Youth Engagement and Progression Lead Worker Review

July 2024

This report is also available in Welsh.

The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales. Estyn is responsible for inspecting:

↗ nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
↗ primary schools
↗ secondary schools
↗ special schools
↗ pupil referral units
↗ all-age schools
↗ independent schools
↗ further education
↗ independent specialist colleges
↗ adult learning in the community partnerships
↗ local government education services
↗ teacher education and training
↗ Welsh for adults
↗ work-based learning
↗ learning in the justice sector

Estyn also:

↗ reports to Senedd Cymru and provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the Welsh Government and others
↗ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence

Contents
Page

Executive summary

The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) is designed to facilitate young individuals in accessing education, training, or employment opportunities. Central to this framework is the assignment of a lead worker who provides support to young people either not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET. During the autumn of 2023, we engaged in a series of visits and virtual meetings with key stakeholders, including 11 local authorities, nine secondary schools, five colleges, five training providers, and Careers Wales teams. Our focus was on evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the lead worker role in assisting at-risk young people through their transition into post-16 education, training, or employment.

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. Adapting to post-pandemic challenges, lead workers commonly addressed issues like social anxiety, mental health, and financial struggles. Lead workers' influence often extended beyond the young person as the support they provided also positively impacted on families and the wider community. This is what some of the young people shared with us.

> "I feel she's proper like helped us, and we are in school every day, and if we didn't have a lead worker, we wouldn't be doing as good as we are now."

> "I could turn to Megan, she always texted and called even when I didn't answer. I don't see Megan as often now. I'm giving 'Inspire' a go and hopefully I will go on a placement and get a job."

> "I would have struggled if my lead worker support was taken away when I was in year 10."

> "We can talk about anything, and she wouldn't judge. If I see her in the corridor, we have a chat."

Our evidence indicated significant, yet often appropriate, variation in relation to the lead worker role across Wales. Approaches were influenced by local contexts such as geography and demographics, as well as available support agencies. Leaders and managers in local authorities faced challenges in relation to assessing the scale of need and the type of support required, as well as meeting need. Complexity of need and the rates of referrals were increasing.

Transition activities into post-16 colleges were typically well-structured, but 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. Handover at this stage posed a risk as young people often lost continuity of support. There were no systematic procedures to ensure that students

retained their places and when young people were identified as at-risk, they were usually assigned a new lead worker instead of reconnecting with their previous one.

Local collaboration to support the lead worker role varied, with the best cases involving strong representation from relevant agencies at strategic and operational levels with leaders committing to transparent data sharing. However, in many cases there were challenges due to anxieties around GDPR and a lack of understanding about what information could and could not be shared. Collaboration at a regional and national level was limited with very few examples of pan-Wales sharing of knowledge, experiences, and professional learning.

Leaders monitored and evaluated the impact of lead worker services using various approaches, including data tracking, learner well-being surveys, case studies, and feedback from young people and lead workers. However, attributing successful outcomes, such as a sustained place in education, training, or employment beyond age 16, solely to lead worker interventions was challenging due to the number of other services that a young person often received support from.

Lead worker recruitment and retention challenges stemmed from short-term contracts and difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified youth workers. Recruiting Welsh speakers was particularly challenging, limiting support services in Welsh. However, demand for Welsh-medium support was low and therefore meeting need did not pose challenges at the time of our visit.

Recommendations

The Welsh Government, Careers Wales, local authorities and all other partners involved in supporting young people through lead workers should:

- Improve post-16 transition support by ensuring continuity of a young person's lead worker until 31st January following a young person's move into their post-16 destination, whether this is in school, at college, with a training provider, or employment

- Develop ways to measure the success of work to prevent young people becoming NEET that are based on longer-term evaluations and do not over-emphasise the value of initial destination survey data

- Support better data sharing about the circumstances of individual young people to facilitate stronger collaboration between all partners, including education and training providers, and enable young people to receive relevant and timely support

- Support the professional learning needs of lead workers in all agencies and share effective practice in the provision of lead worker support

- Improve practice in line with the effective practice featured in this report and address the shortcomings highlighted in this report

Introduction

This report is written in response to a request for advice from the Welsh Government in the Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2023-2024. The report focuses on the effectiveness of the youth engagement and progression lead worker role in supporting young people transitioning into post-compulsory education or training who are NEET. The report takes into consideration the Welsh Government's [Youth Engagement and Progression Framework Implementation Plan](#) and [Youth Engagement and Progression Framework Handbook](#) alongside the [The Young Person's Guarantee](#).

To inform this report we drew upon evidence from activities across a range of organisations including 11 of the 22 local authorities, nine secondary schools and 10 post-16 providers, which included further education and work-based learning providers, as well as organisations delivering the Jobs Growth Wales+ (JGW+) programme. We also met with Careers Wales and Working Wales teams across Wales, and key partner organisations including the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS) and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

Prior to visiting local authorities, we invited them to complete a pre-visit survey to provide us with an insight into how they approach the lead worker role and to inform our planning. During our visits to local authorities and schools, we met with key staff at strategic and operational level, and interviewed young people who had accessed, or were currently accessing, the support of someone in a lead worker role. In our online meetings with post-16 providers and other key partners, we met with a range of staff to discuss their understanding of the lead worker role and explore how they work collaboratively to support young people who are not engaged in education, employment, or training or are deemed to be at risk of dropping out of education or training.

The intended audience for this report is the Welsh Government, local authorities, the youth service, education providers, and other key partner organisations who have a role in supporting young people moving into post-compulsory education and training.

Background

This section of the report examines the lead worker role, outlining the initial rationale and expectations. It details how the role has evolved and the changes in the numbers of young people who are NEET over time.

Rationale and expectations for the lead worker role

In 2013 the Welsh Government published the YEPF implementation plan. The Ministerial foreword to this document included the following statement:

Welsh Government has a long-standing commitment to maximise the opportunities for all children and young people. This includes supporting their progression into education and training and then employment, enabling them to fulfil their potential. We recognise that economic and personal circumstances present some groups of young people with huge challenges to progression, and we are passionate about tackling these barriers, particularly for those who need support the most. (Welsh Government, 2013, p. 2).

Within the framework there were two new offers, one of which was:

…the allocation of single point of contact (a lead worker) to the most at-risk young people to help ensure that support is delivered in a joined up and coordinated way, and that it works to meet their needs. (Welsh Government, 2013, p. 6).

The Welsh Government's intention was that lead workers would be allocated to pupils identified as being at risk in Years 10 and 11 to provide continuity through transition, with the aim being that the lead worker would be the point of contact for the three months following the end of Year 11. From there, the young person would be re-assessed as part of the five-tier model and a decision reached on whether support via a post-16 lead worker should continue or not (Welsh Government, 2013, p.28).

Five tier model

For individuals between the ages of 16 and 18, lead worker support is assigned based on the Careers Wales 5-tier model of engagement. The YEPF handbook states that, in most cases, the lead worker role would be provided by the youth service for young people in tier 2, and by Careers Wales for those in tier 3, and 4 where appropriate, and that a national system of lead workers across Wales would be established. However, teams and individuals involved in supporting young people recognised that other local authority services such as social services may also be in a position to provide lead worker support if they were deemed to be the most appropriate point of contact.

The Careers Wales five tier model of engagement (for post-16) and allocation of lead workers

Tier	Young people	Lead worker	Tracking and careers information, advice and guidance support
Tier 5: **In further education or EET**	• In EET. • Working or studying part time over 16 hours.	No lead worker necessary given that young person is already engaged and not judged to be at risk of disengaging. Providers' own pastoral systems or support should be utilised as appropriate.	Careers Wales
Tier 4: **At risk of dropping out of EET**	• Engaged in less than 16 hours of EET. • Have been identified at risk of disengagement pre-16 and/or were judged as at risk of not making a positive transition but are subsequently in further education, sixth form or training. • Have been identified to Careers Wales by EET providers (or themselves) as at risk of dropping out of EET.	Allocation of lead worker depends on level of risk: • For low and medium risk use provider pastoral systems and/ or allocate a learning coach as a lead worker. • For High risk a lead worker may be allocated from either youth service or Careers Wales or if Families First involved Team Around the Family will decide allocation of lead worker.	Careers Wales

Tier 3: NEET or actively seeking EET but known to Careers Wales	• Engaged with Careers Wales and/or known to be actively seeking EET; either ready to enter EET, or assessed as requiring career management or employability skills support to enter EET. • This tier should also include those known to Careers Wales, actively seeking EET but not requiring Careers Wales enhanced support, for example accessing support via careerswales.gov.wales or awaiting a college start date..	• Lead worker identified for 100% of the cohort. • Careers Wales will provide the lead worker in nearly all cases.	Careers Wales
Tier 2: Young people known to Careers Wales who are NEET and are not ready or available to seek EET	• Significant or multiple barriers requiring intensive personal support. **Not available or unable to seek EET (for example due to illness, being a young carer, pregnancy, in custody).***	• Lead worker identified for 100% of the cohort. • Youth service will provide lead worker in most cases (in some instances this role may be allocated to other services or organisations providing intensive personal support).	Careers Wales
Tier 1: EET status unknown to Careers Wales	Unknown to Careers Wales.	Once individuals are identified they are allocated to appropriate tier and allocated a lead worker accordingly.	Careers Wales

(Adapted from: Welsh Government, 2022, p. 29).

