportunities and its offer of impartial careers information, advice and guidance.

11.6. As Section 7 outlines, both roles are seen as effective by those interviewed for this evaluation, and this is supported by evaluations of programmes. The accounts of young people discussed in Section 9 suggest that for those young people who take up the offer of support either from YEPF lead workers, for those aged 16 to 18, or from Working Wales, for those aged 16 to 24, access to support and opportunities becomes more simple and more straightforward. This is because young people have a guide to help them navigate the complex range of support and opportunities available to them.

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<sup>146</sup> The cut in funding for CfW+ which led to a raising of the age at which young people become eligible to 20 is an example of simplification. The Welsh Government is also exploring the feasibility of a single operating model for employability support programmes, which might simplify the support system in relation to Welsh Government provision.

- 11.7. However, as discussed in Section 7, this model is reliant upon YEPF lead workers' or Working Wales's advisors' knowledge and understanding of the support and opportunities, which may be more limited in some areas. As Section 8 outlines, keeping operational staff in gateway services like Job Centre Plus and Working Wales up to date with a dynamic and complex landscape of support was considered a key challenge. Moreover, this support also tends to end once a transition has been made (for example, from school to college). Therefore, a young person will need to re-engage if they need support navigating further transitions (for example, from college to university).
- 11.8. Finally, and most fundamentally, as outlined in Section 5, the YEPF usually only provides a structure to support young people aged 11 to 18<sup>147</sup> and only a minority of young people, particularly young people aged 19 to 24, take up support from Working Wales. As the accounts of young people in Section 9 illustrate, for those who don't take up the offer of support, the system can be confusing and difficult to navigate without a guide. This can particularly be the case for those who are unsure what they want to do, and/or who have complex needs. Therefore, despite the intention of the YPG, for young people who do not take up the offer of support from Working Wales, it is unlikely to feel like there is a 'coherent, simple and accessible system' for them to 'access the range of opportunities' offered by the YPG (ibid., p. 9).

### **Are young people making informed choices?**

- 11.9. Interviews with young people, discussed in Section 9, interviews and discussions in workshops for this study and the National Conversation all indicate that a lack of direction may compound young people's difficulties when deciding which pathways to follow. As one person quoted in the National Conversation put it: '... everyone's like, you should know what you want to do', making it very difficult for those who do not know what they want to do (Welsh Government, 2024l, p. 23). However, as one informant from

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<sup>147</sup> It is reported that YEPF lead workers sometimes support young people aged 18+ when, for example, they remain engaged with youth service provision.



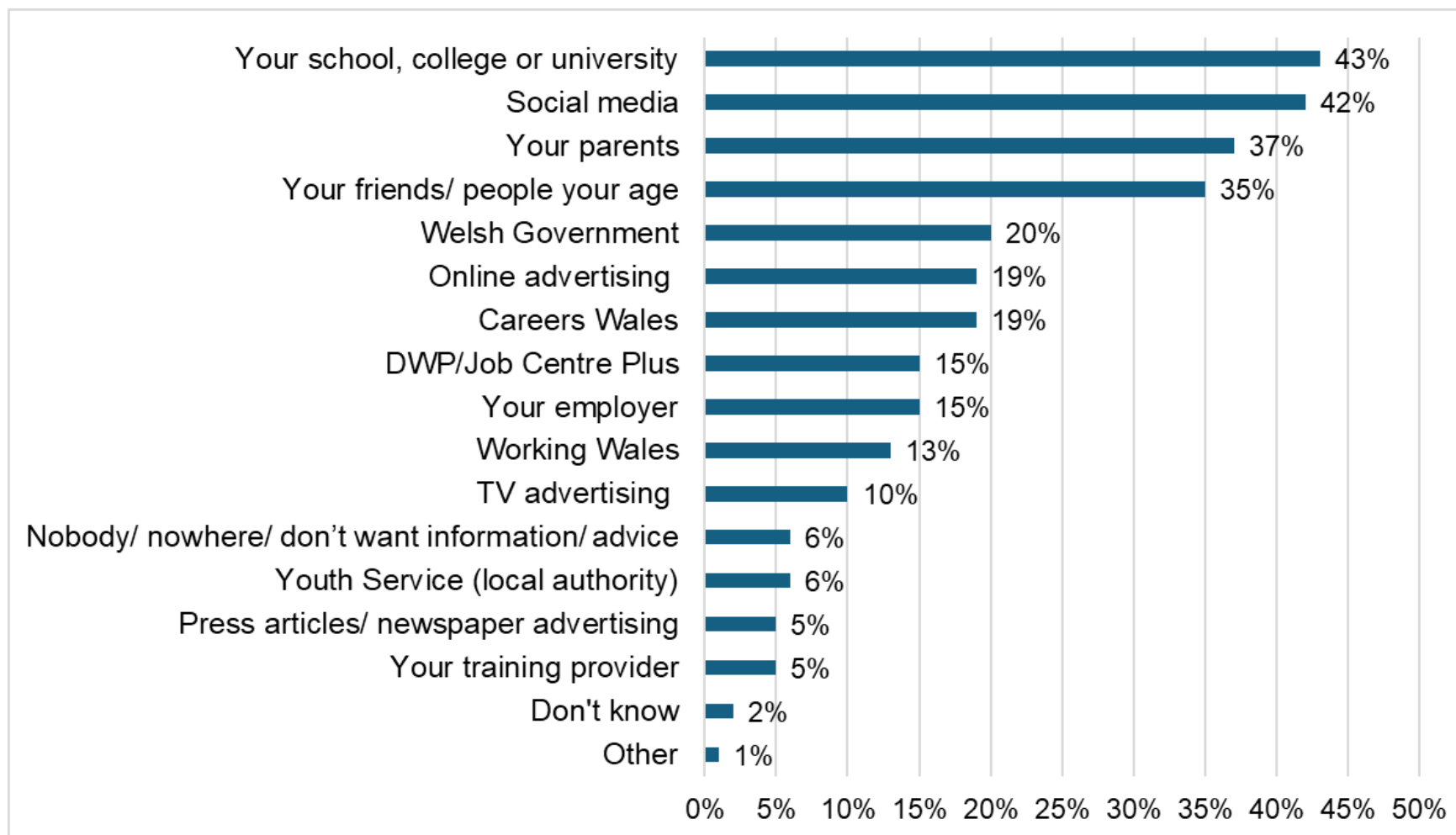
Careers Wales observed, this is a complex area: it is normal to 'not know' what you want to do for a certain period of time, and the purpose of careers advice and guidance is to support young people to develop their career management skills and this happens over time. Therefore 'not knowing' may only become a problem when it coincides with periods of transition, when young people have to make a choice.

