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# Support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing

The work of further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community providers during the COVID-19 pandemic

March 2021

This report is also available in Welsh.



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## Introduction

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This report is written in response to a request for advice from the Minister for Education in November 2020. It provides an overview of how further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships have supported learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing during the COVID-19 period between March 2020 and January 2021. This includes the periods of lockdown as well as when providers reopened. It captures how further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships have adapted their support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing in response to the challenges resulting from COVID-19.

The intended audience for this report is the Welsh Government, local authorities and staff in further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships. It draws on the evidence base in appendix 1 including remote video or telephone interviews, documentary evidence and feedback from the Welsh Government learner survey. Due to restrictions associated with COVID-19 we were unable to visit providers to gather first hand evidence about the effectiveness of support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing. The report is part of a series of publications by Estyn to share learning and support the education system's continued response and recovery from COVID-19.

The report features cameos of interesting practice from further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships. These are not case studies as we are unable to fully evaluate the impact of the work because of restrictions on our activities due to COVID-19. The cameos are included to exemplify points raised in the report and give a flavour of the work that has taken place across Wales.

The report also includes details of additional resources, sources of support and contact details for a range of external organisations that provide support for people with their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

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## Background

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In the foreword to his Annual Report 2019-2020, Meilyr Rowlands HMCI (Estyn, 2020e, p.4) stated that 'the last months of the 2019-2020 academic year brought challenges to Welsh education the like of which we have not seen in generations. The challenges were many, complex and unexpected. The COVID-19 pandemic changed people's lives, had a huge impact on economies, and caused major disruption to education systems worldwide and in Wales'. His foreword and the report offer an account of how education and training providers in Wales coped with the initial lockdown period and strived to support learners while providing continuity of

learning for them remotely. For further information on this initial lockdown period see the Annual Report 2019-2020 (Estyn, 2020e).

On 20 May 2020, the Welsh Government (2020b) published its overarching COVID-19 Resilience Plan for the Post-16 Sector <https://gov.wales/resilience-plan-post-16-sector-coronavirus>. The plan is organised into three phases:

- (i) **Rescue** – making sure providers have security of funding and immediate arrangements for continuity of learning are in place (March – July 2020)
- (ii) **Review** – planning for potential changes to provision, funding and learning delivery for autumn 2020 and beyond (May – September 2020)
- (iii) **Renew** – putting revised arrangements in place for the academic year 2020-2021, and evaluating the impact of Covid-19 (September 2020 – March 2021)

The Welsh Government identified learner and staff wellbeing and engagement as one of six work streams to support the delivery of the resilience plan. The plan included a commitment by the Welsh Government to working collaboratively with its partners and provider network to ensure a comprehensive approach to tackling shared challenges. This collaboration is taking place through existing networks, new task and finish groups and the Resilience Plan Steering Group.

As part of this approach, the Welsh Government established a Learner and Staff Wellbeing and Engagement Task and Finish Group with representation across the further education, work-based learning and adult learning sectors, including Estyn. The overall role of the group is to support the mental health and wellbeing of learners and staff, especially those directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes developing appropriate guidance and reviewing support systems.

During the summer term 2020, Estyn inspectors spoke to leaders and managers in further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships through monthly engagement calls. The topics discussed in these calls focused on supporting learner wellbeing, continuity of learning, supporting vulnerable learners, leadership, partnerships and communication. The findings from these remote meetings were published as part of the thematic section of the Annual Report 2019-2020 (Estyn, 2020e).

Estyn published cameos of interesting practice to show brief insights into the work that providers and partnerships were doing during the first period of lockdown, from March to July 2020, to support learners' and staff emotional wellbeing and to provide continuity of learning. Separate updates were provided for further education colleges <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/learning-support/supporting-wellbeing-and-learning-during-covid-19-approaches-further-education> (Estyn, 2020c), work-based learning providers <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/learning-support/supporting-wellbeing-and-learning-during-covid-19-approaches-work-based-learning> (2020d) and adult learning in the community partnerships <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/learning-support/supporting-wellbeing-and-learning-during-covid-19-approaches-adult-learning> (2020b).

During September and early October 2020, Estyn inspectors made a further series of engagement calls to all further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community providers. Each engagement call focused on the provider's approaches to continuing learning, including blended learning, and support for learner wellbeing and engagement. The findings from these activities in were published in December, as an update to accompany the Annual Report (Estyn, 2020a, 2020e) <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/learning-support/engagement-work-post-16-sector-update-autumn-2020>.

Between November 2020 and January 2021, Estyn inspectors made further engagement calls to a representative sample of providers to explore in more detail the ongoing challenges relating to learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing and to identify interesting or innovative practice. Initial evidence from the Welsh Government post-16 learner survey (2021), conducted between 16 November and 20 December 2020 was also considered as part of this work.

In practice, the 2020-2021 academic year has continued to be highly disrupted for learners. Most post-16 learners did return to some face-to-face learning in September 2020, but most returned to learning from home in the week following half-term in November as part of the firebreak lockdown in Wales. There was again some return to face-to-face learning during November and early December before a return to lockdown before Christmas. During the autumn, there was further local disruption on a regular basis due the requirements for individuals and groups of learners and staff to self-isolate at different times. Learners have continue to learn from home during the spring term 2021. With rates of COVID-19 infections declining and in line with the Welsh Government's planned phased return, vocational learners who need to attend onsite learning in order to complete practical learning and assessments, including apprentices and those undertaking assessments to demonstrate occupational or professional competence returned to socially distanced onsite learning from 22 February 2021.

