

SOCIAL RESEARCH NUMBER: 93/2025

PUBLICATION DATE: 30/09/2025

Young Person's Guarantee: process evaluation

Summary

1. Research aims and methodology

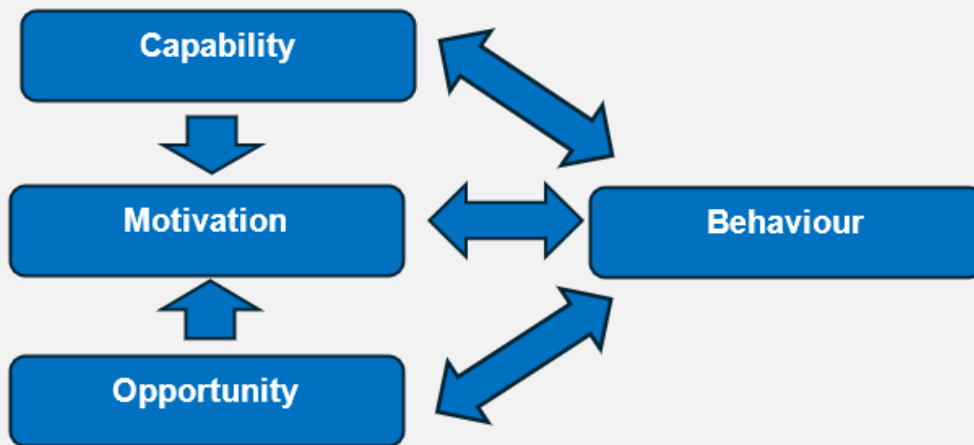
- 1.1 The [Young Person's Guarantee \(YPG\)](#) aims to provide young people aged between 16 and 24 in Wales with an offer of support to gain a place in education or training, find a job or become self-employed. Working Wales provides one simple route for young people to access the YPG, while the YPG's offer of support is delivered by a wide range of programmes and services including Working Wales, Communities for Work+ (CfW+), Jobs Growth Wales+ (JGW+) and Business Wales. [The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework](#) (YEPF) complements the YPG. It 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) and to offer appropriate forms of help. Both the YPG and YEPF aim to contribute to two of the national milestones for Wales:
- that 'at least 90% of 16 to 24 year-olds will be in education, employment or training by 2050' and
 - 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, 2022, p. 4).
- 1.2 The aim of the evaluation was to review the design, implementation, and delivery of the YPG against its strategic intent and intended outcomes. Given its complementarity to the YPG, the evaluation also encompassed a review of the YEPF. A theory-based approach to evaluation was taken, informed by an [Evaluability Assessment](#) (Welsh Government, 2025a). The COM-B Model of behavioural change (outlined in the boxed text below) was used as a theoretical framework.

The COM-B model of behavioural change

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 used the COM-B (Capability – Opportunity – Motivation – Behaviour) model of behavioural change (Michie et al., 2011). As Figure 1.1 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).

Figure 1.1. The COM-B model of behavioural change



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

1.3 A range of research methods were used, including:

- a desk-based review of secondary sources, including policy-related documents, national statistics and administrative data;
- evaluations of services and programmes that provide access to the YPG or deliver the YPG's offer of support (like Working Wales, CfW+ and JGW+);
- primary research (involving interviews, focus groups and workshops) with over 75 stakeholders involved in developing and/or implementing the YPG and/or YEPF; and
- primary research (in depth narrative interviews) with 81 young people aged 16 to 24 living in different parts of Wales and with a range of different equality characteristics, in order to explore their experiences of making transitions.