11.10. As Section 9 illustrates, it appears that many young people's choices at 16 represent the default option, rather than the result of an active choice. In some cases, young people quoted in the as the National Conversation reported being 'pushed' into pathways they did not choose (ibid.). This issue has also been highlighted by Estyn which reports that:

....there remains a need to develop the way that the broad range of provision available across the post-16 sectors in Wales is matched to individual learners. It can be difficult for learners to view and understand the full range of options available to them. The information and guidance that prospective learners receive is not always clear and consistently useful. (Estyn, 2024c, p. 3.)

11.11. The different sources of information young people turn to is illustrated by Figure 11.1 which presents data collected through the Wales Omnibus Survey included in the National Conversation.

**Figure 11.1. National Omnibus Survey 2023 responses to the question: ‘Thinking about education, employment and training, where do you get information and/ or advice from at the moment?’**



Source: [Welsh Government, 2023a](#)

11.12. The information provided by these different sources will differ and the National Conversation data is revealing here. As one of the associated reports identifies:

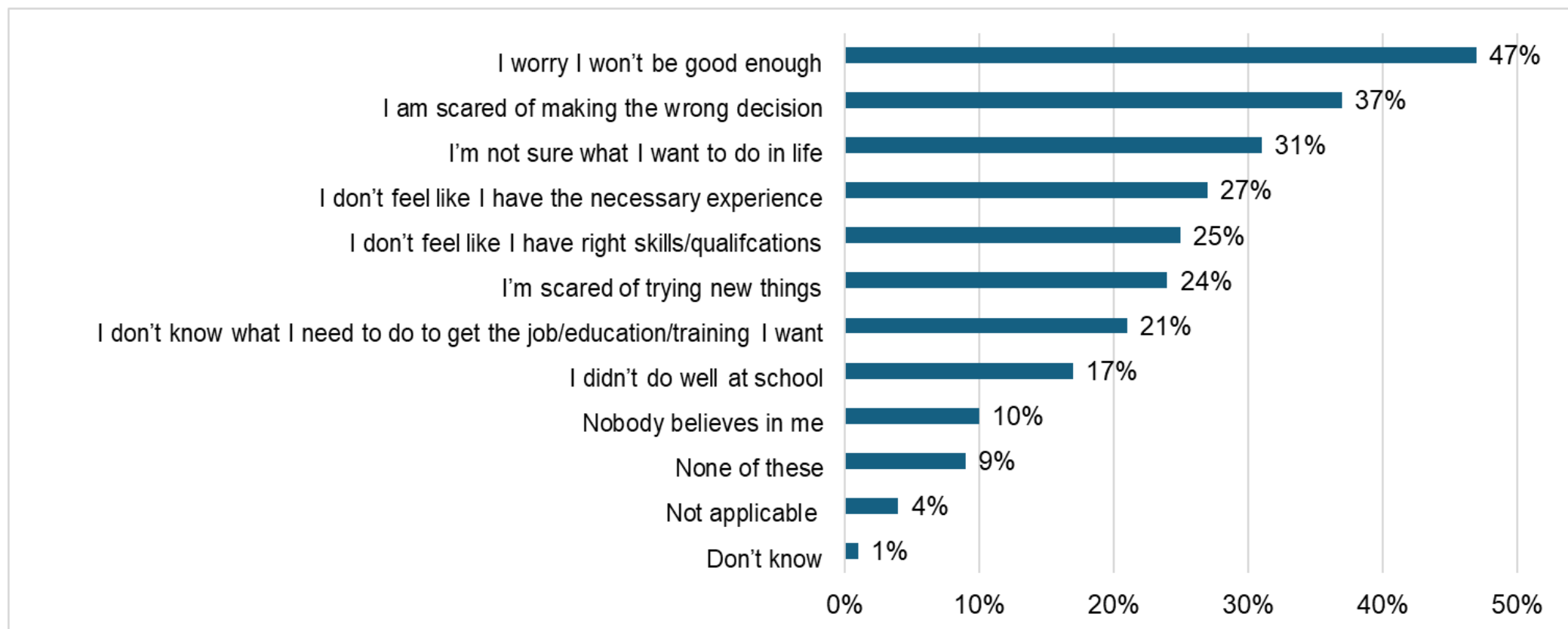
Young people surveyed tended to be most aware of the more 'traditional' qualifications such as A levels, yet there was a significant disparity in awareness of vocational qualifications between young people and their parents. (...) While 74 per cent of parents surveyed reported they were aware of such qualifications, only 46 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds had heard of them. (Welsh Government, 2024l, p. 9.)

11.13. In addition to awareness of options, it is important to note that both the consultation to inform the refresh of the YEPF (LWI, 2021a) and interviewees for this evaluation identified that the range of options for those aged 16 and over in Wales who do not want to pursue the academic option of A levels are often limited, especially in rural areas. However, assessing the range of education and training options available to young people is beyond the scope of this evaluation.

### **Young people's experiences of transition**

11.14. As Figure 11.2 illustrates, anxiety and uncertainty about the future was widely reported by young people surveyed for the National Conversation. As Section 9 outlines, this was also common amongst many of the young people interviewed for this evaluation.

**Figure 11.2. National Conversation Omnibus Survey 2023 responses to the question: which if any, of the statements below apply to you?**



Source: [Welsh Government, 2023a](#)

11.15. Figure 11.3 below outlines how easy different options are likely to feel for the 'mainstream' young person who has done well at school and is encouraged by their school and their parents to continue into the school sixth form. The different degrees of difficulty in Figure 11.3 are indicated by the changing colours and also the change in the line around each box from a solid line, through to a dotted line.