Mental health and emotional wellbeing were widely identified as a growing concern across the UK even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has presented society with many additional challenges and has placed further pressure on individuals' mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Recent research by the Mental Health Foundation and Swansea University (Mental Health Foundation, 2021b) found that the mental health of 13-19 year olds in Britain is under severe pressure across a range of indicators and has worsened during the pandemic. When surveyed in late summer 2020, around one in ten teenagers said their mental health had been 'poor' before lockdown. When questioned again in November 2020 the proportion describing their mental health as 'poor' had risen to almost one in six.

The study also highlighted that teenagers from less advantaged backgrounds, including those with unemployed parents, appear to be at especially high risk of experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression. Symptoms include feeling nervous, anxious or on edge; having trouble concentrating on things such as their studies and having trouble in sleeping.

The study raises important concerns about the links between poverty and widening gaps in rates of mental health difficulties and educational attainment, including the risk that such inequalities will be magnified as a result of the pandemic. It also highlights the importance of providing targeted support for those most at risk of developing a mental health problem given the context of their economic and social circumstances.

A similar study by the Mental Health Foundation and its university partners (Mental Health Foundation, 2021a) questioned UK adults at regular intervals since the first lockdown in March 2020. This study found that key indicators of distress among UK adults, including loneliness, suicidal thoughts and feelings, and not coping well with stress, have worsened since the start of the pandemic. In particular, the study found that since March 2020 the proportion of UK adults saying they are experiencing loneliness increased from one in ten to one in four by November 2020. Over the same period, the percentage of UK adults reporting having suicidal thoughts and feelings rose from 8% in April 2020 to 13% in November 2020.

Findings, from the Welsh Government's (2021) Post-16 learner survey on the effect of COVID-19 on learners aged over 16, in relation to learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing are that 96% of learners feel safe where they live and 91% feel safe online. Overall, 82% of learners are confident about what their provider is doing to keep them safe. However, 61% of learners have concerns about the future of their education or training options as a result of COVID-19.

The survey also found that 58% of learners find it difficult to concentrate on their work when studying at home and 26% are not satisfied with the support they are receiving from their provider for their mental health and emotional wellbeing. Overall, 58% of learners were worried about going back into their learning settings in September 2020, while 46% of learners felt really behind with getting back into learning or training.

The nature and extent of providers' roles in relation to learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing vary between sectors, types of learners and modes of attendance. All providers have a statutory duty to exercise their functions with a view to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and vulnerable adults. To help ensure that young learners and vulnerable adults are appropriately supported and protected, providers usually identify dedicated pastoral support staff in roles such as personal tutors to work with these learners. Most learners on full-time college courses, traineeship programmes and full-time adult courses have dedicated pastoral support allocated within their timetable. On other programmes arrangements for pastoral support are less formal. For example, many tutors on part-time and adult learning programmes often provide informal help and advice to learners as part of their teaching role and signpost learners to internal or external specialist support as required. Apprenticeship learners are usually able to access wellbeing support via their employer as well as being able to discuss issues with their assessors. For example, many learners may be entitled to access counselling support via employee assistance programmes offered by many employers.

The Healthy Universities and Colleges Framework for Wales provides [best practice standards in six health topics](#), including mental and emotional health and wellbeing

(Public Health Wales, 2017). Central to this framework is the importance of adopting a holistic, whole systems approach to mental health and emotional wellbeing.

The Minister for Education approved an allocation of £2m to support mental health and wellbeing initiatives in the further education sector for the 2020-2021 financial year. These funds were allocated across three strands: national, collaborative and institutional work. National work has included the development of resources around substance misuse and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These resources are due for publication in spring 2021.

The three collaborative projects include building resilient communities; developing a graduated and holistic response to identifying and supporting the mental health and emotional wellbeing needs of learners and staff; and measuring and evaluating the impact of mental health and emotional wellbeing interventions. Common areas for institutional work supported through this mental health funding includes the development and implementation of whole-college wellbeing strategies, active wellbeing roles, staff mental health and resilience training and community wellbeing days.

The Welsh Government has also provided funding for a range of projects supporting mental health and emotional wellbeing in adult learning in the community partnerships and more recently within the work-based learning sector.



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## Main findings

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- 1 The impact of lockdowns and the pandemic on learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing is influenced by their personal circumstances. Key contributing factors identified in our discussions with providers include bereavement, social isolation, uncertainties over qualification assessment arrangements, worries about future prospects, pressures of working long hours in front-line occupations such as health and social care, and the impact of being furloughed or made redundant.
- 2 The switch to remote and blended learning has been easier for some learners than others. Learners who had readily available access to technology and reliable broadband internet connectivity generally found it easiest to adapt to new ways of working. Disadvantaged learners, such as young carers and many traineeship learners, have often faced considerable additional pressure in trying to keep up with their learning given their difficult personal circumstances.
- 3 Since the initial lockdown period starting in March 2020, all providers have made substantial changes to the ways in which they support learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing. Although there have been short periods when a minority of providers have made a limited return to some forms of in-person support due to relaxation of lockdown restrictions, most support has continued to be delivered remotely. Over the whole pandemic period, nearly all providers have made the wellbeing of learners and staff their overriding priority and have worked hard to maintain continuity of support as well as of teaching, learning and assessment.
- 4 What has evolved so far over the course of the pandemic could be described as a 'blended support' model in which support is provided in a variety of ways. These ways include remote telephone call or text messaging support, online video calls and, in a few cases, online chat facilities, as well as more traditional in-person support. During periods when restrictions were eased, nearly all providers continued to provide most of their support remotely rather than return fully to pre-pandemic approaches due to ongoing concerns about the transmissibility of the virus.
- 5 The overall effectiveness of support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing varies substantially between and, in many cases, within further education colleges, work-based learning consortia and adult learning in the community partnerships. In the best cases, providers have maintained or introduced careful and well-thought-out triaging approaches to identify and prioritise learners who are either at risk or most in need of support. Where support is less effective, providers do not identify and maintain regular contact with those most at risk of disengaging from learning or experiencing difficulties with their mental health and emotional wellbeing, help is mainly provided on a 'first-come, first served' approach and learners often face lengthy waiting lists for specialist support such as internal or external counselling provision.
- 6 Support is also provided more efficiently and effectively when providers work closely with internal and external partners and specialist agencies. Multi-agency support