1.4 Figures in this report were correct at the time of drafting.

2. The design of the YEPF and YPG

- 2.1 There have been longstanding concerns about young people who struggle to make transitions from secondary education into employment, (post-16) education or training (EET). 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 COVID-19 pandemic, and policy responses like lockdown, were triggering a labour market crisis which was hitting young people particularly hard (Learning and Work Institute, 2021). In 2021, the YPG was rapidly developed given the well-founded fears that a generation of young people could have been lost due to the long-term scarring effects of youth unemployment.
- 2.2 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, EET can access support in a timely way. Both take a system-wide collaborative approach that aims to break down barriers between EET support and education and training provision. This is important because the planning and delivery of EET support, on the one hand, and education and training provision, on the other, are often characterised as ‘siloed’. Moreover, different programmes, providers or settings delivering support or education and training are sometimes effectively operating in competition with each other. 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 system-wide approach was necessary. The YEPF aims to do this for those aged 11 to 18 years through collaboration at local authority (LA) level, while the YPG seeks to do this for young people aged 16 to 24 years through collaboration at a national and regional level.
- 2.3 However, despite sharing similar goals, the designs 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 support¹), whereas the YPG is an ‘opt in’ model (where young people have to actively choose to take up support²). This difference reflects the difficulties in tracking young people aged 18 years and over (demonstrated by the first iteration of the YEPF³) and the expectation that as adults, young people aged 18 and over exercise more agency⁴. 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 all young people aged 16 to 24 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

¹ This model is based upon tracking of individuals who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging, in order to target active outreach efforts. 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.

² In contrast to the YEPF model, in the YPG, the default is generally that a young person does not have support from services unless they actively choose to seek it out and take it up.

³ In the period 2021 to 2022, the YEPF covered young people aged 11 to 25. However, in 2022, the YEPF was refocused upon young people aged 11 to 18, in part due to the difficulties tracking young people aged 18 and over.

⁴ Agency has been defined in different ways 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. Here, we mean not only young people’s capacity to act, but also the expectation that they exercise that capability and make choices.

inactive and not actively seeking to re-engage with EET (Welsh Government, 2024a, 2024b).

3. The implementation of the YEPF and YPG

- 3.1 The YPG and YEPF are both collaborative models of system change.⁵ Therefore, implementation of each depends upon the decisions of multiple stakeholders operating at different levels in different sectors. This, in turn, means that the YPG and YEPF, as they are experienced by young people (as distinct from their design on paper), have ‘emerged’ from the decisions of multiple different stakeholders in two overlapping ‘policy networks’ centred on the YPG and YEPF.⁶
- 3.2 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 were also identified. These included more comprehensive and impartial information, advice and guidance for all young people making choices at 16, better communication of information about post-16 learner pathways to young people, the strengthening of employer engagement, and further developing the links between DWP and YPG provision.

4. The effectiveness of the YEPF and YPG

- 4.1 The YPG is working for very large numbers of young people – and over 50,000 young people have now taken it up, helping them navigate increasingly challenging transitions. The range of support provided through the YEPF and by services like Working Wales and the Out of Work Service (OoWS), and programmes like JGW+ and CfW+, that make up the YPG, is effective, and around 40 to 60% of young people supported by programmes that constitute the YPG achieve positive outcomes. These services and programmes support young people to make transitions, by, for example, offering:
- careers and employability information, advice and guidance, meaning that young people better understand and can more easily 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’, which can help increase young people’s motivation; and
 - financial or practical support with travel to college or work or with childcare, which can help increase young people’s access to EET opportunities.

⁵ A ‘system’ embodies the idea of a set of different elements connected together to form a whole, and whose properties are created by the operation of the whole system, rather than just the individual parts (Checkland, 1981, p. 3). ‘Emergence’ describes how an outcome, such as the YPG as it is experienced by young people, is the product of the interactions between the different elements that make up the system (ibid.).

⁶ 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). These policy networks have the characteristics of a system, and given the lack of detailed guidance from the Welsh Government, the YPG in particular, as experienced by young people, can be said to have ‘emerged’ from this system.

Understanding young people's behaviour in context

The impact access to support can make illustrates the importance of understanding young people's capabilities, opportunities and motivations, and therefore their behaviours, in context. For example, an effective YEPF Lead Worker of CfW+ mentor can enhance young people's capabilities, their access to opportunities and their motivation, and therefore encourage and enable behavioural change. Contexts also structure access to opportunities. For example, access to opportunities can be more difficult for young people in rural areas, and negative employer attitudes can disable young people. Social norms, values and customs (which are all part of context) can also shape young people's motivation.