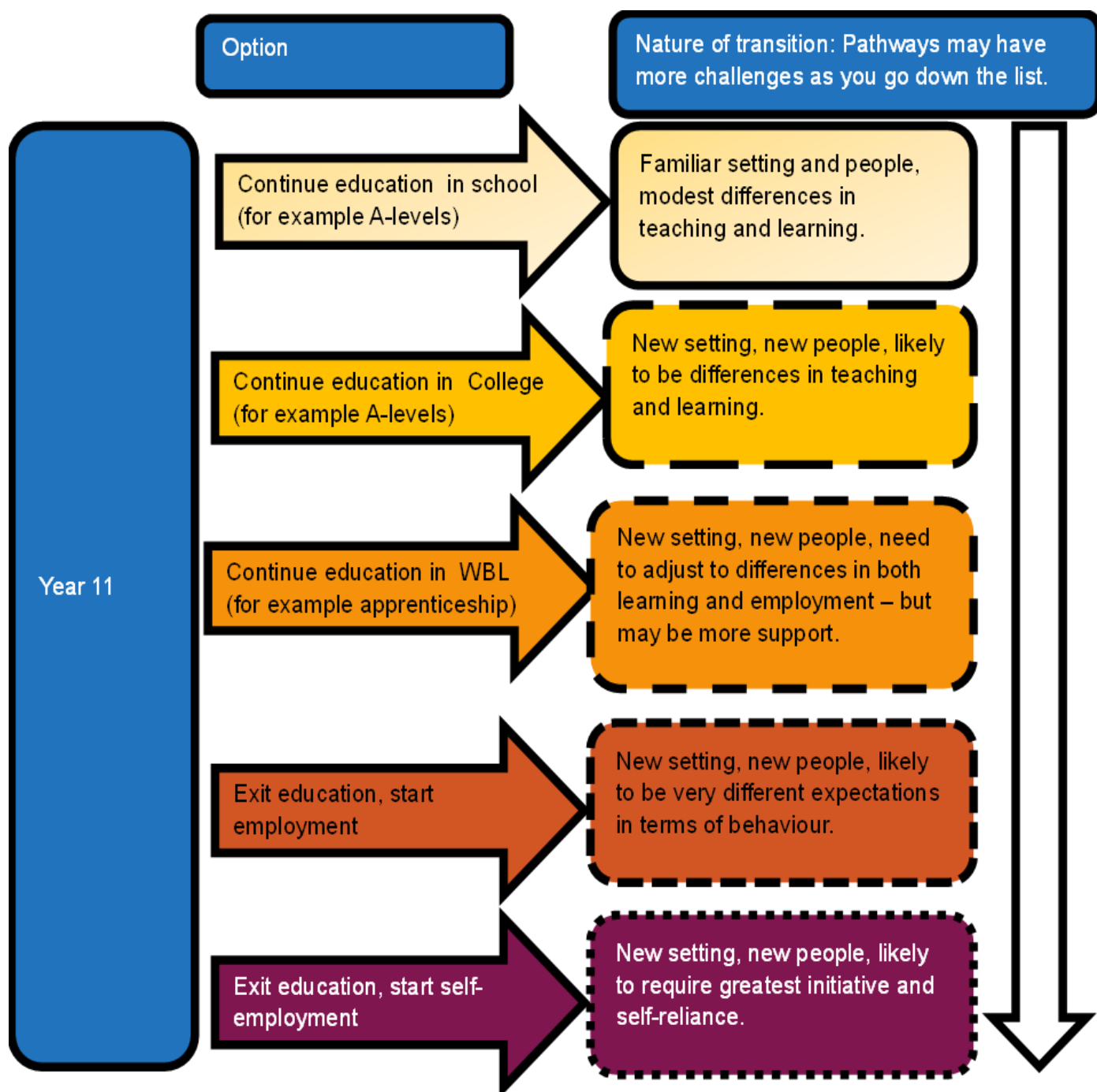
11.16. A transition like that from school to sixth form has been described as a 'slow track' transition. Here, a young person continues in education, often in the same institutional setting, and remains dependent on their parents for longer and experiences 'a slower – but usually more successful – transition' (ODPM, 2005). For example, one interviewee from an RSP reported that:

We're finding a number of young people who are going into their first jobs at the age of 16, then coming out going into unemployment and they weren't work ready and dropping off the radar going I can't do it, and they were disappearing.

11.17. Estyn has also identified concerns about what happens to young people who make transitions into work based learning, where unlike schools and colleges, training providers generally have limited knowledge of and engagement with the YEPF and lead workers (Estyn, 2024b).

11.18. Nevertheless, as outlined in Section 6, the purpose of the YEPF is to make sure that young people do not 'drop off the radar' after leaving school, and an informant from Careers Wales questioned whether young people were being lost, observing that (as Section 6 outlines) young people (aged 16 to 18) are still subject to YEPF monitoring and tracking.

**Figure 11.3. Example of how different pathways at the end of year 11 might be viewed by a young person**



11.19. However, as the young people's accounts discussed in Section 8 outline, different groups of young people with different capabilities, motivations and access to opportunities perceive the simplicity or complexity of various pathways in different ways. As one interviewee from the voluntary sector observed, 'school [sixth form] isn't for everyone'. Some young people are eager to exit school at 16 and value the greater freedom, independence and support offered by continuing their education in

college.<sup>148</sup> Others may, for example, have connections that encourage them to take up an apprenticeship with a family member, while, especially during the pandemic, ‘opting out’ and retreating to the comfort of their bedrooms appeared to some young people to be the simplest option. As one interviewee from the Welsh Government observed, if the choice was between ‘getting the bus at 6.30am’ and you were feeling ‘wobbly’ after the pandemic, ‘staying in bed might feel much easier’. It was also observed that some groups, such as neurodivergent young people, might face additional barriers to accessing public transport and taking up EET opportunities.

11.20. Perceptions of the ease or difficulty of different pathways are also likely to be influenced by young people’s own knowledge of those different pathways and the knowledge of those people they turn to for information, advice and guidance, be it online sources like social media, trusted adults or Working Wales.