In November 2021, the Welsh Government unveiled the The Young Person's Guarantee | GOV.WALES, which operates alongside the YEPF. This commitment aimed to ensure that individuals aged 16 to 25 in Wales had the necessary support to secure a place in education or training, or to find a job, or to become self-employed (Welsh Government, 2021, p.3). It established a comprehensive framework to oversee Welsh Government-funded initiatives for young people with its primary goal

being to maximise the use of current interventions and to streamline the path for young people, irrespective of their circumstances or backgrounds. As part of this commitment, Working Wales led on providing one simple point of access to information and the offer available to young people. However, policy makers acknowledged that those young people who are classed as NEET, or at risk of becoming so, were unlikely to access the services and information available without support from a lead worker who understands the needs of the young person, and the barriers they face.

Data sources and statistics

Data on young people not in education, employment, or training plays a crucial role in determining the level of support needed and evaluating the effectiveness of interventions, including lead worker support. However, challenges arise due to the diverse sources of NEET data, such as the Statistical First Release (SFR) Participation of young people in education and the labour market , the Annual Population Survey (APS) and the Careers Wales pupil destination survey, each offering different perspectives. The complexity intensifies because of the dynamic nature of the situation, with young people frequently relocating both geographically and in terms of their educational and employment status. Additionally, the impact of COVID-19 has further complicated patterns and trends in NEET data, as many young individuals have been adversely affected by the pandemic.

The main differences between these data are explained in Table 1 below. Figure 1 below details the numbers of young people who are NEET according to each data set. Table 2 provides further explanation of the numbers.

Table 1

SFR data	APS data	Careers Wales destinations data
Provisional SFR data, which is published annually, categorises NEET young people according to their age groups with 16 to 18-year-olds being one group, and 19 to 24-year-olds the other. Information is drawn from education enrolments in school, further education, higher education, work-based learning providers, and the Open University. The data also considers population estimates taken from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and Welsh Government alongside the annual population survey (APS).	The APS, conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), is a large household survey that includes questions on education and employment. It provides a rolling year estimate of the proportion of young people who are NEET. Published quarterly, APS estimates indicate trends in youth NEET rates between annual releases, though they are not directly comparable to SFR data owing to different data sources and methodologies. A number of recent NEET estimates are categorised as being of limited quality due to falling sample sizes (25-40 responses) in the APS.	Careers Wales conducts an annual survey tracking the destinations of leavers from maintained schools in Wales, focusing on individuals in Years 11, 12 and 13. The initial published data, which is captured in October and published in March or April, helps to calculate the proportion of NEET leavers. This is the only data set that provides estimates at local authority level. However, non-response issues vary across local authorities, hindering comparisons.

(Welsh Government, 2020)

Figure 1: Proportion of young people, aged 16-18, not in education, employment, or training in Wales, 2018 to 2022
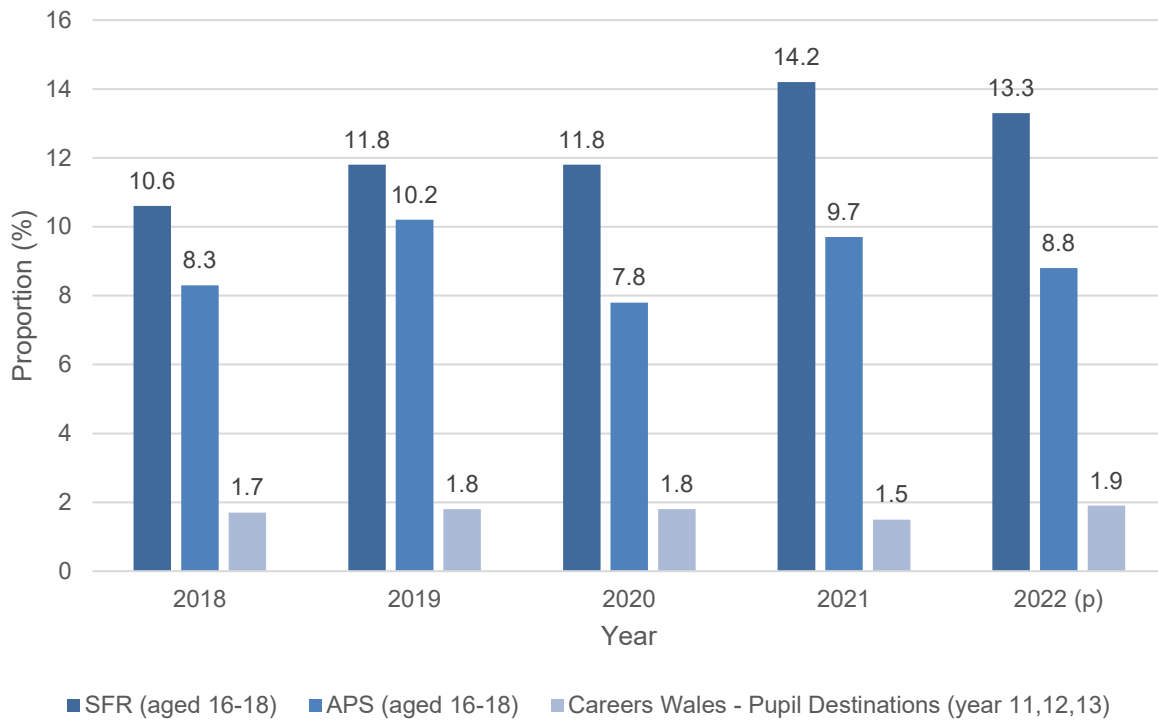
Note: (p) Statistical First Release (SFR) data for 2022 is provisional. Figures for Careers Wales – Pupil destinations (Years 11,12,13) exclude non-respondents.
Statistical First Release (SFR) series, Annual Population Survey (APS) series, and Pupil Destinations from schools in Wales—provide estimates on the proportion of young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET). However, they differ in methodology, data collection, time periods covered and definitions, and are not directly comparable.

(Welsh Government, 2024)

(Welsh Government, n.d.)

Table 2

SFR data	APS data	Careers Wales data
The SFR dataset indicates that the NEET rates for 16 to 18-year-olds remained relatively steady, averaging 10.6% from 2012 to 2018. However, there was an increase to 11.8% in 2019 and 2020. In 2021, following the initial year of the pandemic, NEET rates escalated to 14.2%, subsequently decreasing to 13.3% in 2022, which corresponds to **14,400** individuals aged 16-18. The data for 2022 is provisional.	The APS data reveals notable variations in NEET data for 16 to 18-year-olds from 2012 to 2022. The peak NEET figures since 2012 were documented in 2012 and 2013, reaching 11.9%, while the lowest point was observed in 2020 at 7.8%. The latest data for 2022 indicates that 8.8% of the 16 to 18-year-old cohort were classified as NEET, representing **9,300** individuals in this age group.	The pupil destination survey conducted by Careers Wales reports by year group capturing data for those who had been in education or training during the previous academic year. A pupil's destination is their known activity on the 31 October following the end of the academic year. In October 2022, the combined figures for Year 11, 12 and 13 leavers. indicates that there were **1,066** NEET young people. Added to this, a further 892 did not respond to the destination survey, and 276 were identified as having left the area. The most notable increase is for Year 11 leavers with 2.1% of the total cohort being NEET in 2022 compared to an average of 1.7% for the previous four years. In the case of years 12 and 13, the percentage of NEET young people has remained reasonably consistent over the past five years averaging 0.6% for year 12 leavers and 2.7% for year 13 leavers.

In most cases, local authorities used Careers Wales data as their reference as this data set reports at local authority level. However, drawing lines of comparison across local authorities is not always helpful as discussions with stakeholders revealed that data could become a distraction of sorts resulting in too great a focus on the figures, and ways in which they can be manipulated, as opposed to the young people

themselves. Where practice was weaker, it was often driven by box-ticking and moving young people into other categories to present a more appealing picture.

There were also inconsistent approaches to how electively home-educated (EHE) young people were considered, with a few local authorities ensuring a focus on this cohort, whereas for many this was not the case due to issues with data sharing and EHE families exercising their right to privacy. Local authorities have reported that in some instances EHE families refused consent for their information to be shared with Careers Wales.

Case studies: insights into young people's feedback on the positive impact of their lead worker support

These case studies explored the experiences of young people in three separate focus groups, all of whom have received support from lead workers. These insights highlighted the pivotal role lead workers play in supporting young individuals in dealing with challenges such as mental health issues, behavioural problems, low attendance, and disengagement from education.

Focus group with six young people

This case study explored the experiences of six young people, all of whom left school in either 2022 or 2023. At the time of our visit, they were all being supported by the local authority's post-16 team as they were either NEET or were very recently NEET. Two of the six young people had been supported by a lead worker pre-16. In the majority of cases, the lead worker initially contacted them either by phone or by visiting their house if phone calls were unanswered.

All young people expressed a strong sense of support from their lead worker, highlighting how they had been helped. This support included initiating a paid work opportunity at a game shop, organising voluntary painting in the local shopping centre to enhance employability, and facilitating the attainment of qualifications in first aid, food hygiene, and customer service. The lead worker also arranged for free bus passes, supported those who had dropped out of college to access a skills development programme, and assisted in personal matters such as obtaining birth certificates and sorting out bank details. Notably, the lead worker played a crucial role in helping a young person with anxiety, who had been reluctant to leave the house since the pandemic, gradually building a relationship and supporting their participation in a skills programme.

Focus group with five young people

These young individuals came from diverse educational backgrounds, including mainstream secondary schools, special schools, and pupil referral units. The discussion explored the role of lead workers in improving attendance, behaviour, and mental health outcomes for these young people.