It is essential that EET support services work with young people as they present to services – with particular sets of capabilities, motivations and access to opportunities, that enable and constrain their behaviours. This does not mean that the contexts, including those that form young people's biographies, should be ignored. They can help services better understand why young people present with particular capabilities, motivations and behaviours. They also highlight the potential need for 'upstream' interventions, earlier in young people's lives, or for interventions to change the context, such as work with employers. Nevertheless, an excessive focus upon contextual factors risks limiting how EET services can support young people today, by encouraging and enabling young people to change their behaviour, by focusing upon their capabilities, motivations and access to opportunities.

- 4.2 The COM-B model (outlined above) offers a strong theoretical case for the likely effectiveness of the YPG and YEPF models. This is supported by evaluations of the services and programmes that make up the YPG and reviews of the YEPF. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that the fragmentation of data collection and the lack of direct comparability between service or 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 Annual Population Survey (APS)⁷ and/or service or programme management information data are collected.
- 4.3 Moreover, where available, impact evaluations of the programmes that constitute the YPG, such as CfW+ (Welsh Government 2024c), 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. Furthermore, the positive impacts of the YPG associated with improving access to and/or strengthening support programmes or services are only experienced by those young people who engage with one (or more) of the support programmes or services that make up the YPG. The data suggest many young people do not engage with support programmes

⁷ The APS, conducted by the Office for National Statistics, is a large continuous UK wide household survey that includes questions on education and employment, and also ethnicity, religion and health.

or services and research suggests that those in the most disadvantaged position in relation to education and employment are:

both generally the hardest to engage and support and the least likely to achieve positive outcomes if they do engage with EET support services (Welsh Government, 2024b, pp. 93-94).

- 4.4. Although it is not possible to calculate precisely how many young people do not take up the offer of support from the YPG, the available evidence suggests that it is a substantial minority of young people. Moreover, some groups, including disabled young people, and to a lesser degree, women, are under-represented in support services.

5. Young people's transitions at 16 and 18 in Wales: the education 'lazy river' and the post education 'rapids'

- 5.1. The 81 young people interviewed for the study described a wide range of factors that they felt helped or hindered them, as they made transitions into and out of EET. For example, young people described:

- often difficult experiences in school, and, in a small number of cases, in elective home education. Difficult experiences of education were often linked to adverse childhood experiences such as bullying or periods of time in care, what young people felt were unmet additional learning needs (ALN), and/or health problems, including mental health issues. The disruption to their education caused by the pandemic and policy responses like lockdown was also frequently raised.
- impairments, neurodivergence and/or mental health issues, and ways in which these could lead to discrimination when applying for a job, and how societal failures to make reasonable adjustments could disable them.
- barriers to seeking out or taking up support, including not knowing what support is available, not having the confidence to ask for support from others, a lack of trust or confidence in services, and/or the stigma that can be associated with taking up some types of support (most notably that offered by Job Centre Plus and mental health services).
- feeling lost or unsure about their next steps, and the value for those who were supported, of trusted adults who could help guide and support them.

- 5.2. In order to describe young people's transitions at 16 and 18, we use the metaphor of young people in years 10 and 11 in school drifting down a 'lazy river'. At the end of year 11 (around the age of 16), most (around 90%) are guided by 'lifeguards', such as teachers and careers advisors, down one of two channels that lead to school sixth forms or colleges.⁸ But some young people may get into difficulties, or find they are in the wrong channel, and have to swim against the current. The YEPF (with its focus