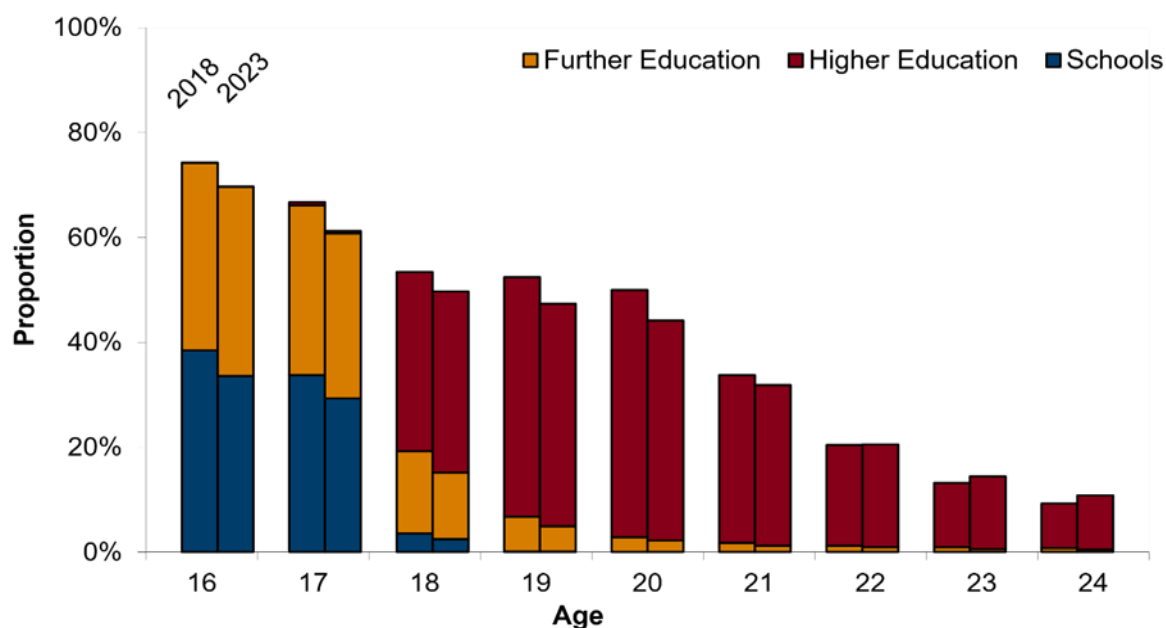
11.21. As Sections 5 and 9 outline and Figure 11.4 shows, the transition to school or college is the transition most young people make at age 16 and it delays the more challenging transition from sixth form or college until they are older and generally more mature and capable of making the transition. In contrast, those who leave education earlier on ‘fast track’ transitions ‘can face a more uncertain future’ (ODPM, 2005, p. 10).<sup>149</sup> Nevertheless, as Section 9 outlines, delaying the transition until 18 does not necessarily mean that young people have the acquired the capabilities necessary for the transition.

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<sup>148</sup> For example, young people consulted as part of the refresh of the YEPF reported that support in education increased considerably once they had left compulsory schooling and moved on to either college, school sixth form or a work-related training programme such as Traineeships. The majority of young people who were attending college or work-related training praised the support they had received, specifically citing the relationships with their tutors and/or other support staff. Several individuals stated that because the tutors and support staff in college or on Traineeships were more ‘approachable’ than staff in schools, they felt far more confident in asking for support when required, compared to their school experience (LWI, 2021a).

<sup>149</sup> Industrial change means that many of the more traditional pathways into employment at 16 have been lost (see, for example, Lloyd-Jones, 2005; McDonald and Marsh, 2005).

**Figure 11.4. Participation of young people in Wales in full-time education by level of study and age, 2018 and 2023**



Source: [Welsh Government, 2023e](#)

## Conclusion

11.22. The changes in the nature and extent of support offered to young people the YPG contributed to, coupled with the steps taken to break down silos (discussed in Section 8), has made the system more 'coherent'. However, the changes, coupled with changes in funding, following the end of the ESF and start of the SPF in Wales, have also tended to increase, rather than decrease the complexity of the system of support. Therefore, rather than trying to simplify the system, attention has tended to focus upon helping young people navigate the system of support. Mechanisms here have included access to YEPF lead workers for those aged 16 to 18 who have disengaged, or who are judged at risk of disengaging, and Working Wales, a service offering young people impartial advice and guidance to help them navigate this complex support landscape. As Section 9 outlines, for those taking up this support, the system can feel 'simple and accessible'. However, as Section 9 also outlines, for those who do not take up this support from, for example, a YEPF lead worker or Working Wales, the system of support can feel complex and/or inaccessible.



## 12. Conclusions and reflections on the YPG and YEPF

### The design of the YEPF and YPG

- 12.1. As Sections 4, 5 and 6 outline, there have been longstanding concerns about young people who struggle to make transitions into EET, and in response, the YEPF was introduced in 2013 to reduce the number of young people who were NEET. These concerns were turbocharged by concerns that the pandemic, and policy responses like lockdown, were triggering a labour market crisis which was hitting young people particularly hard. In 2021, the YPG was rapidly developed given well founded fears that a generation of young people could have been lost due to the long-term scarring effects of youth unemployment.
- 12.2. As Section 6 outlines, both the YEPF and YPG seek to ensure that those young people who need support to sustain participation in, and to progress and make transitions through, education, employment and training can access support in a timely way. Both take a systems wide collaborative approach that aims to break down barriers between support and education and training provision, which is often characterised as ‘siloes’, and which is sometimes effectively operating in competition with other provision. There was broad agreement amongst interviewees from Welsh Government and programmes that make up the YPG that there was a need for action and that a systems wide approach was necessary. The YEPF aims to do this for those aged 11 to 18 through collaboration at LA level, while the YPG seeks to do this for young people aged 16 to 24 through collaboration at a national and regional level.
- 12.3. However, as Section 6 also outlines, despite sharing similar goals, the design of the YPG and YEPF are very different. We characterise the YEPF as an ‘opt out’ model (where in effect, young people have to actively reject the offer of support<sup>150</sup>), whereas the YPG is an ‘opt in’ model (where young people have to actively chose to take up support<sup>151</sup>). This difference reflects the difficulties in tracking young people aged 18

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<sup>150</sup> As Section 5 outlines, this model is based upon tracking of individuals who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging, in order to target active outreach efforts. As Section 8 outlines, when, for example, a youth worker, makes contact young people can choose not to take up the offer of support – but in effect they are put in a position where they have to make this choice.

<sup>151</sup> In contrast to the YEPF model, in the YPG, the default is generally that a young person does not have EET support from services, unless they actively choose to seek it out and take it up.

and over (demonstrated by the first iteration of the YEPF) and the expectation that as adults, young people aged 18 and over exercise more agency. The opt in model works well for those young people actively seeking to continue in, or to re-engage with EET – and between 85 to 90% of young people make successful transitions. It is important that this success is not taken for granted. Nevertheless, the opt in model is less well suited to the minority of young people who are economically inactive and not actively seeking to re-engage with EET (Welsh Government, 2024o, 2024t).