arrangements are most effective where learners are given a single point of contact. However, arrangements for those learners studying with partner providers and subcontractors to access specialist support for mental health and emotional wellbeing are not always made clear in information made available by lead providers.

- 7 As well as providing targeted direct support to learners identified as needing specific support with their mental health and emotional wellbeing, providers are also promoting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing, for example by holding wellbeing weeks and offering a range of wellbeing-related activities. All providers need to focus more on developing learners' resilience to overcome challenges and prepare them for the world of work following the pandemic.
- 8 As part of their efforts to encourage and help learners with the self-care and self-regulation in order to maintain and improve wellbeing, many providers have made a wide array of resources available to learners and staff. Many of these resources are provided online via learner and staff portals. In the best cases, resources are chosen carefully and reviewed rather than simply being added to online webpages. This avoids overloading users with too much information that is then difficult to navigate.
- 9 Most providers have raised staff awareness of mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. Providers report that this has resulted in staff being better placed to identify and support learners who are struggling, as well as helping the staff themselves in maintaining their own emotional wellbeing. Many providers, especially further education colleges and work-based learning providers, have also invested in additional front-line support roles such as wellbeing officers, resilience and learning coaches, active wellbeing staff and learner engagement officers as part of their learner support provision. There has also been a substantial growth in the training and use of mental health first aiders, especially in further education colleges and work-based learning providers.
- 10 Providers have reported a mixed picture in terms of the number of safeguarding reports and referrals since the outbreak of the pandemic. A majority of providers have experienced increases in the number of learners who have sought support for complex issues such as self-harm and suicidal thoughts and feelings. Most providers have also strengthened their approaches to promoting and ensuring online safety as far as they can, within the challenging context of nearly all learners spending more time online at home often via their own equipment and home Wi-Fi networks.
- 11 Most providers have reported a surge in demand for learner counselling services during the pandemic. Most of this support is now delivered remotely. Although a minority of counselling staff have undertaken specific training in how to provide remote counselling effectively, this is not always the case. Similarly while nearly all counselling staff receive regular clinical supervision to support their own development and emotional wellbeing, similar support is not made available to many staff in other front line support roles who may also be dealing with complex and distressing cases as part of their work.
- 12 Most providers have accessed additional funds to assist learners with technology requirements for home study and remote support. A few providers do not make

enough use of other categories of support funding which could help their learners access other types of support for additional learning needs.

- 13 Although many of the issues associated with the pandemic have presented learners and providers with additional challenges, many providers also recognise that adjustments to the support provision and methods necessitated by lockdown restrictions may present opportunities for improvement in the longer term. For example, providing learners with a greater choice of how they can access support in the future may improve the overall accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness of mental health and emotional wellbeing support.

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## Recommendations

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### **Further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships should:**

- R1 Target resources to promote positive mental health and emotional wellbeing carefully in order to avoid overloading learners and staff with too much information
- R2 Identify carefully those learners most at risk from disengaging from learning or experiencing mental health and emotional wellbeing issues and monitor their wellbeing on a regular basis
- R3 Prioritise the provision of support according to need to ensure that all learners requiring urgent help with their mental health and emotional wellbeing receive support as quickly as possible
- R4 Work as closely as possible with external agencies to make overall support for mental health and emotional wellbeing as seamless as possible and minimise, or ideally avoid, the need for multiple points of contact
- R5 Make clear how support for mental health and emotional wellbeing can be accessed by all learners, including those studying with subcontractors or partner providers
- R6 Ensure that all counselling staff, and other staff in similar roles, receive appropriate supervision or mentoring and undertake specific professional learning in how to provide remote support effectively

### **The Welsh Government should:**

- R7 Ensure that the outcomes of Welsh Government-funded mental health projects are evaluated fully and share the findings across all post-16 sectors

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## 1 The impact of COVID-19 on post-16 learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing