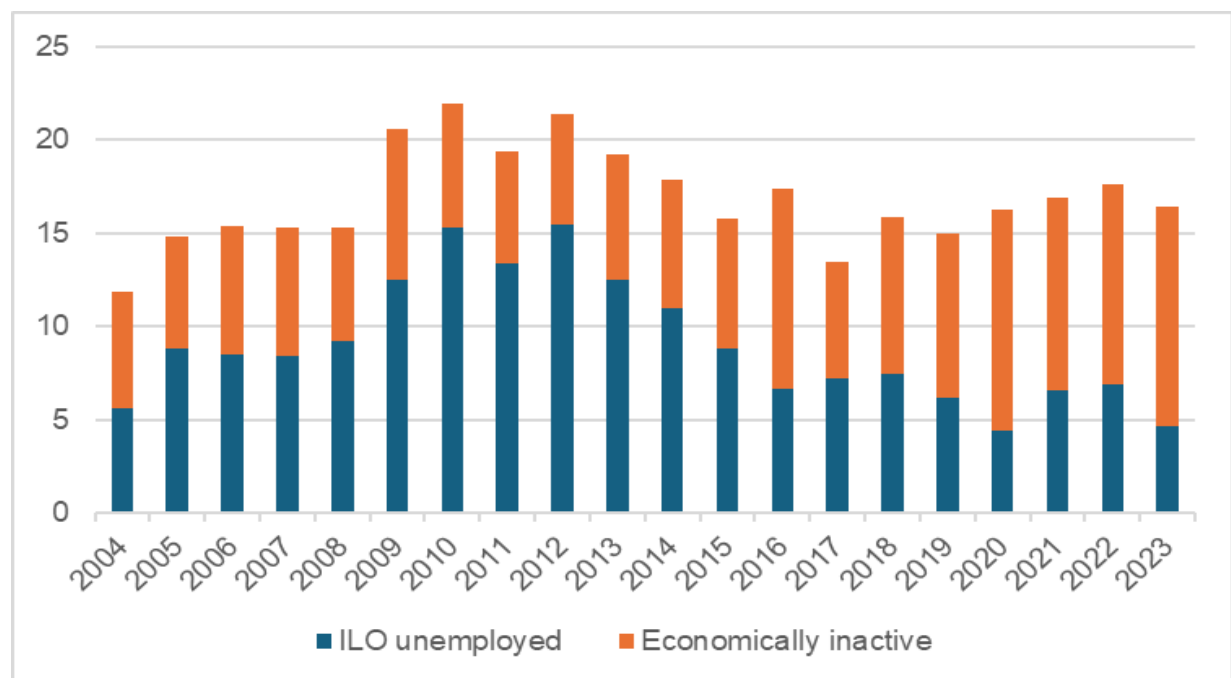
⁸ The remainder either move into employment or are unemployed or economically inactive (and described as 'NEET'). Further details on the percentage of young people aged 16 to 18 who are NEET are provided in the [Statistical First Release: Participation of young people in education and the labour market](#), which is considered the definitive source of data on young people who are NEET.

upon tracking young people's progress and identifying those who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging) means that lifeguards, such as Lead Workers, youth workers, and Careers Wales advisors, are actively looking out for those young people who get into trouble in years 12 and 13.⁹

- 5.3. However, around the age of 18, at the end of year 13, these young people encounter more rapid waters and more channels they must choose between (such as transitions to university, work-based learning, employment and/or self-employment), which requires them to exercise greater agency. As the current in our metaphorical river gets stronger and faster and divides into these different channels, young people need the capability to swim against the current and the opportunity and motivation to choose between different channels.
- 5.4. This stage is also more difficult for young people, because many of the lifeguards are no longer actively looking out for those who have got into difficulties (as the tracking of young people under the YEPF generally stops at 18, unless local authorities are already working with those young people, for example through youth work). Instead, the lifeguards, such as support services like Working Wales, and Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches rely upon young people (who are now adults) approaching them for help. There are many young people who do not, for a range of different reasons, including perceived stigma and the conditionality associated with engaging with DWP provision.
- 5.5. The total number of young people aged 16 to 24 who are NEET, and in particular young women aged 19 to 24 who are NEET, in Wales has declined since the Great Recession (2008 to 2010). However, as Charts 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate, a greater proportion of young people aged 19 to 24 who were NEET were economically inactive rather than unemployed and actively seeking work in 2023 compared to 2008. This change has been particularly marked for young men. These figures reflect a large decline in the proportion of young women who are economically inactive because of caring responsibilities, alongside a rise in the proportion of both young men and young women who are economically inactive due to ill-health (Murphy, 2023). This rise in economic inactivity is a concern, because (among other consequences) it potentially means that these young people are less likely to seek support from either the DWP or the YPG to find work, compared to young people who are unemployed (and therefore actively looking for work).