### **The implementation of the YEPF and YPG**

- 12.4. As Sections 7 and 8 illustrate, collaborative models of system change, implementation, and therefore the manifestation of the YEPF and YPG in practice, depend upon the decisions of multiple stakeholders operating at different levels in different sectors.<sup>152</sup> This is particularly clear in relation to the YPG, where, in contrast to the YEPF, the absence of detailed guidance has given the YPG the flexibility to evolve and develop over time. Moreover, the numbers and range of stakeholders involved in delivery, and therefore in shaping the YPG's offer of support, is greater than the number and range of stakeholders involved in the delivery of the YEPF's offer of support.

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<sup>152</sup> That is to say, the YEPF and YPG as they are experienced by young people are created, or manifested by, the decisions of multiple stakeholders operating at different levels in different sectors.

12.5. As Section 7 illustrates, interviews with those involved in the design and/or delivery of the YEPF and YPG, and evaluations of the different component parts of each, suggest that implementation has generally been effective. Nevertheless, as with any policy or programme, areas for improvement have also been identified. These include:

- providing more comprehensive and impartial information advice and guidance and better communication of information about post-16 learner pathways for all young people making choices at 16 (Estyn, 2022a, 2022b). As Section 7 outlines, this is intended to be addressed by an expansion of Careers Wales' offer of impartial advice and guidance to all young people in year 11.<sup>153</sup>
- the strengthening of employer engagement using, for example, the Welsh Government's influence over public sector, financial levers and its convening power to promote greater employer engagement and fair work.

### **The effectiveness of the YEPF and YPG**

12.6. As Sections 7 and 8 outline, the range of support provided through the YEPF and by programmes like Working Wales, JGW+, CFW+ and the OoWS, that make up the YPG, is effective. As Sections 7 outlines, around 40 to 60% of young people supported by programmes that constitute the YPG achieve positive outcomes. As Section 9 illustrates, the YEPF and YPG are enhancing young people's capabilities, motivation and access to opportunities, helping them make transitions. For example:

- information, advice and guidance can help young people better understand and navigate post-16 pathways (increasing their capability to do so);
- encouragement, positive feedback, and the knowledge that someone, such as a YEPF Lead Worker, has your back can help increase young people's motivation; and
- financial or practical support with travel to college or work or with childcare can help increase young people's access to opportunities.

12.7. This illustrates the importance (outlined in Section 4 and also Section 9) of understanding young people's capabilities, opportunities and motivations and

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<sup>153</sup> It is however, too early to judge how effective this will be, and recently concerns have still been raised about the extent to which all young people can access impartial careers information, advice and guidance in evidence to the Children and Young People's Committee (Senedd, 2025).

therefore their behaviours in context, and the ways in which support, from for example, a Lead Worker, can enhance young people's capabilities,<sup>154</sup> opportunities and motivations, and therefore encourage and enable behavioural change.

Consequently, as Section 5 outlines, relationships with trusted adults who young people are motivated to reach out to, and who young people will accept support and, where appropriate, challenge from are an integral part of Welsh Government programmes like JGW+, CfW+ and the OoWS and also many voluntary sector projects (illustrated by the accounts of young people in Section 9). However, these relationships between young people and trusted adults take time to develop and nurture, which highlights the importance of long-term funding for services.

- 12.8. As Section 4 outlines, and the interviews with young people, discussed in Section 9 illustrate, the impact of context, also highlights the importance of understanding and thinking about the relational nature of young people's agency. Young people's (cap)ability to successfully navigate transitions, depends not only on their own attributes, but also upon other factors. These include the information, support and guidance they can access, from those they consider trusted adults like their parents, teachers, careers advisors and youth workers and/or from post-16 EET support programmes like JGW+, CfW+ and the OoWS.
- 12.9. The evidence considered in this evaluation and the Rapid Evidence Review (Welsh Government 2024t) also suggests that it is likely that action to support young people's re-engagement with EET will need to be founded at least in part upon support from trusted adults who can help reach out to young people. This should aim to augment action focused primarily upon motivating young people, such as the Feed Your Positivity campaign and welfare conditionality. Moreover, as a range of people can play the role of trusted adult, this approach also requires relationships of trust between trusted adults and EET support services, so that they are confident encouraging young people to engage with EET support services.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> As outlined in Section 4, we conceptualise capability as both an attribute of individuals, but also as context dependent. This is because context determines both what capabilities are required, and the degree to which young people can augment their own capabilities with support from others.

<sup>155</sup> As Section 9 illustrates, the reasons why young people choose not to take up support can include the nature or perceptions of services and the perceived stigma associated with seeking support. In particular the

12.10. These are not new ideas, and as noted above they are an integral part of many of the programmes that make up the YPG. Therefore, a strong case can be made in theory for the effectiveness of the YPG model (which as outlined in Section 5 is in line with evidence of ‘what works’), and this is backed up by evaluations of the programmes that make up the YPG. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the fragmentation of data collection and the lack of direct comparability between programme data and national statistics on, for example, disability makes it challenging to evaluate how effective the YPG has been in supporting different groups of young people. Addressing this is likely to require changes to the way national statistics, such as the APS, and/or programme data are collected.

12.11. Moreover, where available, impact evaluations of the programmes that constitute the YPG (such as CfW and CfW+) suggest that the degree of additionality (the extent to which positive outcomes associated with the YPG would not have happened in the absence of the YPG) is often low. It is also notable that while the evaluation of JGW+ is very positive, it also identifies that the degree of additionality is uncertain (although at this stage an impact evaluation has not been undertaken) (Welsh Government, 2025e). Evaluations of the types of programmes that make up the YPG identify that there is scope to strengthen and enhance the support they offer, and its impact upon young people’s capabilities, access to opportunities, motivations and ultimately their behaviours (Welsh Government, 2024t). A tension here is that outcomes tend to be better for young people facing fewer barriers (who have stronger capabilities, motivation and access to opportunities), but where the degree of additionality may be lower. In contrast, as the [Rapid Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education, or training](#) identifies

... those with the weakest capabilities [and] motivation and/or most constrained opportunities, who are less likely to -re-engage with EET without support are also both generally the hardest to engage and support and the least likely to achieve positive outcomes if they do engage with EET support services. (ibid., pp. 93-94).