The young people in this focus group had received lead worker support for durations ranging from four months to two years. On average, they had approximately four hours of contact per week with their lead worker. Lead worker introductions were facilitated through schools or self-referral based on peer recommendations. Lead workers were accessible through various means, including classroom sessions, bookable meetings, drop-in sessions, and phone contact, even during holiday periods. All of the young people accessing lead worker support had faced challenges in mainstream school related to attendance, behaviour, and/or mental health.

Many young people reported significant improvements in attendance and engagement with education due to lead worker support. They revealed that their peers were often jealous of the support they received from lead workers, leading some young people to refer their friends to lead worker services. The young people said that the best aspects of having a lead worker included feeling heard, having a space to discuss their emotions, and receiving personalised attention.

The young people expressed a desire for more fun activities and trips to support their engagement in education. Parents/carers had limited involvement in the lead worker support process, but most were familiar with the lead worker and had some form of communication with them.

Focus group with three young people

The three pupils, who were from Year 9, Year 11 and Year 12, shared their experiences of working with assigned lead workers for a little over a year. These young people faced a variety of challenges, including mental health and emotional issues, behavioural problems, low attendance, and disengagement from school.

The process of assigning lead workers began with the pupils being approached by their heads of year, followed by parental involvement in the decision-making process. The pupils had no prior awareness of the lead worker role before being offered support. They were open to the suggestions and willingly engaged.

At the time of our visit, all three learners found themselves in a much-improved educational position, with two no longer accessing lead worker support, while one continued to benefit from it. The lead worker support programme included an accredited unit focusing on confidence building, self-awareness, and addressing anti-social behaviour, resulting in certificates that could be used for college applications.

The young people knew how to contact their lead workers by phone, although they had not needed to do so outside regular hours. They also knew where the lead workers were based in the school. The support was accessible through an appointments system, typically one hour per week, with the flexibility for more ad-hoc visits if required. The young people appreciated seeing their lead workers in various school spaces, creating a sense of reassurance and accessibility. They were also well-informed about the days when their lead workers would be in school.

Lead workers offered holistic support, addressing both academic and pastoral needs. For instance, when a pupil was struggling in a particular lesson, the lead worker would take them to a dedicated room to work through the content together in a supportive manner.

The young people could identify the significant benefits of this support, such as choosing to stay in sixth form instead of pursuing college, no longer avoiding challenging situations, recognising the importance of education, and finding joy in learning. They spoke of their newfound confidence and enhanced focus in their academic pursuits. One pupil highlighted a substantial improvement in attendance, with rates increasing from around 40% to consistently over 80%.

In a testament to the strong relationships formed, one student also encountered their lead worker in a youth club setting, further strengthening their connection. Even for those young people who no longer required formal lead worker support, the opportunity to see their lead workers around the school and engage in casual conversations in the corridor was highly appreciated.

Approaches to the lead worker role across Wales

Who fulfils the role

Our findings showed that there was no consistent approach to the lead worker role across Wales. This is not to suggest that there should be, as each local authority area is unique with its own context, geographical spread, and demography.

In relation to who might fulfil a lead worker role, although the YEPF implementation plan suggested that this would likely be someone from the local authority or careers service, it also acknowledges that it could potentially be any individual who can offer the necessary support to those in need.

> We believe those young people who are at risk of disengaging, or who have disengaged, should have access to an individual who can provide consistent support and help coordinate support if a young person is also receiving support from other specialist support services. We describe this role as the 'lead worker'. (Welsh Government, 2013, p.25).

The updated YEPF handbook builds on this vision stating:

> The lead worker function is intended to provide continuity of support and contact for the most at-risk young people to remain in, or to enter EET (education, employment or training). It should be focused on those needing sustained support, and an offer of additional support to an individual. (Welsh Government, 2022a, p.23).

Our meetings with local authorities and Careers Wales teams found that it is common practice that the youth service takes responsibility for providing lead worker support for young people in tier 2, and Careers Wales advisers for those at tier 3. We found that the lead worker role was carried out by a diverse range of individuals across Wales, including:

- Local authority staff who have the job title lead worker

- Local authority staff who have other substantive roles, but also have a lead worker remit, for example, those based in family support services, the employment agency, or youth support teams

- Youth service staff

- Careers Wales and Working Wales advisers, both in schools and office basedofficebasedoffice based

- Careers Wales advisers seconded to local authorities

- Those with a pastoral remit whether as a school, college or local authority employee, for example, parent liaison officers, well-being and behaviour officers, learning coaches and attendance officers

- Heads of Year 11 and sixth forms in schools

- Those working in third sector organisations who have established relationships with young people

In a few cases, a young person will link with more than one lead worker meaning that there isn't always that one single point of contact thereby conflicting with the original vision. For example, a young person may be accessing support through the school pastoral team as well as via a local authority lead worker. Likewise, others may access support through third sector organisations while at the same time linking with college support teams. Accessing lead worker support through more than one route may be beneficial to a young person.

Alex, who is 17, had a very unsettled past as a care-experienced child and young person moving across the UK with every move involving a complete change of support. When in hostels, Alex did not co-operate or see the need to engage with a support worker, describing themself as very unreliable and forgetful.

Having self-referred, Alex is now supported by a support worker as well as a homelessness charity. They have developed a very close relationship with the support worker who is helping them to obtain a passport and bank account without which they cannot get stable employment. Alex is about to start volunteering at a charity warehouse where they will learn to restore furniture. Alongside this, they intend to start a BTEC programme in barbering in January as this is their chosen occupation. Alex says that the support worker is reliable, replying to texts within 10-20 minutes. They share that the support worker always 'keeps their word' when they promise to do something.

Alex has also started the Step Ladder Plus scheme. This is a programme about planning for the future and managing money for care-experienced children and young people aged 16-17 who earn money by completing six stages of the scheme. By the end of the scheme, Alex will have earned £1,500 to help them into a flat.

Approaches to the lead worker role in local authorities

The approach to and positioning of lead workers within local authority structures varied across Wales. Factors that influenced this included existing structures, where the individuals who take on a lead worker role are already based, and funding streams.

Examples of approaches are as follows:

- In Denbighshire, the co-ordination of lead workers fell under the remit of the Engagement and Progression Lead Officer (EPLO). This role was situated within

the engagement and progression team, which was part of the broader education team.

- In Newport, the Youth Engagement and Progression Co-ordinator deployed and otherwise co-ordinated with partner agencies and their various operational staff to engage young people identified as needing lead worker support. For example, each of the authority's nine secondary schools and alternative provision has a learning coach, a family liaison officer, or similar post on site with a significant lead worker function.

- In Pembrokeshire, all lead workers were officers who sat across directorates enabling them to have access across relevant departments in the local authority to enhance the support it provided for young people. They were all fully qualified and experienced youth workers with different backgrounds, which supported a person-centred planning approach that enabled them to match the right lead worker to the right young person.

- In Cardiff, lead workers, known as Youth Mentors, sat across two departments within the Cardiff Commitment providing an overall structure and guidance that coordinated the work across both pre- and post-16 education. This included schools, post-16 providers, the youth service, and employability and skills services.

Role descriptors and skillset

The YEPF implementation plan set out the original specification for the lead worker role. This has been further developed in the updated YEPF handbook to include specific functions which are as follows:

- being a named individual responsible for regularly keeping in touch with the young person

- having an awareness of the range of support in place around an individual and, if necessary, negotiating with other support services and professionals and advocating on behalf of the young person as appropriate

- flagging to a supervisor or EPC (Engagement and Progression Co-ordinator) if support is not helping a young person move forward

- helping to build resilience of a young person in ways relevant to the lead worker's organisation and its particular focus and expertise

- reviewing the 'status' of the young person against the Careers Wales 5-tier model of engagement, and providing feedback to the EPC (Welsh Government, 2022, p. 23).

Generally, those with local authority lead worker roles had appropriate role descriptors whether they were in a role entitled 'lead worker' with an associated job description, or whether they fulfilled this role as part of another remit.

In the main, role descriptors were clear and outlined the skills and qualities required which echoed those shared in the YEPF noted above. Role descriptors largely focused on the personal qualities and experiences required as opposed to formal qualifications as in some instances applicants did not have the desired accreditation. Where possible, the aim was to recruit lead workers with a youth work qualification or youth work background but, where this was not possible, in many cases there was a willingness to support new recruits through training and qualifications.

Local authorities aimed to recruit individuals who could demonstrate experience of working with young people in small groups and one-to-one settings. They also sought individuals who were effective administrators and who were able to follow information management processes. Most of those fulfilling lead worker roles were appropriately skilled, held relevant qualifications or were willing to work towards them, and were enthusiastic and wholly committed to the work that they did. However, our visits highlighted that demand for staff with additional learning needs (ALN) experience and expertise has increased in recent years and this was presenting challenges.

Those fulfilling lead worker roles, as well as managers and leaders, acknowledged that the role had evolved over time. In the best cases, job descriptions were revisited and reviewed during appraisals to ensure that they were current and transparent to new employees coming into the role.

Caseloads

The management of caseloads emerged as a dynamic challenge, marked by a delicate balance between need, resource allocation, and the evolving complexities faced by young people. There was significant variance across Wales with tier 2 caseloads for full-time local authority employed lead workers ranging from 15 to 45 young people. It was difficult to directly compare as local authority structures, resources, wider support services, and demands differed. In Careers Wales and Working Wales, advisers identified variances in caseloads, but acknowledged that they were within acceptable parameters.