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- 14 Providers told us about the range of factors that are adversely affecting post-16 learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing. Learners in further education colleges, especially 16-19 year olds on full-time courses, have experienced a great deal of uncertainty over examination and assessment arrangements as well as regarding their future education and employment prospects. With the closure of non-essential businesses during lockdowns, many learners have not had the opportunity to develop their work-related skills, particularly traineeship learners who often have additional barriers to learning and employment. Many learners have told their providers that they particularly miss the opportunity to meet and socialise with friends both within and outside their learning environment.
- 15 Apprenticeship learners faced contrasting pressures ranging from heavy workloads in front line 'key worker' occupations, such as health and social care roles, to widespread furloughing arrangements and redundancies in those occupations hit hardest during lockdown and firebreak periods. This is particularly prevalent in hospitality, hairdressing, beauty therapy and areas of engineering and construction, such as aeronautical engineering.
- 16 Many learners on adult learning programmes, especially those who are clinically vulnerable, faced increased social isolation due to not being able to attend classes in person. Other adult learners, such as those on English for speakers of other languages courses, particularly at entry level, or those without the necessary technology or connectivity for remote online learning, have also found it particularly difficult to continue their engagement in learning where this is delivered remotely.
- 17 Providers also told us that a minority of learners and staff also say they are feeling more stressed and anxious than usual due to the combined pressures of providing home schooling for their children and working from home as well as trying to keep up with their studies. Many also have additional caring and support responsibilities for clinically vulnerable relatives or other family and friends within their support bubble.
- 18 Many providers report that the number and proportion of learners and staff that have been affected by the bereavement of family members or close friends caused by COVID-19 have increased over the second wave of the virus. Similarly, the number and proportion of learners and staff who have contracted the virus have also risen. Although many learners and staff have been keen to return to on-site learning, many providers also say that a minority of learners and staff are particularly anxious about the risks involved in returning to on-site study and work.
- 19 The cumulative impact of the pandemic and repeated lockdowns is clearly taking its toll on mental health and emotional wellbeing across society. This is leading to widespread concerns over potential medium and longer term mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Providers report particular concern over learners' levels of anxiety and a majority of providers report greater prevalence of suicidal thoughts

among learners when compared with pre-pandemic levels. They also told us that there has been an increase in the prevalence of learners experiencing eating disorders, especially among young adult learners. Concerns over employment prospects, including the potential of redundancy, are also particularly evident among work-based learners. Providers also report that clinically vulnerable learners and learners on independent living skills programmes are also experiencing particular challenges, both in terms of maintaining their engagement in learning and experiencing anxiety over risks associated with contracting COVID-19. A majority also report that the proportion of learners who are not engaging regularly in learning is generally higher than levels experienced before the pandemic and learner withdrawal and non-completion rates are expected to be higher as a result of the pandemic.

- 20 Providers have focused on identifying and supporting learners in need of help although they have paid less attention to developing materials and practices that would improve the resilience of learners, particularly in supporting learner progress and achievement. However, a minority of providers have also told us that some learners and staff have identified positive as well as negative effects of lockdown restrictions. For example, studying or working from home may provide additional time to spend with the family or reduce the pressures of travelling to places of study or work. Other learners also recognise a sense of achievement in coping with greater responsibility for their own learning and coming to terms with new ways of studying and working. Where this is the case providers told us that learners and staff now feel more positive about their resilience and ability to cope with future uncertainty and change.
- 21 Nearly all providers told us that for a few learners studying from home can be especially difficult, especially where they feel unsafe or unsupported by other family members. Financial difficulties also mean that a few learners worry about being able to afford enough food for meals or other essential items.

## 2 Strategies and approaches to support post-16 learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing during the pandemic

### An increased focus on mental health and emotional wellbeing

- 22 Overall, providers report that they have heightened their focus on the wellbeing of learners and staff since the start of the pandemic. Many leaders describe how they have made a greater range of wellbeing resources available to learners and staff, especially through online platforms. These include information and activities on a wide range of mental health and emotional wellbeing issues such as coping with stress and anxiety, resilience, mindfulness, getting active, eating disorders, problems with sleep, alcohol and substance misuse and staying safe online.

#### **Cameo: Developing and implementing a whole organisation approach to mental health and emotional wellbeing**

Bridgend College has developed a whole college approach to mental health and emotional wellbeing which is founded on the simple principle of 'for us, by us'. Senior leaders have engaged extensively with learners, staff, trade union representatives and governors to identify specific gaps in existing support provision. This has enabled them to develop a clear and cohesive strategy which focuses on 'doing a small number of things, really well'.

The college brought together a cross-section of its key stakeholders in a mental health visioning day. By reflecting on what was working well as well as areas to improve, they identified six key strands. These include the value of parental or home engagement, and developing staff understanding of mental health issues. These strands were used as the starting point for developing a whole-college action plan. When describing their overall approach to emotional wellbeing, college leaders commented that fundamental to their approach is the view and belief 'that happy and well staff are much more likely to help learners be happy and well'.

Initiatives implemented so far include the introduction of learner engagement leads to support all aspects of learner engagement, including learner voice, student ambassadors and student governors. In addition, the college has appointed an active wellbeing lead to encourage learners and staff to maintain and improve their mental health and emotional wellbeing through the benefits of physical activity. In February 2021, Bridgend College achieved a prestigious UK national award in recognition of its work on mental health and wellbeing.

- 23 All further education colleges shared their wellbeing strategies with Welsh Government and these were evaluated as part of our work for this report. Most college strategies outline a whole college approach towards learner and staff wellbeing, explain how this is promoted, direct staff and learners to additional support and explain how the college apply and evaluate different support interventions. However, a minority of college wellbeing strategies do not address issues related to

substance misuse or explain fully what training pathways are available to help staff improve their understanding of mental health and wellbeing issues.