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stigma associated with claiming welfare benefits, can undermine young people’s motivation to do so. Barriers such as mental health issues and lack of transport can also limit their capabilities or opportunities (and therefore also their motivation) to reach out for support.

12.12. Therefore, interviews for this study and other studies (included in the Rapid Evidence Review) identify gaps and weaknesses in support for groups such as:

- young people experiencing mild to moderate mental health issues;
- neurodivergent young people; and
- young people in rural areas (ibid.).

12.13. Moreover, and more fundamentally, as the Rapid Evidence Review (ibid.) highlights, the offer of support only works if young people choose to take it up. As Section 9 illustrates, although it is not possible to precisely calculate how many young people do not take up the offer of support, the available evidence suggests it is a substantial minority of young people. As Sections 4, 8 and 9 identify, young people's capability, motivation and their opportunity (in the sense of absence of constraints) to access support differs. At present, too many young people, including too many disabled young people and, to a lesser degree, women, are not taking up all the support that is available and therefore do not benefit from the YPG offer (ibid.).

12.14. As a number of interviewees from the Welsh Government observed, notwithstanding the long-term decline in the number of young people who are NEET since the great recession (2008 to 2010)<sup>156</sup> discussed in Sections 4, 5 and Appendix A, progress has slowed and, since the pandemic, the rates have been more volatile.<sup>157</sup> Therefore, as Figure 12.1 illustrates, notwithstanding the declines, the proportion of young people aged 19 to 24 who are NEET has remained stubbornly high. It is important to bear in mind that the post-pandemic surge in youth unemployment that was forecast in 2020 to 2021 did not materialise – something many interviewees from the Welsh Government in particular attributed to the success of the YPG and YEPF.<sup>158</sup> It is also

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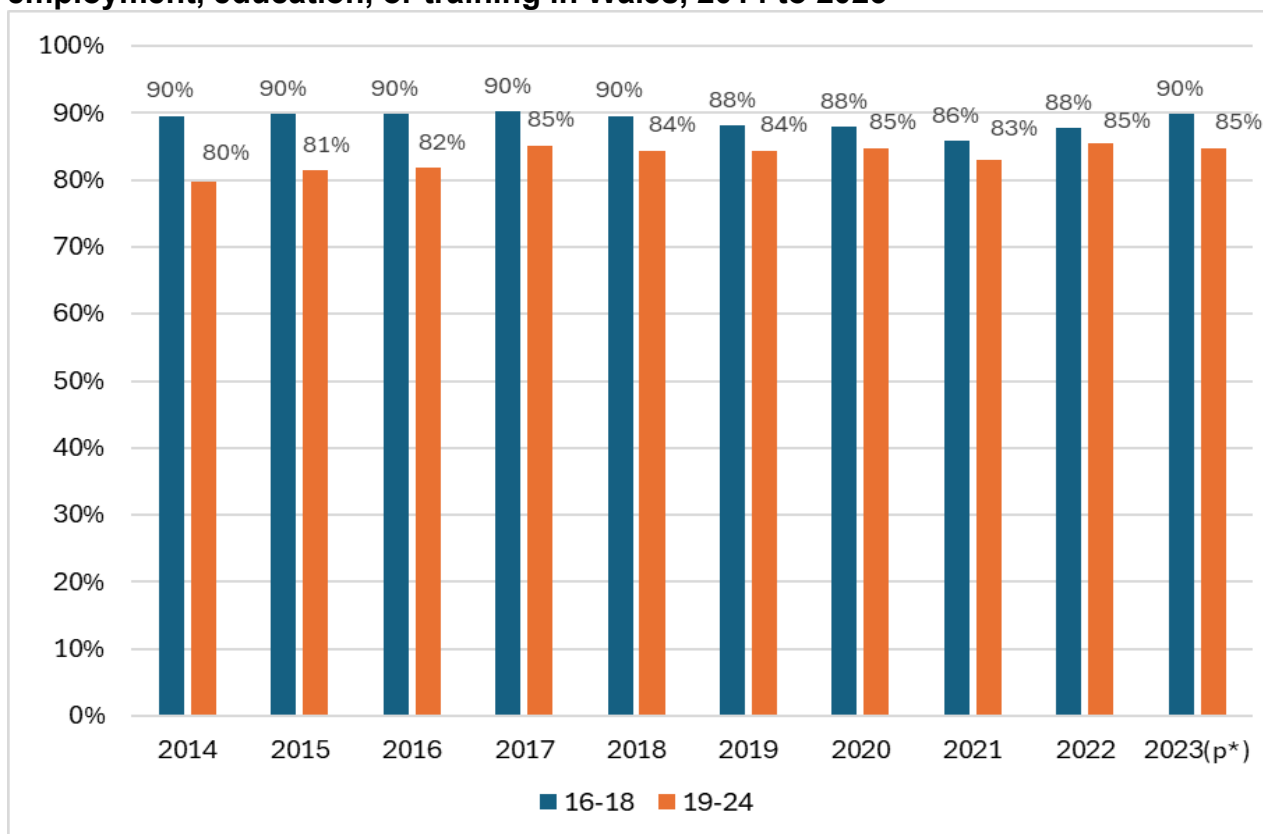
<sup>156</sup> For example, SFR data shows that the proportion of young people aged 19 to 24 in Wales who are NEET declined by over five percentage points over the last decade (see Welsh Government, 2025h).

<sup>157</sup> APS data suggest that for people in Wales aged 16 to 18 the NEET rate has decreased by 3.7 percentage points from the year ending September 2019 to the year ending September 2024 and by 2.2 percentage points for people aged 19 to 24 for the same five year period (Welsh Government, 2025f). However, rates are very volatile and there remains uncertainty about the data and concerns about, for example, the increasing divergence of APS and SFR data. Further information on the increased uncertainty of the APS estimates is available in the [young people not in education, employment or training \(NEET\)](#) release.

<sup>158</sup> For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it: the increase in youth unemployment 'wasn't as bad as it could have been, it was, at least, was being predicted. So actually, that's a measure of success, I would say'.

quite possible that the long-term decline in the number of young people who are NEET will continue and the 2050 milestones will be achieved, but it is simply too early to judge.