There were some recurrent themes in relation to caseloads. One was a lack of clarity in terms of taking on additional young people beyond caseload limitations to ensure a responsive approach to increasing demands. The other was the reason for this growing need for lead worker support, which was attributed to the post-COVID-19 era and an increase in mental health and anxiety issues resulting in greater pressures on one-to-one support services.

The upheaval caused by the pandemic presented itself across all educational settings. A notable example unfolded within a school setting, where the Head of Year 11 assumed the pivotal role of lead worker for pupils at risk of becoming NEET. The school's link youth worker, despite having an official caseload, provided additional support to individuals who had previously received lead worker support but were no longer officially registered, highlighting the need for clear expectations in relation to 'unofficial' caseloads.

Where collaborative working was well-established, teams worked together to explore how best to optimise resources to ensure caseloads were managed effectively and

efficiently. Local authorities took different approaches to reviewing caseloads. In the best cases, caseloads were discussed and reviewed regularly to ensure that they remained manageable.

Local authorities did not routinely have mechanisms in place to determine when a young person was deemed to no longer need lead worker support. Our findings showed that, although processes were in place at a local level, there was no consistent approach in relation to entry and exit criteria for young people accessing lead worker support.

Professional learning

Many of those with local authority-based lead worker roles had access to a wide range of training opportunities through their own organisations, and in a minority of cases, via partner organisations. The types of professional learning and training that lead workers undertook included formal accredited courses, in-house mandatory and optional training opportunities, and support through supervision. Examples of specific professional learning included:

- Level two and three youth work qualifications
- Adverse childhood experiences training
- Trauma-informed practices training
- Emotional literacy support assistant training
- Mediation training
- Suicide prevention training
- Structured supervision sessions

The above list was not exhaustive but provided a flavour of the opportunities available to lead workers which varied from organisation to organisation. Where these opportunities were available, this resulted in enhanced expertise, which in turn positively impacted on lead workers' ability to address complex issues and challenges in their roles.

In the best cases, professional learning took a collaborative approach that enabled lead workers to access a range of expertise, share good practice and raise questions. Examples included:

- In Pembrokeshire local authority, those who were new to the lead worker team were supported to obtain level three youth work qualifications and register with the Education Workforce Council. They shared that this was crucial for ensuring that staff had the necessary qualifications and credentials for their roles and ultimately contributed to maintaining high standards for those in lead worker roles.

- Carmarthenshire local authority viewed the well-being of staff as a priority. Managers reflected on practice and identified training needs, which were provided for all local authority services. The staff engagement and participation group, alongside the service development and training group, contributed to the discussion around the holistic training needs of practitioners. This focus on staff

well-being contributed to a healthier work environment and better outcomes for both staff and young people.

- At Willows High School in Cardiff, youth mentors had access to a wide range of multi-disciplinary corporate training provided by Cardiff Council. This included corporate mandatory training such as safeguarding, but also a raft of youth service training opportunities which supported the development of creative and innovative teams who were able to learn from one another leading to a more holistic and effective approach to their work.

- Bridgend local authority included supervision meetings as part of their practice. These forums supported lead workers and encouraged them to reflect on practice and problem solve while also providing opportunities to discuss current issues and approaches to dealing with them.

These professional learning opportunities, when effectively implemented, supported the development of well-equipped, collaborative, and resilient lead workers who were better prepared to address the diverse needs of young people thereby contributing to positive outcomes. However, in a few organisations, training and development was limited, and across the board there were very few examples of cross local authority shared professional learning opportunities. One example of where this did happen was via the WLGA who offered a common thread by attending various meetings on a national and regional basis resulting in them being in a position to share expertise and knowledge in relation to the YEPF and lead worker roles.

Geographical, demographic, and location considerations

Local authority leaders, managers, and lead workers generally had a strong understanding of their cohort of young people and local demographics, allowing for targeted and appropriate support. Geographical area impacted on how effectively teams were able to engage with young people, but in most cases lead workers had strategies to address this. Teams endeavoured to find ways to reach young people, many of whom were not able to travel to central venues. Bases where young people could access lead worker support included schools, colleges, Careers Wales offices, community venues, youth clubs and homes. Examples included:

- In Merthyr Tydfil, the lack of transport; unsafe housing and living arrangements including people choosing to live in cars; and levels of economic inactivity were affecting young people's ability to access provision and their engagement with it. Lead workers worked closely with those who were economically inactive or at risk of offending and provided relevant interventions. For example, a community lead worker facilitated qualifications that would enable access to education, training and employment alongside the youth offending service (YOS) who worked on behaviour management programmes for younger learners.

- In Pembrokeshire, activity largely took an outreach approach involving lead workers going into communities and homes where appropriate, though parental interference created barriers in the case of the latter on occasion. Post-pandemic, it was commonplace that young people accessing lead worker support were often reluctant to leave their bedrooms. As a result, the team has engaged

with young people online where appropriate. This approach was also useful given the rural nature of Pembrokeshire.

- In Cardiff, the area of greatest need fell within the southern arc of city at the time of our visit. However, there were also growing needs in more affluent areas to the north-west of Cardiff where large housing developments had been built. These areas typically had very limited facilities and transport links resulting in isolation for those without their own means of transport. Many of those requiring lead worker support in these areas had been involved in crime and 'county lines' so the local authority had worked closely with youth justice and the probation service to ensure a cohesive approach to engaging with these communities.

- Bridgend local authority emphasised the importance of youth clubs, sharing that funding constraints had resulted in a reduction in these venues. In the past, there were around 25 youth clubs in Bridgend, but this number reduced to three in 2015. However, the local authority's Cabinet had recently invested to increase the number of youth clubs back to six in 2022. Leaders, managers and lead workers in Bridgend shared that youth clubs played a vitally important role by providing safe spaces for young people to go in the evening, offering structured activities and links with *police community support officers. Through the clubs, they were able to* provide targeted interventions and opportunities for young people to link with lead workers and reduce anti-social behaviour.

Profile of young people

At the time of our visits, lead worker teams were grappling with the evolving profiles of young people, particularly evident since the pandemic. Lead workers provided a consistent and pivotal role, ensuring regular check-ins and offering support whether on a short-term or long-term basis.

The most commonly cited issues that young people presented with included:

- mental health challenges
- increased anxiety
- a reluctance to leave bedrooms
- difficulties returning to education post-Covid
- financial struggles and in-work poverty in the family
- being homeless or at risk of being made homeless

Other significant areas of concern included:

- exposure to emotional harm
- adverse childhood experiences
- young people with caring responsibilities
- young people in care
- substance misuse
- exploitation (including involvement in 'county lines')

Ali, a young person accessing tier 2 support, had disengaged from school due to debilitating anxiety. Despite managing to complete their GCSEs, they became

increasingly isolated, rarely leaving their house without the company of a family member. Their confidence and self-esteem were extremely low, and anxiety acted as a significant barrier to their participation in education, employment, or training.

The local authority employability service project provided 17 months of personalised support, focusing on confidence building and addressing the barriers they faced. Weekly sessions were designed to target various aspects of their personal development, including social skills, communication, and independence. They were supported to apply for and access financial assistance, demonstrating a comprehensive approach to their well-being.

Ali initially attended sessions with their mother, highlighting the depth of their anxiety. However, they gradually progressed to the point where they were able to attend meetings independently. Overcoming their anxiety attack on the way to a planned activity was a significant milestone, demonstrating their increasing resilience and independence.

Ali went on to attend events, engage with peers, use public transport, and partake in activities they had previously avoided. Over the course of their work with the youth worker, they blossomed into a confident and self-assured young person. They transitioned to an employment scheme, volunteering at a hospice, where they gained valuable work experience and interacted with customers.

Families de-registering from education in favour of elective home education posed challenges for local authorities in accurately gauging the scale of need, tracking cases, and making referrals. There had been a considerable increase in the number of young people who were electively home-educated and in many cases, local authorities were aware that this was a cohort that was not being supported adequately. A further complication was the number of young people aged 16+ who were facing significant challenges, but who refused support. Leaders, managers, and lead workers expressed concerns about the high rate of young people declining tier 2 support.

Effectiveness and impact of collaborative working practices

The lead worker role is pivotal within the YEPF which includes six components, with each aspect taking into consideration a young person's vulnerability stage and age. These components are early identification; brokerage; monitoring progression; provision; employability and employment opportunities; and accountability. Effective lead worker support hinges on collaboration with all stakeholders. Across Wales, this is often achieved in a variety of ways from formal partnership structures to informal working relationships between staff who have a role in supporting young people. In the best cases, leaders provided clear strategic direction, which ensured that lead workers had access to a plethora of support, resources and opportunities through their own organisations and via external partners enabling them to support young people well.

Ffion's journey with a lead worker began in June when she was referred. Having refrained from attending school since week 28 of their pregnancy, in accordance with Public Health Wales' advice for pregnant women during the pandemic, she was a single parent living with her mother. Initial attempts to contact the family were challenging due to numerous medical appointments for both Ffion and her new-born baby. Once contact was established, the team agreed to provide support whenever the mother felt ready.

Concerns had arisen at school about Ffion potentially becoming NEET. Despite initially rejecting help during an early pregnancy interview with Careers Wales, she expressed interest in pursuing either a career with the army or the police during subsequent meetings. As her baby reached a few months of age, she also expressed a desire to explore college courses for September.