- 24 The Welsh Government is funding a range of recently established national and regionally-based mental health projects to support and encourage the development and sharing of effective practice in the further education and adult learning in the community sectors. These projects focus on strengthening whole organisational approaches to mental health and emotional wellbeing. The Welsh Government has also recently extended its support to fund a series of mental health projects in the work-based learning sector through working with the National Training Federation Wales (NTfW) and those further education colleges which are lead contract providers of work-based learning provision in Wales.
- 25 As a result of the mental health projects undertaken as part of the national strand of work, resources to help colleges support issues relating to substance misuse and to support a train the trainer professional development programme relating to adverse childhood experiences have already been developed. The project will be extended in 2021-2022 to enable trailblazer colleges to pilot the professional development programme. This will involve evaluation and networking to enable a full roll out of the programme. The institutional strand of work has already led to the development or updating of whole organisational wellbeing strategies, professional learning on resilience and mental health first aid, the extension of active wellbeing initiatives and wellbeing events for learners and staff.
- 26 Under the collaborative strand of the mental health project work colleges have worked closely together on a regional basis across three geographical areas. These projects have resulted in the joint development of e-learning activities, train-the-trainer mental health and emotional wellbeing resources, an early identification tool related to mental health issues and trauma-informed practice resource materials. The project work has also developed measurement and impact tools as part of efforts to improve the monitoring and evaluation of mental health and emotional wellbeing initiatives. All project outcomes and resources will be available in spring 2021 to share across the sector via Hwb.
- 27 Overall, the effectiveness of existing support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing varies between and within sectors including between and within individual further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships. In those providers where support appears to be most effective, there is a clear strategic focus and direction on mental health and emotional wellbeing across all aspects of provision and plans are in place to ensure that all learners have equitable and timely access to support services across all sites and delivery partners. However, in a minority of cases there is too much variation in the availability and effectiveness of mental health and emotional wellbeing support services across different sites or delivery partners. For example, although further education college learners studying on main college sites have ready access to a wide range of mental health and emotional wellbeing services and activities, it is not always made clear the extent to which those learners studying with the college's work-based or adult learning in the community venues or partners have access to the same support.

- 28 In general, large providers have the most extensive specialist support capacity and resource base, including staffing, to support learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing directly. Overall, nearly all providers reported that they developed and implemented useful strategies and procedures to support learners remotely during the COVID-19 crisis. Online wellbeing resources, guidance documents and support information have also been made available to nearly all learners. They have amended referral systems for safeguarding and specialist support to suit the unprecedented situation faced by learners and staff.
- 29 Since the initial lockdown in March 2020, most providers reported that they have been agile in adapting their arrangements appropriately to meet the mental health and emotional wellbeing support needs of learners. Although most support has been available online, a majority of providers have also made arrangements for learners to attend some support sessions in-person when necessary and when circumstances allow. This has been particularly beneficial to traineeship learners in developing their confidence, teambuilding and self-esteem. Many of these learners have challenging home circumstances. Their lack of digital technology or resources may have a negative impact on their mental health and engagement in learning. However, since the most recent lockdown restrictions introduced in December 2020, providers have returned to providing most support using remote arrangements.
- 30 Most providers promote positive mental health and wellbeing issues through regular communication with learners to help maintain engagement and motivation. Examples include remote delivery of 'Be Active' and wellbeing sessions and increasing the availability of self-help resources, especially through online platforms. Other providers run specific short courses focused on wellbeing. For example, Merthyr Tydfil Adult Community Learning Partnership has recently launched 'Wellbeing Fridays' starting with a six week course covering aspects such as mental health and stress awareness followed by practical workshops on techniques such as mindfulness and an introduction to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) based approaches around positive thinking. The course is already fully subscribed and additional courses are now being planned for future delivery.
- 31 Learners and staff in many providers have access to dedicated health and wellbeing resources on the learner and staff portals. These resources are generally designed to help and encourage learners with their self-care and self-regulation. In the best cases, these resources are chosen carefully and are adapted to suit the needs of specific age-groups where appropriate. In a few cases, the high volume of resources distributed or made available online risks overloading learners with too much information. This means that it is not as easy as it should be for learners to navigate their way around and access resources or help on issues that are most pertinent to their needs.



**Cameo: Supporting the wellbeing of work-based learners during the pandemic**

Wellbeing officers at the Quality Skills Alliance (QSA) consortium of work-based learning providers provide helpful support and advice to learners. This has continued during lockdown periods with an enhanced range of useful strategies applied to support learners' wellbeing.

Support staff have established a remote wellbeing service using online platforms so that learners could continue meet them virtually when in-person meetings were restricted. Initially, staff identified learners at risk or in need to additional support by using a RAG (red, amber, green) rating system. This enabled them to tailor support to the needs of individual learners. Staff have maintained at least weekly contact with their most vulnerable learners. They have also provided support to over 120 new learners. Resources and essential information were sent out to all learners, including cybersafety guidance, useful tips on working from home, exercise programmes to suit a range of abilities and specific information addressing domestic violence and other forms of abuse.

Providers across the QSA have built on their relationships with partners to offer specialist, industry support to apprentices. For example, apprentices at Cardiff City Football Club have access to the Professional Footballers' Association wellbeing programme and Sgil Cymru apprentices are able to access support from the BBC and ITV.

A remote wellbeing team was also created to support learners with mindfulness sessions, information on useful apps, signposting to websites and wellbeing quizzes for learners to do. A bespoke foodbank has continued to be accessible and food parcels are delivered to the most vulnerable learners.

- 32 Learners in work-based learning are often worried about the loss of employment and being made redundant. Work-based learning providers recognise that apprentices often also face the challenges of home working and in some cases home schooling as well as undertaking remote learning themselves. Although the prevalence of such pressures reduced in the period following the end of the first lockdown, the return to stricter restrictions and renewed lockdown arrangements saw the number of learners affected by these arrangement increase sharply again in December 2020 and early 2021. In most of these cases, tutors and assessors have been flexible with targets and deadlines where learners are under pressure due to the COVID-19 situation.