**Figure 12.1. Participation of young people aged 16 to 18 and 19 to 24 in employment, education, or training in Wales, 2014 to 2023**



Source: [Estimated 16-24 year olds not in education, training or employment by economic activity and age groups \(StatsWales\), Welsh Government](#) <sup>159</sup>

\* Figures for 2023 are provisional.

<sup>159</sup> This draws upon Welsh Government analysis of: Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Higher Education Students Early Statistics Survey (HESES), Open University, Lifelong Learning Wales Record (LLWR), Annual Population Survey (APS).

12.15. Given these challenges and uncertainties, a number of interviewees from the Welsh Government and workshop contributors observed that in their view, more radical change was required if the 2050 milestones were to be met. For example, as one interviewee from the Welsh Government put it, '[We] can't expect better results if we continue to operate in the same way'. Similarly, as the [Rapid Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education, or training](#) concluded, 'simply doing more of the same is unlikely to be sufficient'<sup>160</sup> (Welsh Government 2024t, p. 94). This is important because as Section 5 outlines, in many ways the YPG was a continuation and expansion of existing support, rather than a radical change in the nature of support.

12.16. If we assume that on current trends, the 2050 milestones that 90% of young people are in EET by 2050, and that participation of under-represented groups is increased,<sup>161</sup> may not be achieved (which as noted is plausible, but far from certain), on current trends, the YPG and YEPF face two key challenges:

(1.) increasing young people's engagement with EET support services. This evaluation and also the Rapid Evidence Review (Welsh Government 2024t) both suggest that new strategies to reach and engage those young people, particularly those aged 19 to 24 who have become increasingly disengaged from EET and from support services, are likely to be required.

(2.) increasing the effectiveness of EET support services, so that the proportion of young people achieving positive outcomes is increased, and in particular, outcomes for those who were most disengaged from EET (before engaging with support services) are improved.

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<sup>160</sup> Although the review also identifies 'that it is not just what is done but how well it is done that makes a difference' (Welsh Government, 2024, p. 95), meaning there may also be scope to improve existing models.

<sup>161</sup> The two National Milestones are: (1) 'at least 90 per cent of 16 to 24 year olds will be in education, employment or training by 2050' and (2) 'eradicate the gap between the employment rate in Wales and the UK by 2050, with a focus on fair work and raising labour market participation of under-represented groups' (Welsh Government, 2022a, p. 4).



12.17. In response, this evaluation identified interest from stakeholders from across the Welsh Government in exploring more radical changes. However:

- as outlined above, existing models work at least moderately well, and ‘what works is reasonably well understood’ (see boxed text); and
- there is ‘no ‘silver bullet’ (or panacea)’ and the evidential base for more radical options is limited. (Welsh Government 2024t, p. 92)

Therefore, as the [Rapid Evidence Review: supporting young people who are not in employment, education, or training](#) identifies, this ‘raises difficult questions about where best to target scarce resources’ Welsh Government, 2024t, p. 94). For example, should resources

- focus upon interventions whose effectiveness has been demonstrated, but demonstrated to only have a moderate impact and to not reach some target groups; or
- focus upon interventions whose effectiveness has not (yet) been demonstrated (evaluated), but which may benefit groups who are not currently being effectively engaged and/or supported by existing interventions’ (ibid).

12.18. If more radical options are favoured, the limitations of the evidential base suggest rather than assuming there is a ‘fully formed solution ready for implementation’, there is a need to adopt a more experimental approach (Alliance for Useful Evidence and Nesta, 2016, p. 19). This approach would need:

- real time testing and adaptation; and
- a strong focus upon young people’s capabilities, motivations, access to opportunities, and behavioural responses to initiatives.

### **Young people’s transitions**

12.19. As Section 4 outlines, young people need the capability, opportunity and motivation to make successful transitions and the YPG is working for very large numbers of young people. Over 50,000 young people have now taken up YPG support, helping them navigate increasingly challenging transitions.

Nevertheless, as Sections 4, 5 and 9 outline, important challenges remain. In particular:

- too many young people lack the capability to make successful transitions, particularly at 18 (the end of year 13). This is undermining their motivation to try, meaning increasing numbers are now economically inactive, and are likely to be less motivated to engage with the YPG's offer of support<sup>162</sup>.
- Lack of opportunity is a constraint. Too many young people end up on sub-optimal pathways because of limited choices and weaknesses in IAG, meaning that their choices at 16 are more a default rather than an active choice. At 18, weakness in local labour markets and, particularly for those in rural areas, difficulties travelling to employment opportunities hold some young people back. These difficulties can be compounded by limitations in young people's capabilities and in their motivation,<sup>163</sup> which make it harder for them to overcome these barriers.

12.20. Consequently, while, as outlined above, the total numbers of young people aged 19 to 24, and in particular, young women, who are NEET in Wales has declined since the Great Recession (2008 to 2010), a greater proportion of young people who were NEET were economically inactive rather than unemployed and actively seeking work in 2023 compared to 2008 (see Section 5 and Appendix A). Moreover, too many young people who are in EET are not fulfilling their potential as, for example, they end up in sub-optimal education or training pathways and/or are stuck in what could be described as unfair work, that is poorly paid, insecure and offers limited opportunities for progression. As we outline below, as well as changes to the

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<sup>162</sup> As Section 4 outlines, it is important that motivation, and the reasons why some young people have, for example, stopped actively looking for work, is understood as being shaped by context and factors like a young person's capability to find and sustain employment and their access to employment opportunities.

<sup>163</sup> As the accounts of young people discussed in Section 9 illustrate, young people, may face substantial barriers to re-engaging with EET. Overcoming these barriers may require effort, persistence and sacrifice on the part of young people, and therefore requires motivation. Young people, who feel, for example, that there are no suitable jobs locally or who are not confident that employers will make reasonable adjustments are likely to be less motivated to try to overcome other barriers that may hold them back.

YEPF and YPG suggested above, this highlights the need for further action, beyond the scope of the current YPG.