The progression team within the local authority facilitated a Careers Wales appointment and a visit to the college, where Ffion, despite having missed her GCSEs due to giving birth, aimed to enrol on a foundation skills course. The team assisted with paperwork for a nursery grant and completed education maintenance allowance forms. After meeting with course staff, it was determined that the initial level was not suitable for her capabilities, prompting discussions with management. Consequently, she was placed on the public services course she had originally wanted.

At the time of our visit, Ffion was content with her chosen outcome, and her baby enjoys being at the nursery with friends. Ffion, now a student, has regained independence and is thriving in her new role.

The successes were evident in the effective partnership models implemented in different local authorities with initiatives that focused on early intervention, prevention, and comprehensive support for at-risk young people. In the best cases, local authorities fostered a multi-agency approach that aligned with the Welsh

Government's emphasis on early identification and intervention. Examples that illustrated effective partnership and collaborative working practices included:

- In Bridgend, the local authority employed a cohesive approach to meeting the needs of young people through the early help strategy, which provided a one-stop-shop for various services including lead workers. There were three main hubs in the local authority area, each providing a physical workspace for various professionals who worked in the early help team. This included family support workers, counsellors, social services, and more. These shared workspaces encouraged collaborative approaches to meet the needs of young people effectively. Collaborative initiatives with the youth justice sector had also been successful, with prevention panels chaired by youth justice promoting a preventive approach. Additionally, the youth homelessness team worked alongside the early help team to address identified needs in schools, aligning with the Welsh Government's emphasis on early intervention for youth homelessness.

- In Pembrokeshire, lead workers were based in different directorates, fostering effective information sharing with stakeholders in education, social services, health, youth work, and youth offending. The local authority collaborated well with schools to prevent young people from becoming NEET by being aware of, and adapting to, changes in communities, such as social and economic shifts in Milford Haven. Strengths of the local authority's approach included the presence of pre-16 youth workers in all schools and participating in multi-agency Team Around The Pupil, Parent and School (TAPPAS) meetings with various stakeholders. There was an agreed template for information gathering, and the TAPPAS process covered specific needs, focusing on early identification, and ensuring officers across directorates had access to school databases to identify at risk young people.

- An exemplary practice in Newport involved a longstanding arrangement with Careers Wales, embedding a Careers Wales officer into the authority's YEPF team. This officer, funded by the youth support grant, worked closely with the YEPF co-ordinator, enhancing the efficiency and speed of lead worker engagement. This collaboration allowed for immediate data sharing between the local authority and Careers Wales, leading to positive contact with young people within 24 hours resulting in appropriate support being put in place in a timely manner.

- In Neath Port Talbot, youth engagement workers operating within the youth service were based in each secondary school. One aspect of their role included delivering relevant training to teachers on personal, social, health and economic matters, such as travel training in response to transportation being identified as a barrier to progression. These workers provided an important link to the community, ensuring that lead worker engagement activity was not limited to school opening times. 'Legacy' youth workers, mostly operating in a post-16 environment, though sometimes co-located with youth engagement workers in schools, maintained a continuity of engagement in the evenings, weekends and throughout school holiday periods.

Our visits to schools demonstrated that different models were implemented in different areas. In most cases, schools met the needs of their at-risk learners though the degree to which they worked with external agencies to support them varied considerably. The examples below highlight two distinctly different approaches that schools took to respond to the needs of those young people identified as being at risk.

- Maesteg School considered lead workers to be an integral part of their organisation and it was evident that connections were well-established and effective. The school demonstrated a comprehensive grasp of the structure and management systems of lead workers within the local authority. The school had clear communication channels with local authority lead workers and management teams. Lead workers based in the school had a direct line manager within the local authority and a supervisory connection to the school's ALN co-ordinator. This team approach addressed issues related to young people. In cases where there were students who could benefit from check-ins during holiday periods, the school communicated these concerns to the lead workers. Additionally, the lead workers kept the school informed about any developments concerning the pupils that may necessitate other interventions, such as addressing issues related to homelessness and exploitation.

- Ysgol Bryngwyn took a different approach to lead worker support as there was no local authority assigned lead worker, but rather the function was split across different school and local authority funded pastoral roles. The roles included a parent liaison officer, a well-being and behaviour officer, attendance officers, a youth worker, counsellors, a careers adviser, and other pastoral staff, such as progress leaders and pastoral engagement officers. The school had a clear process for establishing need, and each pupil identified was allocated a member of staff from the pastoral team as a trusted adult who could best understand and meet their needs and therefore undertake the lead worker functions. Interventions included linking with post-16 providers to enhance transition arrangements, making referrals to educational psychologists or counsellors, and arranging access to a wide range of interventions offered by the youth worker. This approach created a web of comprehensive support to best meet the needs of the young people.

Within post 16 settings, which included further education colleges, apprenticeship providers, and Jobs Growth Wales+ provision, there were also many examples of meaningful collaborative working practices. However, the extent to which providers engaged with local authority lead workers and Working Wales lead workers varied considerably. In many cases, post-16 providers had well-established links with partners, but they did not necessarily recognise the term lead worker. It was often the case that colleges had their own support and wellbeing infrastructure and that therefore the common understanding was that college staff would fulfil the lead worker role.

- The College Merthyr Tydfil actively engaged with local authority lead workers to track the progress of vulnerable individuals and their college applications. Strong working relationships between the college and the local authority ensured that lead workers were kept informed about all college activities, including transition

arrangements and events which lead workers often attended along with the young people they were supporting. Upon confirmation of enrolment with the college, young people received a learner transition passport which strengthened the collaborative framework between the local authority and the college. The college team kept the local authority informed about destinations, dropouts, and case studies. The two-way tracking process at operational and strategic levels included regular reviews of caseloads, monitoring trends in support, identifying support needs, and assessing the outcomes of support.

- Coleg Y Cymoedd was well-acquainted with the lead worker role, but it operated differently in the two local authorities it collaborated with. In one, there was a designated and very responsive point of contact, the EPC, who oversaw a team of youth mentors primarily based in schools. In the other local authority, the lead worker role was fulfilled by a team of youth engagement and progression officers (YEPOs), essentially serving as the post-16 lead workers. The college maintained a close connection with all YEPOs who had a regular presence on college sites. Both the YEPOs and the EPC aided the college in connecting with external agencies involved in a young person's life, such as youth homelessness teams, to ensure comprehensive support. The college also collaborated with one of the local authorities to offer a monthly youth forum. During these forums, events and initiatives were discussed and agreed upon. An example of this collaborative effort was the establishment of a youth club for learners with ALN at the college, which proved to be very successful. It was subsequently transferred to a community venue.

While there were many positive examples of collaborative working practices and partnership approaches, there were also challenges. Data and information sharing emerged as a notable challenge across several local authority areas, resulting in information gaps. The significant apprehensions and lack of confidence in relation to what could and could not be shared led to reservations about divulging information. The impact of this was that there were delays in interventions and support for young people. This challenge was even greater in cases where young people moved across local authority areas.

In one local authority there was no central record of which agency was working with a young person, or who their lead worker would be at either pre- or post-16. This was due to the absence of protocols for data sharing resulting in each agency operating with its own data access points and systems. In this instance, the EPC maintained records, but this information was not shared beyond the EPC's team. This hindered the ability to track and monitor outcomes for young people, especially when they were not under the direct support of the EPC team. The absence of a central point for information posed a barrier to effective co-ordination and collaboration among agencies. Data protection was also cited as the reason for not being able to share information with the local college which meant that the college did not have a reliable picture of the scale of need and the support required.

Even where data sharing agreements were in place, if a learner had involvement with YOS or a safeguarding issue, in some authorities, this sensitive information was only passed on after a young person had enrolled on a programme. Not having access to this information hindered the ability of post-16 providers to deliver appropriate

support along with advice and guidance to ensure that the learner was enrolled on a course that they could successfully complete, and which allowed them a viable route into employment.

In cases where data sharing did take place, delays in reporting and data had a negative impact. For example, colleges were asked to inform Working Wales via a monthly data return if they had learners who were at risk. However, the reality was that often colleges had to wait for a period of time before withdrawing a learner so by the time Working Wales were made aware, the young person may have been disengaged for several weeks and therefore harder to re-engage.

Local authorities and Careers Wales often experienced frustrations about not being able to share information with one another despite the introduction of the Wales Accord on the Sharing of Personal Information, waspi.gov.wales/files/waspi-framework-documentation/the-accord/, agreement (Welsh Government, 2018) and impacted on the effectiveness of the support and services provided to young people. However, partners also recognised that consent was an issue particularly where young people were 16 or older, or under 16 and home-educated.

In some regions, a multiagency approach was not always employed, and even where this did happen, local authorities did not routinely include Careers Wales teams and other key third sector partners. Where this was the case, Careers Wales staff emphasised a need for more face-to-face meetings and a regular presence at the table to allow for more flexible information sharing. However, local authority teams, schools and post-16 providers shared that there had been a reduction in the number of Careers Wales advisers across the board, adding that their limited availability was evident.

Too 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. In the case of the latter, the third sector representative body shared that there was often no formal recognition or mapping of voluntary opportunities in local areas.

Many work-based learning and JGW+ providers had very limited engagement with lead workers and often were not even familiar with the function of the lead worker. In the case of Jobs Growth Wales+ programmes, there were very few instances of referrals via lead workers with most young people being recruited directly by the providers.