### Professional learning

- 33 Many providers have reported that they have provided extensive training, such as in mental health first aid, to staff to help them identify concerns and support learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing. Recent activities include the launch of a national project aimed at creating a trauma and adverse childhood experiences (TrACE) informed further education sector in Wales by raising staff awareness and sector capacity to identify and support learners in further education colleges affected by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Further education colleges are working

closely with Public Health Wales, with the support of a sector lead seconded from a further education college, to develop and roll out professional learning on ACEs across the sector. This project is also supporting the development of ACE-related materials and resources for use within further education colleges. However, this area of work is in the early stages in post-16 providers when compared with schools.

**Cameo: Running a mental health and wellbeing conference for adult learning in the community tutors**

The Greater Gwent Adult Community Learning Partnership ran a mental health and wellbeing conference for its tutors soon after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and imposition of lockdown restrictions in March 2020. The conference raised tutors' awareness of a range of mental health and emotional wellbeing issues that may affect learners and staff during the pandemic. Issues covered included the prevalence of mental health problems in society and in the workplace, the potential impact on mental health of social isolation during periods of lockdown or shielding, and tips to establish work-life boundaries when working from home.

During the conference, tutors also examined and discussed the links between physical and mental health and explored a variety of potentially useful coping strategies. These included the value of hobbies and interests; ways of maintaining social contact and interaction with relatives, friends and colleagues; improving self-awareness; enjoying natural surroundings within local areas; and incorporating feeling gratitude into daily routines as part of a positive approach to maintaining emotional wellbeing.

Tutors discussed the value of listening to learners and encouraging their positive wellbeing as well as identifying a range of ways in which they could provide helpful advice to learners, or direct them to sources of additional resources, help and support. The conference also provided an important opportunity to make sure that all tutors and learners were aware of the arrangements for safeguarding and online safety. Leaders report that feedback from the conference was very positive and that the event also helped them to identify and address other development needs relating to digital literacy and working remotely.

- 34 Since the start of the pandemic many providers have increased their use of mental health first aiders, and, especially in larger providers, wellbeing officers. These roles are often linked to monitoring attendance and engagement in online sessions, maintaining regular contact with learners and providing or signposting wellbeing support and resources. Other roles targeted at supporting learner wellbeing include resilience coaches, peer mentors and learning coaches. These roles are designed to strengthen learners' capacity to practise effective self-care and self-regulation as well as helping remove or reduce any barriers, or stigma attached, to learners accessing specialist support for their mental health and emotional wellbeing.

**Cameo: Developing designated wellbeing roles within adult learning in the community partnerships**

Bridgend adult community learning partnership, along with adult community learning partnerships in neighbouring local authorities in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil, has recently embarked on a joint project to identify and develop a network of 'wellbeing champions' across the three areas who will cascade knowledge, information and resources to their peers and advise tutors on ways to support their learners on wellbeing issues. The partnerships have collectively secured Welsh Government project funding to launch the programme and are working closely together to develop appropriate strategies to ensure long-term sustainability of the roles beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 35 In a few cases, providers have supported staff to encourage learners from occupational sectors where mental health needs are particularly prevalent among staff, such as among construction, childcare and hospitality workers as well as for young males, to talk to others about any concerns they may have about their mental health. These providers have identified that these groups of learners are under-represented in the numbers accessing specialist mental health support.

**Assessing and prioritising support**

- 36 Initial screenings and detailed assessments of learners' needs are used widely, especially in larger providers, to help prioritise mental health and emotional wellbeing support. However, a few providers do not identify those learners most at risk of disengaging from learning or who are experiencing mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. As a result, engagement levels of a few learners are too low and their wellbeing is not being monitored on a regular basis.
- 37 Examples of more systematic approaches which have been developed or extended since lockdown include 'at-risk' registers, 'RAG' ratings and greater use of triaging approaches to make sure that support is prioritised for learners most in need.

**Cameo: Prioritising support for young adult carers during the pandemic**

At the start of the first lockdown the NPTC group of colleges made the decision to place its young adult carers at the top of its priority list for mental health and emotional wellbeing support. The decision was made because of the high levels of anxiety being reported in the weeks leading up to lockdown by these learners. The college is also aware that many of its young adult carers do not receive statutory support and may not have regular contact with individuals outside of their caring situation.

Young adult carers indicated that they were feeling more isolated and that the responsibility for caring had intensified for them during lockdown as a result of shielding requirements. To support these learners, the college identified a member of the wellbeing team to maintain at least weekly one-to-one contact. Learners were able to choose whether the contact was by telephone or email. Teaching staff and other support staff were kept informed as appropriate and provided

additional support and resources. The college also linked closely with local young carers services in both Neath Port Talbot and Powys local authorities. This helped enable many young adult carers to access additional support such as supplementary food parcels, help with shopping and prescription collection services.

The careful identification of young adult learners with caring responsibilities and the prioritisation of help and support is helping them continue in their learning and is reducing the risk of them having to leave college due to the added pressures they are facing during these exceptionally challenging times.

**Cameo: Use of a graduated response model to provide timely interventions for a college learner**

Coleg Cambria has developed a graduated model that follows a triaged approach to identify and respond to learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing support needs.

One learner reported struggling with their mental health during lockdown and experienced a lack of motivation to complete their college work. The learner was referred from their tutor to the resilience coach for support following the college's graduated approach model guidelines. The resilience coach provided immediate support and followed the graduated approach reporting process. The coach worked with the learner to develop a support plan. In this case, the learner was encouraged to attend lessons on-site rather than attend remotely. The resilience coach also provided weekly online support sessions through Google Meet.