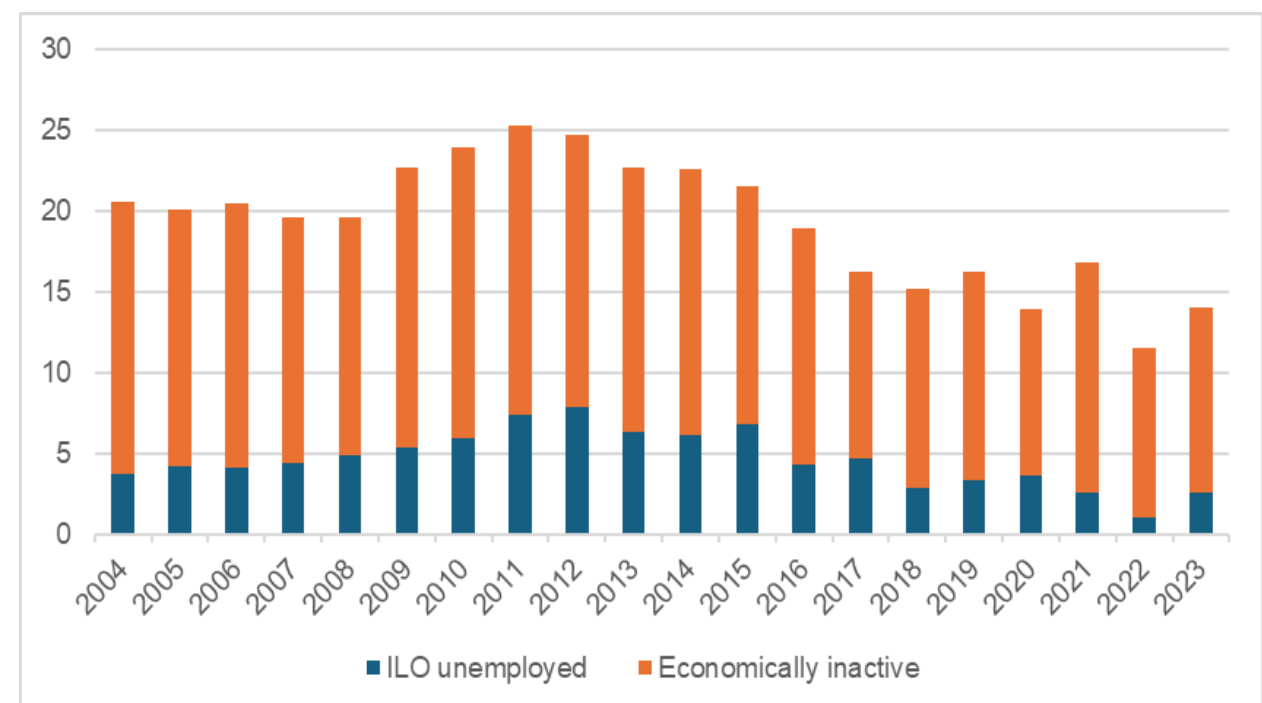
⁹ The metaphor of lifeguards illustrates the relational nature of capabilities, by showing how young people, who may struggle to swim against the current on their own (due to constrained capabilities), can be supported, so they can successfully navigate the rapids and choose a channel that enables them to make a successful transition to the next stage of their EET journey.

Chart 5.1. The estimated percentage of 19 to 24 year-old males in Wales not in education, training or employment, by unemployment and economic inactivity status, 2004 to 2023



Source: [Welsh Government: SFR Participation of young people in education and the labour market](#). Estimates for 2023 are provisional.

Chart 5.2. The estimated percentage of 19 to 24 year-old females not in training or employment, by unemployment and economic inactivity status, 2004 to 2023



Source: [Welsh Government: SFR Participation of young people in education and the labour market](#). Estimates for 2023 are provisional.