Training providers reported that, where links with local authorities were strong, approaches were proactive and information sharing was good. However, too often local authorities were reactive which affected the quality of advice young people were getting, their suitability to the programme, and ultimately the sustainability of their final placements. Young people were often funnelled into programmes that they were not suited to as a result of relationships between training providers and lead workers being poor, or non-existent.

One training provider shared that they had no knowledge of the lead worker role and therefore they had researched in preparation for our visit to gain an understanding of the role and the YEPF before the meeting. The provider explained that they had had no referrals via the local authority or Careers Wales and that when a young person had joined their programme, they had had no access to existing information that may have provided some insight and inform support strategies. One example of this was where care experienced young people had enrolled on their programmes, a fact the provider only discovered once they were in placement meaning the provider had not been able to put appropriate support in place in a timely manner.

Inconsistencies were apparent in relation to ongoing support for individuals transitioning into post-16 learning. Partners across various organisations cited this as a risk, as young people going through a significant transition period risked being disconnected from the lead worker they had developed a relationship with. As 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 and therefore the young people moving into this provision as well as the providers themselves were perhaps in greater need of ongoing lead worker support.

There was a notable absence of a network for lead workers who were not from local authorities or Careers Wales such as those from the voluntary sector. Stakeholders often misunderstood that they could be lead workers. The distinction between 'official' lead workers with a designated title and job description, and those who took on the role organically, created issues in terms of consistency and collaboration. However, non-official lead workers have diminished over time, with most now part of local authority or careers service. This shift has reduced the role of third-sector organisations in fulfilling this function. For young people with non-official lead workers, ensuring consistent service and support poses challenges, as they do not have the oversight of an EPC, or someone in a similar role. The WLGA recognised that it would be beneficial to involve wider agencies in the lead worker role while ensuring that it is not perceived as onerous for the individual taking on this responsibility, recognising that there should be no additional work on top of what they are already doing to support a young person.

Successes, challenges, and impact

How was success and impact measured?

The impact of the lead worker role was measured in different ways across local authorities, schools, post-16 providers, and Careers Wales. The challenge lay in the intricate web of agencies and individuals involved in a young person's journey, making it complex to attribute outcomes solely to lead worker interventions. Where lead workers worked effectively with young people, the positive impact on the young person, as well as the wider family and community, was often significant.

> Bailey was suffering from severe mental health issues and was hospitalised in year 11 and consequently missed a great deal of school. In fact, Bailey was advised by health professionals not to come to school and not to do GCSEs. However, the school supported the transition well, advising Bailey that support was available and easily accessible via a small number of designated people. Frequent meetings were held with the Bailey's parents about the transition and progress. Without that support, Bailey doesn't think they would have done their GCSEs. They were allocated a medical room where they could go at any time which was a huge help as they could use this space whenever they needed it. The anticipated embarrassment of returning to school and divulging health issues was overcome with the support of a small group of key support workers, including the Careers Wales adviser. As a result, Bailey returned to school, completed their GCSEs, and has now progressed into a part time further education course alongside part-time employment.

Local authorities took different approaches to assessing the impact of the lead worker role. All local authorities tracked the number of NEET young people through Careers Wales pupil destination data. However, data tracking alone was not a reliable method of monitoring given the challenges set out in the background section of this report. Added to this, there wasn't always a mechanism in place to measure the impact of the lead worker role in isolation. This was largely due to the fact that there were numerous agencies and individuals involved in a young person's journey and therefore making a direct connection between lead worker support and the outcomes for a young person was not straightforward. Useful approaches across different local authorities included:

- Maintaining continuous monitoring into post-16 provision through multi-agency working
- Conducting monthly analyses of Careers Wales data
- Tracking outcomes of formal assessments such as exams and accreditation
- Monitoring attendance data
- Using tools that support the assessment of softer skills
- Collating feedback from young people, families and schools
- Maintaining a focus on case studies

We also explored how schools determined the impact of the lead worker role. As with local authorities, the responses varied with some schools being able to provide clarity, whereas others either had only informal mechanisms in place to measure impact, or they did not work with local authority employed lead workers. Examples of how impact was measured by schools included:

- Tracking data on attendance, behaviour, and engagement
- Monitoring of emotional well-being, and relationship building
- Well-being surveys
- Anecdotal feedback from teachers and those in pastoral roles
- An emphasis on case studies illustrating the response and support for individuals alongside the impact on the wider family and community

Lead worker intervention in a post-16 setting was not generally measured in isolation, but rather those young people considered to be at risk were monitored as part of the provider's own systems and processes in the same way all learners would be. This created challenges in terms of capturing the longer-term journey for a young person. For example, a young person accessing lead worker support in Year 10 may successfully transition into an apprenticeship and go on to succeed, but it was rare that this was captured centrally by local authorities and Careers Wales. In a few cases, updates were shared with local authorities though this was generally on an ad-hoc basis as opposed to through a structured approach.

The Careers Wales and Working Wales teams evaluated the impact of their lead workers in different ways including through the analysis of adviser time and a young person's likelihood of engaging in education, employment, or training as a result. However, there was limited evidence as to how this information was used in a meaningful way. Careers Wales and Working Wales teams also scrutinised destination data. A central data hub managed by the careers service stored information about young people across all tiers. This data was replicated in all local authorities for YEPF tracking, yet there were minimal instances, which demonstrated how the Careers Wales teams used this information and captured and shared impact.

At the Careers Wales level, there were no specific NEET reduction targets or success measures tied to the lead worker role. Working Wales advisers, on the other hand, set a target of 90 days to transition learners from tier 3 to tier 4, expressing confidence that this occurs in most cases. However, there was a lack of available data on the success rate of achieving this target.

There was a lack of uniformity in exit and entry criteria for young individuals seeking lead worker support. Additionally, after a young person had transitioned into post-16 provision and been signed off, there was a lack of systematic follow-up to determine their ongoing engagement.

Data and information sharing

Approaches to sharing data in relation to young people at risk differed across local authority areas. Some local authorities had established agreements that facilitated effective data sharing at a local level. However, even where this was the case, the

extent of data sharing depended on the specific partners involved. For instance, sharing data between local authorities, Working Wales and post-16 providers presented more challenges than the relatively smoother data sharing between local authorities, Careers Wales, and schools.

Careers Wales and Working Wales were unable to disclose tier 3 information to local authorities due to legal constraints. The YEPF explicitly specified that only tier 1 and 2 data could be shared with local authorities. Local authorities expressed a desire for access to this information, as it would provide insights into the journeys of young individuals who they had previously supported. Despite efforts by Careers Wales and Working Wales to address this concern, including sharing anonymised data and information, it remained a source of frustration for most local authority teams.

In certain instances, each agency involved in a young person's journey operated with its own data access points and systems. This lack of a central point hampered the ability to track and monitor outcomes for young people, particularly when they were not directly supported by a local authority lead worker.

Data sharing faced additional hurdles when multiple local authorities were involved, often citing GDPR as the reason. Stakeholders expressed concerns about breaching GDPR, leading to an overly cautious approach that ultimately affected the tracking of young people and, in turn, meeting their needs. Furthermore, there was a notable lack of data and information sharing between local authorities and voluntary organisations, with GDPR again cited as the reason for this. This situation resulted in instances where a young person who was unknown to Careers Wales might be thriving in the third sector, leading to differing viewpoints between the two parties regarding the young person's well-being.

Provision

Lead workers exhibited a deep understanding of the young people they worked with, employing a person-centred strategy to tailor provision and tools to each individual's unique needs. This approach, with emotional well-being and trust as a central focus, enabled them to develop strong relationships with young people.

Cai never really liked school and became increasingly 'bored' in Year 10. A common thread with all the young people interviewed was the increased 'pressures' put on them by their schools in Years 10 and 11 as they started preparing for their external examinations. Cai was excluded five times for short term periods as well as having detention every day. The careers officer worked with them to identify and arrange a placement, and this took around two months.

Whilst still in school, Cai applied for an apprenticeship in the local hospital – their careers adviser was supposed to help them prepare for the interview but didn't do so, and they were disappointed with what they perceived as being a lack of support. Their welfare officer at school referred Cai to a designated lead worker. The lead worker worked with Cai to identify another placement in a nursery. They have worked there for two months. The lead worker keeps in touch with Cai and helps them with the challenges they are facing especially around resilience.

For those on the verge of transitioning into post-16 learning, many post-16 providers collaborated with school colleagues in developing comprehensive transition processes that supported in developing confidence at a time when young people were facing significant change. Most further education colleges offered a summer programme of transition activities, and as a result many young people proceeded to college programmes. In some cases, these were programmes that were specifically designed to meet the needs of more vulnerable learners, but often learners progressed to mainstream college programmes including level two and three vocational courses and academic pathways.

Local authorities, schools, and post-16 providers recognised that many of those accessing lead worker support were better suited to vocational routes. However, opportunities at pre-16 were limited. In a few cases, schools addressed this by offering vocational subjects though they did not necessarily have the vocational expertise, resources, or facilities to support this appropriately. In the best cases, local authorities, schools, and colleges worked together to create a suitable vocational offer. In Carmarthenshire, Coleg Sir Gâr offered a youth access programme for Year 10 and 11 pupils who wanted to follow a vocational subject in college. The programme was structured so that pupils attended college three days a week, and school two days where they continued with their core GCSEs. Young people having access to provision that better suited their needs resulted in better engagement, and less demand for lead worker support.