### **The case for action beyond the YPG**

12.21. As Section 1, and also Section 4 outline, what happens outside of the YPG, in areas like the pre 16 education system, the UK welfare system and the economy, will have a large impact upon the YPG and also the achievement of the national milestones. For example, pre-16 education (most notably schools and ALN provision) and support from Careers Wales, can be understood as having ‘downstream effects’<sup>164</sup>, which shape the capabilities and motivations young people have at age 16, and therefore the types of support they may need through the YPG. In addition:

- the interface between different systems is important. For example, as Section 6 outlines, YEPF lead workers have a key role in helping young people judged at risk of disengaging successfully navigate the transitions between pre- and post-16 education and training systems.
- The YPG effects these other systems. For example, if more young people make successful transitions at 16 and 18 into EET, fewer young people are likely to be claiming employment related welfare benefits, and the economy is likely to benefit, which over time, may help create more employment opportunities for young people.

### *Action to address distal factors (as well as proximate factors)*

12.22. As Section 4 outlines, one of the risks with the COM-B model is that it may encourage too much focus upon the individual and their ‘deficits’, and how, for example, weakness in a young person’s capabilities or motivations at a particular point in time hold them back and prevent them from seizing opportunities. While it is important that young people are not pathologised, this does not mean that these weaknesses should be ignored or discussion of them suppressed; indeed, much of the success of the YPG is rooted in the

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<sup>164</sup> ‘Downstream effects’ describe the impact of something that are only experienced later in time. Although perhaps somewhat confusingly, ‘upstream interventions’ describe interventions to address these types of underlying causes – or to use the language of this report, distal factors.

ways in which post-16 EET support programmes can enhance young people's:

- capabilities, by for example, strengthening vocational and social and emotional skills;
- motivation, by for example, helping inspire young people, clarifying their career goals and giving them the confidence that they can achieve their goals; and
- access to opportunities through, for example, the investment in apprenticeships and programmes like JGW+, financial and practical advice, and support to help them overcome potential barriers like travel and childcare.

12.23. Nevertheless, as Section 8 outlines, one of the arguable weaknesses of the YPG is that it has focused more upon addressing individual deficits, through training and support, rather than changing the structure of opportunities, through for example, engagement with employers. As Section 4 outlines, approaches like the SMD can help mitigate the risks here by focusing attention upon the ways in which society shapes the opportunities open to young people and therefore also, for example the capabilities they require.

12.24. Moreover, as Section 4 outlines, and young people's accounts in Section 9 often hint at, it is also vital to consider distal factors: the underlying reasons why young people may have weakness in their capabilities or motivations at a particular point in time, and constraints which can hold them back and mean that as Section 9 illustrates, they can struggle to make transitions. For example, past experiences will have shaped young people's development (and their capabilities), thinking (and their motivations) and therefore also their behaviours.<sup>165</sup> Some of these distal factors will be historic experiences, such as adverse or positive childhood experiences. Others will be more recent, such as experiences of the pandemic and cost of living crisis or of discrimination in education, training or employment settings. This means that,

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<sup>165</sup> See for example, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory.

as outlined above, understanding the context is vitally important for better understanding why some young people flourish, and other struggle,<sup>166</sup> and also why young people have a particular set of capabilities, motivations, access to opportunities and behaviours at a particular point in time.

- 12.25. A focus upon how contexts (including those that form young people's biographies) shape young people's capabilities, motivations and access to opportunities encourages us to broaden the lens to consider other types of interventions beyond those in the YPG. This is important because, as Sections 4 and 8 highlight, there are likely to be limits on the extent to which the YPG's offer of post-16 EET support can increase young people's capabilities, motivation and access to opportunities. Therefore, if the 2050 milestones are to be achieved, it is likely that action (including the continuation of existing action) is also needed:
- in pre- and post-16 education and training to ensure that young people are both inspired and supported to achieve more and maximise their capabilities. Action in this area includes identifying and addressing ALN. It also includes developing both academic abilities like reading, writing and maths, and social and emotional skills, like self-efficacy and the capacity to manage emotions;
  - in pre-16 education and post-16 education and training, working in partnership with mental health and wellbeing support services across sectors, including the youth service and voluntary sector. In this context, the [NEST Framework](#) and the [Mental health and wellbeing strategy 2025 to 2035](#) suggest the value of a whole system approach to prevention, early help and intervention, to help improve young people's mental health (and therefore their capabilities);
  - in pre-16 education and post-16 education and training to improve access to impartial information, advice and guidance about pathways (given the weaknesses identified by Estyn, 2020a, 2022b). Action being taken here includes Careers Wales' offer of a guidance interview to all year 11s and

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<sup>166</sup> As for example, context shapes a young person's access to support that can augment their own capabilities, and also shapes the opportunities open to them.

the 14 to 16 learner entitlement, to help enhance the opportunities open to young people; and

- with the DWP, which, as Sections 7 and 8 outlines, is one of the most important providers of employment support to young people (Wilson, 2021). Therefore, ensuring a ‘coherent and complementary approach on employment and skills’ that brings together DWP, SPF and Welsh Government provision is of vital importance (ibid.), particularly following the planned reforms outlined in the [Get Britain Working White Paper](#).<sup>167</sup> with employers, and also education and training settings, to ensure that, where appropriate, reasonable adjustments are made and consideration is given to adjustments when a young person’s difficulties fall short of the definition of a ‘physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a person’s ability to do everyday activities’<sup>168</sup> or, for example, relate to difficulties with transport or childcare.

12.26. Although the evaluation findings suggest that each of these is important, an evaluation of the extent to which sufficient action is being taken in each area is well beyond the scope of this evaluation of the YPG and YEPF. What is clear though, is that each will require action across government and beyond, further extending the cross-departmental government work which developed the YPG (discussed in Section 7) and also with Medr,<sup>169</sup> the DWP and at regional and local levels through the work of LAs and RSPs. This is likely to be challenging, given the complexity of the post-16 support and EET system in Wales and there are likely to be important lessons from the experience of developing and implementing the YPG as a model of ambitious inter-departmental working which aims to shape a complex system.

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<sup>167</sup> These include, for example, the expanded Youth Offer, which includes access to the Youth Employability Programme, Youth Employability Coaches, and Youth Hubs (UK Government, 2024a).

<sup>168</sup> This is the [Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010](#).

<sup>169</sup> Medr has a strategic duty to promote equality of opportunity in tertiary education. For example, one of the organisation’s strategic priorities is ‘Putting the learner at the heart of the system by focusing on the experience of learners in the tertiary system and their well-being’ (Medr, 2025, p. 7).

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