6. Conclusions and policy implications

- 6.1. The YPG contributed to changes in the nature and extent of EET support for young people. It helped break down the policy silos that had fragmented the system of post-16 EET support services and programmes.
- 6.2. In response to these changes in the post-16 EET support system, 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, 2025b). Moreover, the post-pandemic surge in youth unemployment that was forecast in 2020 to 2021 did not materialise – something many interviewees for this evaluation, from the Welsh Government in particular, attributed to the success of the YPG and YEPF.
- 6.3. However, it is less clear if these changes in the offer of support also contributed to as large a change as desired in the behaviour of young people aged 19 to 24. Compared to those aged 16 to 18, a larger proportion of young people aged 19 to 24 in Wales are NEET. Furthermore, compared to young people aged 16 to 18 who are NEET, a larger proportion of young people aged 19 to 24 who are NEET are economically inactive, and a larger proportion in this older age group are not engaging with EET support services offered as part of the YPG.
- 6.4. The available data also indicate that the impact of changes in the offer of support upon young people's behaviour has been uneven. Interviews for this study and other studies (included in the Rapid Evidence Review: Welsh Government 2024a, 2024b) identify gaps and weaknesses in EET support for young people experiencing mild to moderate mental health issues, neurodivergent young people, and young people in rural areas. And data show that despite stronger representation in programmes like JGW+, overall, there is continuing under-representation of disabled young people in both EET support programmes and in EET. Young women are also under-represented in some EET support services and programmes. 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, which is poorly paid, insecure and offers limited opportunities for progression.
- 6.5. As Section 4 outlines, and the findings from interviews with young people outlined above 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)abilities 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.
- 6.6. The evidence considered in this evaluation and the Rapid Evidence Review (Welsh Government, 2024a, 2024b) therefore 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. Relationships between young people and trusted adults take time to develop and nurture, which highlights the importance of long-term funding for services. 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.

6.7. Overall, although the current programmes that make up the YPG are effective and are evidence based (informed by ‘what works’), the evaluation indicates that, as the [Rapid Evidence Review Into Young People’s Thinking and Behaviour](#) concluded, ‘simply doing more of the same is unlikely to be sufficient’ (Welsh Government 2024b, p. 94).¹⁰ This is important because in many ways the YPG was a continuation and expansion of existing support, rather than a radical change in the nature of support. 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 vital if the national milestones, that 90% of young people are in EET by 2050 and that participation of under-represented groups is increased, are to be achieved. However, as the Rapid Evidence Review identifies:

- existing models work at least moderately well, and ‘what works is reasonably well understood’; and
- there is ‘no ‘silver bullet’ (or panacea) and the evidential base for more radical options is limited (Welsh Government 2024b, p. 92).

6.8. If more radical options are favoured, the limited evidential base suggests the need to adopt a more experimental approach, with real time testing and adaptation, and a strong focus upon young people’s capabilities, motivations, access to opportunities, and behavioural responses to initiatives, rather than assuming that there is a ‘fully-formed solution ready for implementation’ (Alliance for Useful Evidence and Nesta, 2016, p. 19).

6.9. This evaluation also identifies that 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. This action includes identifying and addressing ALN. It also includes actions to strengthen young people’s 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, with relevant partners including Medr,¹¹ the youth service and voluntary sector organisations.

¹⁰ 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, 2024b, p. 95), meaning there may also be scope to improve existing models.

¹¹ Medr is also known as the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER). Medr began regulating the post-16 sector in Wales in August 2024. The organisation has a strategic duty to promote equality of opportunity in

The [NYTH/NEST Framework](#) and the [Mental Health and Well-being Strategy 2025 to 2035](#) suggest 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), through, for example, Careers Wales' offer of a guidance interview to all year 11s and the 14 to 16 learner entitlement, to help enhance the opportunities open to young people;
- with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), one of the most important providers of employment support to young people, in order to ensure a 'coherent and complementary approach on employment and skills' (Wilson, 2021), particularly following the planned reforms to the DWP's youth offer, outlined in the [Get Britain Working White Paper](#); and
- 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'¹² or, for example, relate to transport or childcare barriers.

6.10. 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, further extending cross-departmental government work which developed the YPG and also with Medr, and at regional and local levels through the work of Local Authorities (LAs) and Regional Skills Partnerships (RSPs).¹³ 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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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).

¹² This is the [Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010](#).

¹³ RSPs provide a focus for co-ordination and planning, while LAs, provide the strategic and operational leadership for implementing the YEPF.

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Full Research Report: Holtom, D. with Bowen, R. and Preece, E. (2025). The Young Person's Guarantee: process evaluation. Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 93/2025

Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/young-persons-guarantee-process-evaluation>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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