There were also barriers to engagement in education and training in certain geographical areas. For example, in Monmouthshire, lead workers collaborated effectively, but there was a lack of provision in Chepstow, where young people were hesitant to travel due to unreliable and expensive public transport. Similar issues existed in some areas of Carmarthenshire, where access was challenging for young people in more rural parts of the local authority. For example, Jobs Growth Wales+ opportunities were good in Llanelli, but less so in the Ammanford and Aman valley.

There also appeared to be a shortage of opportunities for post-16 pupils with PMLD, with some having to resort to costly placements in England due to the lack of suitable provision in South Wales. One headteacher expressed the view that these learners, many of whom typically access lead worker support, are often overlooked when it comes to education, employment, and training at the post-16 level.

Continuity of contact

It was often the case that young people weren't familiar with terms like 'lead worker' or similar job titles, and instead, they knew these people by their first names. Developing a relationship with lead workers took time as it involved building trust and creating an environment where openness was encouraged. Lead workers used various skills to support young people, recognising the vulnerability and constant evolution of their personal circumstances. In a young person's life, the lead worker often served as the only consistent and reliable presence.

Maintaining continuity of contact was a concern during transitions, such as when young people moved into post-16 provision as this phase created further risk due to the significant changes. Transitioning from a familiar school environment, where a

young person had spent at least five years with lifelong friends, to a new setting like a college, an apprenticeship, or a training programme could be extremely daunting. At the same time as navigating these changes, young people routinely underwent the process of being 'handed over' by their lead worker. While lead workers and college teams collaborated to prepare for this transition and ensure ongoing support, it introduced an additional element of risk. Many lead workers and operational managers suggested that a framework that supported continuity of contact for an extended period would be beneficial.

The effectiveness of strategic leadership and co ordination

Strategic leadership and evaluation

The youth engagement and progression arrangements were generally comprehensively understood by local authorities and the careers service, but effective co-ordination at strategic level was variable. In the best cases, YEPF activities, including the role of the lead workers, were considered by scrutiny committees. Additionally, senior officers working across directorates and service areas collectively ensured that YEPF work aligned across their plans.

Local authority strategic groups that had oversight of work to prevent NEETs typically included representation from relevant agencies, such as the careers service, YOS, and the voluntary sector. However, representation at this level varied among local authorities, and where partnership working was not well established, it impacted on collaborative effectiveness. Examples of where the lack of collaboration impacted negatively included:

- Jobs Growth Wales+ providers had low numbers of lead worker referrals to their provision. The providers identified this as an area of concern given that the profile of young people accessing lead worker support may well be suited to this type of provision which includes robust pastoral support alongside learning and training.

- Apprenticeship providers reported similar experiences in relation to collaborative working at strategic and operational level. One training provider shared that they would welcome contact with the lead workers in the area. They acknowledged the value of such a role in supporting young people into apprenticeships and employment, particularly given the challenges many young people are dealing with.

- Strategic level engagement between the schools and colleges was often limited which in some cases was due to perceived competition for post-16 learners. Colleges expressed a desire for a more mandatory local authority-led approach to strategic working to ensure all young people, but specifically those accessing lead worker support, were aware of all the options available and supported through the process.

Where Careers Wales and Working Wales teams were involved in strategic meetings, this had generally enhanced the efficiency of working practices. In the best cases, the strategic partnership approach improved positive working relationships, enabling the careers service to gain a clear understanding of the status of learners in tier 2 and their proximity to progressing to tier 3. Where this happened, information could be passed on to advisers who were then able to make themselves known to learners ahead of them potentially becoming their lead worker.

In a very few cases, schools and post-16 providers were actively engaged at strategic level either as regular attendees or by invitation to NEET focus strategic

groups. This involvement was an opportunity for post-16 providers to share information about suitable provision alongside providing updates on dropouts, destinations, and support outcomes. This tracking and monitoring of support needs and outcomes helped to identify any changes to provision or further actions needed. For example, in response to emerging issues, one college put on additional training on peer-on-peer sexual abuse, racial abuse, and trauma informed practices. However, this was not commonplace, leading to approaches that lacked cohesion.

The WLGA and CWYVS identified that there were significant benefits to recognising and involving a broader range of agencies and individuals in lead worker activities. For example, this could include community groups such as those that work with lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and queer young people, and young carer groups.

Where multi-agency approaches worked well at operational level, the team approach, facilitated by data tracking systems and lead workers' professional judgement, ensured close monitoring and discussion of learners. Partners triaged needs to allocate the right response, and, in the best cases, local authority operational managers met with schools regularly to discuss young people identified as needing support in the lead up to transition. In many cases, data tracking systems had evolved to provide a nuanced picture of vulnerability, incorporating different criteria and point scores on the vulnerability assessment profile (VAP). This tracking allowed discussions to focus on those most at risk. However, approaches to the VAP and the vulnerability indicators used varied across local authorities. In one case, a school described the VAP as burdensome, static, and not accurate or current in terms of reflecting actual circumstances and needs.

Leaders also tended to overly prioritise young people known to be NEET in the Careers Wales destination survey, placing insufficient emphasis on individuals in tier 1, unknown. Referring to the data outlined in the background section of this report, NEET figures for 16 to 18-year-olds in 2022, as per SFR data, amounted to 14,400; APS data reported a figure of 9,300, while the Careers Wales school leaver destination survey indicated there were 1,066 NEET young people. The Careers Wales' destination data can present an overly positive view of success as drop-outs from post-16 provision are not consistently captured. While there has been a shift towards a more holistic approach, there remains a potential risk in this regard as local authorities make use of the Careers Wales destination data more than other sources as it is the only data source that allows for comparisons with other local authority areas.

Evolving needs and the post-pandemic context

Our discussion with key stakeholders revealed that, over time, there has been a growth in demand for one-to-one support, particularly attributed to the impact of the pandemic. Schools, post-16 providers and local authorities shared that there were increasing numbers of learners facing challenges related to well-being and attitudes to learning, coupled with a rise in concerns related to child protection and anti-social behaviour. This has resulted in an increase in school-based pastoral caseloads and early referrals to local authority prevention teams. Key issues included heightened anxiety, challenging behaviour leading to exclusion from school, poor social skills, low self-esteem, and social isolation. Moreover, there was an increase in the number

of children requiring support due to their parents having passed away as well as an increase in child protection issues. Additionally, lead workers and local authority leaders reported more challenges in relation to youth homelessness both in terms of being homeless, and being at risk of becoming so.

Evidently, this increased demand has significantly heightened the pressures on support agencies, particularly those with EPC and lead worker roles. The demands on these agencies have evolved considerably, with young people now requiring more personalised support to address challenges such as mental health issues and anxiety. This support was often provided on a one-on-one basis, either in the community or at the homes of the young individuals as many didn't feel able to attend meetings in unfamiliar venues. In response to some of these challenges, and where appropriate, a few lead workers have maintained online approaches to help them with managing caseloads.

Other notable changes included meeting the needs of young individuals with ALN, especially those with more complex physical, medical, and neurodiverse conditions. There was a need for lead workers equipped with sufficient ALN knowledge and training to effectively address this growing demand.

In urban areas, especially cities hosting significant refugee populations, unique challenges have arisen due to the transient nature of the residents. This situation has led to a high prevalence of short-term rentals and individuals living in hotels, often being transported to schools. The support provided by charitable organisations becomes crucial in such contexts. As an example, during a school visit, we encountered a diverse environment with 64 different countries represented, accompanied by language challenges. Notably, there were several pupils in Year 11 with very limited English language proficiency. This scenario reflects a growing trend of an increasing number of young people for whom English is not their first language. Welsh Government schools' census results: January 2023 indicates a continuous increase in the percentage of young people with English as an additional language (EAL). In 2023, 3% of the total year 10 and 11 cohort were categorised as EAL, compared to 2% in the previous two years. (Welsh Government, 2023). These ever evolving and increasing needs created additional demand for lead workers as schools struggle to meet needs within their own resource allocation.

Added to this, there has been a significant rise in the number of school-age learners who are electively home-educated. In the academic year 2022/23, 5,330 children were identified as being electively home educated in Wales. The rate of pupils being electively home educated in 2022/23 stands at 11.1 per 1,000 pupils, an increase from 1.6 per 1,000 pupils in 2009/10 (Welsh Government, 2023, p.10). This rate has consistently risen each year, with growth observed in all local authorities. The most common age for home educated pupils is 15. In 2021/22, the rate of 16-year-old pupils being home educated surged to 32 times that of 2009/10. (Welsh Government, 2022a). It's important to note that parents may or may not inform their local authority when they take the decision to home educate their child and therefore, the data would not capture all electively home educated children. This landscape clearly had implications for lead workers and where they were supporting these home-educated young people, they were cautious, focusing primarily on facilitating their return to school or education plans where this was desired or an option, rather than

addressing other concerns. In managing these young people, local authorities considered how to allocate resources to ensure maximum efficiency and effectiveness.

Despite the challenges, there was a concerted effort amongst all stakeholders to effectively prioritise needs and allocate resources. Operational managers actively engaged with schools, emphasising the significance of teamwork in meeting their objectives. Special attention was given to building strong connections with schools, particularly in areas characterised by high levels of deprivation and an elevated risk of young people becoming NEET. Lead workers identified community knowledge as a crucial component for effective collaboration and impactful provision. For example, a secondary school shared that pupils from a particular area were more likely to become NEET than others. Another school identified changing employment opportunities in the local area, which in some cases impacted negatively on families.