The college's 'TRAC' team also supported the learner to organise their work. TRAC is a project across the six counties of North Wales. It aims to prevent vulnerable children and young people from disengaging in education and therefore reduce the likelihood they become inactive and unemployed in the future.

The learner attended curriculum and support sessions regularly, engaged well with staff and after a period of time reported having improved mental wellbeing.

- 38 Many providers report capacity issues, both in terms of internal waiting lists for counselling appointments as well as externally, for example where there are long waiting lists to access support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). A minority of providers also report that learners experience difficulties accessing appointments with their GP to discuss their mental health and emotional wellbeing concerns.

**Cameo: Making sure that the right support for learners is available at the right time by prioritising those most at need**

Historically, all learners referred to the learner support team at Coleg Sir Gâr and Coleg Ceredigion by tutors, external organisations or via learner self-referral would have been added to a list and allocated on a 'first come, first served' basis. The support offered would generally be in-person, one-to-one appointments with mentors. Each learner was typically allocated one hour sessions on a weekly or fortnightly basis depending on their need. This system often created waiting lists as the demand for support outweighed the capacity of the learner support team.

Following the announcement of college closures as a result of the pandemic in March 2020, leaders reviewed the process to ensure that the right support was available at the right time for all learners, prioritising those most in need. They adjusted arrangements to ensure a seamless transition from in-person contact to mostly online or telephone support. Expanding the variety of support on offer to include telephone welfare 'check-ins', online group work and referrals to self-help resources also ensured that all learners referred into the system were contacted and supported in some capacity and were not held on a waiting list.

The college decided to triage any new referrals using a standard initial need evaluation tool to help prioritise the support. The learning support team also created an 'at-risk' register of learners, including those learners who they had already supported. These were identified by known risk of self-harm, unsafe behaviours, substance misuse, unhealthy relationships, homelessness or unstable home environments. These learners were prioritised for support.

The new triaging approach has helped reduce delays and minimise waiting lists. The college feels that the change of approach since March 2020 is providing a far more effective and efficient method of working with learners than was in place before the pandemic. Their analysis of weekly monitoring data indicates that the support is being targeted towards the most vulnerable, with a high percentage of 'at-risk' learners being supported intensively on a weekly basis. The new approach has enabled the college to increase the number of learners being supported from 486 at the time of entering the first lockdown to just over 700 in January 2021. In addition, the clear prioritisation of 'at-risk' learners has resulted in an average of 88% of this cohort of learners being supported intensively on a weekly basis.

**Working with external agencies**

- 39 Links with specialist external agencies involved in mental health support, including public bodies and charitable organisations, are generally strong across the post-16 sectors. These links usually involve regular scheduled meetings, including joint case meetings for learners accessing support from multiple agencies and those identified as being particularly at-risk. Providers report that support arrangements are most effective where learners are given an individual named contact to help them access support rather than having to make contact themselves with multiple contacts.

**Cameo: Multi-agency working to support learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing**

Pembrokeshire College has worked with a learner with multi-agency partnerships, to provide support not only to the learner but to their relative too. The learner's personal circumstances are difficult and complex. The multi-agency partnerships included a wide range of external support agencies working with the college designated safeguarding lead.

With the help of a comprehensive package of multi-agency support the learner was able to maintain their studies and has been able to deal with crisis situations safely and responsibly as they have arisen. They have coped with the impact of lockdown restrictions and with adjusting to studying and accessing specialist support remotely during the pandemic. The learner has now been discharged from primary mental health services and their relative is no longer recorded as 'in need'.

The college feels that a key factor contributing to this success has been the consistency of the named persons supporting the learner and the close working and effective communications between agencies before and during the pandemic. This has included the designated safeguarding lead and learning coach at the college and the named social worker and independent reviewing officer externally. This helps ensure that when the learner needs to share something, their story does not need to be retold, they have trust and confidence to share, and there is a unified approach to action. This avoids duplication of service provision and helps ensure a holistic response to the learner which results in their needs being met even in these unprecedented times when face-to-face in person contact is more difficult.

- 40 In a minority of smaller providers or sites where specialist support may be less readily available, tutors or assessors often provide most of the support for general wellbeing. These staff signpost learners to external sources of specialist mental health and emotional wellbeing where they are unable to provide direct support themselves. However, where learners are signposted to external support, a minority of providers are unclear on whether these staff always make follow up checks to ensure that learners are receiving support.

**Returning to on-site delivery**

- 41 A return to on-site delivery of support provision was gathering pace prior to the return to lockdown restrictions in December 2020. During late summer and the autumn term, when sites were open to a wider range of learners, some in-person learner support services were re-introduced. These arrangements were subject to risk assessments and adjustments to help maintain social distancing. In a minority of providers, this was accompanied by the introduction, or continued implementation, of triaging arrangements to prioritise in-person contact according to need and to help mitigate the ongoing risks of virus transmission.

## Supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable learners

- 42 During periods of lockdown, a minority of settings continued to provide quiet and safe spaces for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners to use on-site. For example, many further education colleges allowed learners who were finding it difficult or were unable to study at home to book a study space in learning resource centres. A few work-based learning providers have made similar arrangements available, especially for their traineeship learners. However, the closure of most community learning venues, including libraries, has made such arrangements more difficult to put in place for adult learners within the community.
- 43 Many providers across the further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community sectors have made strong links with a range of initiatives to support wellbeing among disadvantaged groups, such as helping local foodbanks with collections and deliveries, the provision of hygiene packs and with loaning digital equipment.