The need for support had escalated not only due to the pandemic but also as demands had evolved over time. Cases had become more intricate, with learners often requiring multi-layered assistance. Notably, young people's resilience seemed to be diminishing. Balancing these requirements posed challenges for leaders and managers who had to decide whether to allocate additional resources to individuals in need, or provide lead worker support to a larger number of individuals over fewer hours. The primary aim was to ensure a service that maximised its impact.

Recruitment and retention of lead workers

Services that support at-risk young people were facing several significant challenges that impact the ability to provide support to young people, both pre-16 and post-16. Capacity constraints were a prominent issue, and there was a growing demand for lead worker support for young people, which has led to significant waiting lists in some areas.

Recruitment of lead workers was challenging across many local authorities as attracting qualified and dedicated individuals to these roles was difficult, especially given the increasing demand for youth support services across the board. Most local authorities faced challenges due to time-limited funding arrangements, leading to a lack of security and difficulties in attracting and retaining staff for temporary positions. These funding challenges introduced uncertainty, adversely affecting staff morale and retention. This instability posed a risk to the continuity of support for young people.

Furthermore, local authorities noted that some universities in Wales had withdrawn youth work degree programmes due to low enrolments thereby limiting accessible pathways into this type of work. Recruiting Welsh speakers for essential roles remained a significant hurdle.

Leaders, managers and lead workers emphasised the need for more on-the-ground staff to address the shift towards a greater focus on resilience and well-being with the ultimate aim being to support young people to take up and sustain a place in education, training, or employment.

Funding

Local authorities were creative and innovative in the way that they used the funding streams available to them. Leaders reported that lead worker roles are funded through a variety of different funding streams. In the case of local authorities, decisions were often made at a local level as to which particular stream might be the most appropriate. Alongside shared prosperity funding which has replaced the European social fund, other funding streams supported lead worker roles. These included youth support and local authority core grants, funds allocated to Communities for Work (CFW), Careers Wales funding, and Families First funding.

A complex and conflicting range of policies and funding streams sometimes clashed rather than complemented each other. An example was the revamp of the YEPF in 2022, narrowing its age category from 11-24 to 11-18. This shift, alongside the CFW funding allocation, risked an increased drive towards short-term work opportunities for young people. The unintended consequence of this was that it risked young people becoming NEET at a later point as a result of the emphasis on quick fixes as opposed to longer-term youth work initiatives.

Summer activities posed another area of concern regarding funding constraints, with limited funds allocated in some local authorities. For instance, one local authority was allocated only £500 to meet the needs of 80 young people during the summer holiday period. While alternative funding sources like the school-based Food & Fun Programme had been used, they did not address the needs of school refusers. Local authorities recognised the considerable need for community-based summer programmes. However, the funding attached to such activities is often agreed and allocated at short notice thereby not allowing for a more strategic approach to planning.

Welsh language

Lead worker support for first language Welsh speakers was limited, a challenge intensified by difficulties in recruiting Welsh speakers. However, where a need was identified in a Welsh-medium secondary school, Welsh speaking local authority lead workers were usually assigned. One Welsh-medium school shared that they almost always met the needs of pupils through their own staff and that therefore there was very rarely a need to involve external agencies other than Careers Wales with whom they had an established and effective relationship.

Lead workers supporting Welsh speakers shared that accessing Welsh-medium post-16 programmes was challenging in some areas due to limited options. In Carmarthenshire, however, three Welsh-medium schools had worked collaboratively to develop a broad range of courses (up to 70% of those available in English-medium schools) to ensure that Welsh speakers had better progression opportunities than was historically the case. Similarly, schools and colleges in north Wales had worked together to enhance the Welsh-medium offer at post-16.

Methods and evidence base

This report drew on evidence from visits to 11 local authorities which included meetings with strategic leaders, operational managers, staff with lead worker roles, as well as meetings with young people. We also met with leaders, managers, key staff including those with pastoral roles, and pupils at nine secondary schools. In addition to these activities, we held online meetings with 10 post-16 providers which included further education colleges, work-based learning providers, and those delivering Jobs Growth Wales+ programmes. Other activities included four regional meetings with Careers Wales and Working Wales teams and meetings with CWYVS, the WLGA, and Welsh Government.

The report was also informed by a pre-visit survey that was sent out to all local authorities across Wales. All those we visited had completed the survey.

In addition to the desk-based research detailed in the references section of this report, we conducted an analysis of the national data using three key sources as outlined in the background section of this report.

Estyn would like to thank the following organisations for their participation in this thematic review:

Organisation	Sector
ACT	Work-based learning & Jobs Growth Wales+
Birchgrove Comprehensive School	Secondary school
Bridge Achievement Centre	Secondary school
Bridgend County Borough Council	Local authority
BWBL-Pembrokeshire	Work-based learning & Jobs Growth Wales+
Cambrian Training	Work-based learning & Jobs Growth Wales+
Cardiff Council	Local authority
Careers Wales/Working Wales	Careers service
Carmarthenshire County Council	Local authority
Ceredigion County Council	Local authority
City and County of Swansea	Local authority
Coleg Cambria	Further education college
Coleg Gwent	Further education college
Coleg Sir Gar	Further education college
Coleg Y Cymoedd	Further education college
CWYVS	Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services
Denbighshire County Council	Local authority
Fitzalan High School	Secondary school
Flintshire County Council	Local authority
Gower College Swansea	Wok-based learning
ITeC	WBL /JGW+ South Central

Lliswerry High School	Secondary school
Maesteg School	Secondary school
The College Merthyr Tydfil	Further education college
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council	Local authority
Milford Haven School	Secondary school
Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council	Local authority
Newport City Council	Local authority
Pembrokeshire County Council	Local authority
Welsh Government	Welsh Government
Willows High School	Secondary school
WLGA	Welsh Local Government Association
Ysgol Bryngwyn School	Secondary school
Ysgol Maes Garmon (WM)	Secondary school

Glossary

ALN	Additional learning needs
APS	Annual population survey
CFW	Communities for work
CWYVS	Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services
EAL	English as an additional language
EHE	Elective home education / electively home educated
EOTAS	Education other than at school
EPC	Engagement and progression coordinator
EPLO	Engagement and progression lead officer
GDPR	General data protection regulation
IDPs	Individual development plans
NEET	Not in education, employment, or training
ONS	Office for national statistics
PMLD	Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities PMLD
SFR	Statistical first release
TAPPAS	Team around the pupil parent and school
VAP	Vulnerable assessment profile
WLGA	Welsh local government association
YEPF	Youth engagement and progression framework
YEPO	Youth engagement and progression officer
YOS	Youth offending service

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

References

Bevan Foundation (2019) *Education: Young people who are NEET* [Online]. Available from: https://www. bevanfoundation. org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/State-of-Wales-briefing-NEET-final. pdf [Accessed 29 September 2023)

Careers Wales (n.d.). *Pupil destinations.* [Online]. Available from: https://careerswales.gov.wales/education-and-teaching-professionals/pupil-destinations [Accessed 1 November 2023]

Learning and Work Institute (2021) *Refresh of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework Stakeholder and Youth Consultation Report.* [Online]. Available from: https://www. gov. wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-09/refresh-youth-engagement-progression-framework. pdf [Accessed 29 September 2023)

Welsh Government (2013*) Youth engagement and progression framework implementation plan.* [Online]. Available from: https://www. gov. wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-02/implementation-plan-youth-engagement-and-progression-framework. pdf [Accessed 29 September 2023]

Welsh Government (2020) *Understanding the different sources of statistics on young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in Wales.* [Online]. Available from: https://www. gov. wales/understanding-different-sources-statistics-young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet [Accessed 29 September 2023]

Welsh Government (2021) *The Young Person's Guarantee.* [Online]. Available from: https://www. gov.wales/young-persons-guarantee-html#87199, [Accessed 29 September 2023]

Welsh Government. (2022). Participation of 16 to 18 year olds in education or training: January to December 2021 (provisional) and January to June 2022 (provisional). [Online] Available at: https://www.gov.wales/participation-young-people-education-and-labour-market-2021-and-2022-provisional-html#:~:text=Participation%20of%2016%20to%2018%20year%20olds%20in%20education%20or,2021%20to%2042.3%25%20in%202022. [Accessed: 29 September 2023].

Welsh Government (2022a) *Stats Wales: Children looked after at 31 March by local authority, gender and age.* [Online]. Available from: https://statswales. gov. wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After/childrenlookedafterat31march-by-localauthority-gender-age [Accessed 17 January 2024]

Welsh Government (2022bb) *Youth Engagement and Progression Framework: Overview.* [Online]. Available from: https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-

versions/2022/11/4/1668080534/youth-engagement-and-progression-framework-overview.pdf [Accessed 2 October 2023]

Welsh Government (2022c) *Youth Engagement and Progression Framework: Handbook*. [Online]. Available from: https://www.gov.wales/youth-engagement-and-progression-framework-handbook-html [Accessed 29 September 2023]

Welsh Government. (2023). Pupils educated other that at school: September 2022 to August 2023 [Online]. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/pupils-educated-other-school-september-2022-august-2023- https://www.gov.wales/pupils-educated-other-school-september-2022-august-2023-.[Accessed 17 January 2024]Welsh Government. (2023a). Schools Census Results, January 2023 [Online]. Available at: https://www.gov.wales/schools-census-results-january-2023-html [Accessed 17 January 2024]

Welsh Government (2024) *Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): July 2022 to June 2023.* [Online]. Available from: https://www. gov. wales/young-people-not-education-employment-or-training-neet-july-2022-june-2023 [Accessed 1 November 2023]