### **Cameo: Identifying and supporting the most vulnerable work-based learners**

ACT uses a risk rating approach to help identify those learners who are particularly vulnerable and most at risk. This approach is then used to inform the type, level and frequency of support provided. Examples of support provided includes food parcels, essential wellbeing toiletries and hygiene products, IT and other education resources, regular wellbeing phone calls and the provision of opportunities for learners to attend the learning centre for face-to-face wellbeing support even during lockdown periods.

All learners have a designated wellbeing officer assigned to them. Wellbeing officers provide learners with relevant resources to help them engage in remote learning activities where necessary and are able to provide contact details and help with referrals for specialist support agencies as well as the provider's counselling service. Virtual sessions on wellbeing have also been provided, including specific sessions on how COVID-19 can affect individuals emotional health and wellbeing. By identifying those learners who are particularly vulnerable and most at risk, the provider is able to provide early interventions should any particular issues arise thereby helping minimise the potential long-term impact of such difficulties.

## Safeguarding

- 44 Many providers have updated key policies and procedures, including safeguarding and online safety guidelines, to reflect the context and impact of COVID-19 and to make sure they are in line with updated guidance from the Welsh Government. In particular, many have updated their safeguarding arrangements to reflect the increase in remote learning. Most providers have placed a clear emphasis on safeguarding and staying safe online and many have raised learners' awareness of issues such as online fraud. Most reported that they have circulated updated useful information and guidance to help ensure that learners and staff have safe remote access to college systems.

**Cameo: Providing appropriate support to enable a learner to return to study following a personal crisis situation**

During one of the COVID-19 lockdown periods, a provider was informed that one of their traineeship learners was in hospital following a suicide attempt.

Working through the designated safeguarding lead, the provider put support measures in place to allow the learner time to recover and then made arrangements to support their return to training on a phased approach. The learner said that they felt comfortable engaging in training activities at home during the day and that this provided a positive distraction to their feelings of anxiety and depression.

The provider was aware that the learner was particularly keen on pursuing a specific career route. To help support the learner in returning to study, the provider arranged specialist counselling support and procured an interactive and engaging online course to underpin the knowledge and understanding of this pathway. The learner has since made a confident return to the training centre during the period when the centre was able to reopen and has completed the necessary preparatory arrangements ahead of starting their first placement working in their chosen occupational sector.

- 45 Over the course of the pandemic, increased incidences of learner wellbeing and safeguarding concerns were reported in many colleges and a minority of work-based learning providers, although this has not been the case in adult learning in the community partnerships.
- 46 Overall during the pandemic, a minority of providers have seen an increase in the number of safeguarding concerns reported to the police or referred to social services. However, a few providers have found that during those periods when in-person contact is restricted and support was delivered remotely, the number of reported incidences fell. Providers cite the reduction in opportunities for staff to notice unusual characteristics or behaviours in learners when not being able to see them in person as a potential contributory factor in this trend. Many also recognise that it can be more difficult for learners to disclose issues or concerns either by telephone or online when other members of the household are present.

**Cameo: Supporting a learner experiencing domestic abuse**

Remote learning has brought challenges when speaking with learners. Although assessors ask about wellbeing, at a distance it can be difficult to identify the reality of how learners are feeling and coping. The increased use of online platforms allowing assessors and learners to see one another has helped to reduce this barrier. However, it is sometimes more challenging for learners to share their concerns online than when meetings take place in person.

During the first COVID-19 lockdown, an assessor at Torfaen Training began to raise concerns with a learner and manager in relation to lack of progress with their qualification, as well as concerning ongoing difficulties making contact. Despite support and involvement from the assessor and the learner's manager to help with



generating evidence the situation was unresolved throughout the lockdown period. In order to allow support to be given directly in a face-to-face meeting the assessor set up planned in-person meetings as soon as restrictions were eased.

During the first in-person meeting following easing of lockdown restrictions the learner disclosed details of being affected by domestic abuse which had led to police action being taken against the partner. The assessor was able to reassure the learner that they understood the reasons around the lack of progress and discussed ways in which the provider could offer support and flexibility. As a result of the conversation, the learner also gained the courage to speak to their manager in confidence.

The understanding, supportive and flexible approaches being adopted by the provider and the employer have helped the learner to make substantial progress towards their qualifications, including the completion of essential skills qualifications. The learner has also confirmed that their wellbeing and self-esteem have improved substantially since their personal situation had improved.

### Counselling services

- 47 Providers generally report an increase in the number of counselling referrals. These are for a variety of reasons including anxiety, depression, self-harm and family issues. In particular, since the start of the pandemic, they report an upward trend in young people presenting with issues such as mental health and unhealthy relationships.
- 48 Colleges and work-based learning providers have continued to make counselling services available for learners and staff where required. They recognise an increase in mental health concerns among learners and staff, especially in relation to anxiety and depression. Nearly all counselling support continues to be provided remotely by telephone or online, with few colleges and providers as yet offering a return to in-person sessions due to ongoing concerns about the risks involved in prolonged face-to-face close contact during counselling sessions.
- 49 For those adult learning in the community partnerships where learners are enrolled as a student in the partner college, counselling services are available in the college. Partnerships without a college partner refer to external agencies or to the local authority's social services support.
- 50 Where counselling sessions are being delivered in person, providers report that they undertake appropriate thorough risk assessments and make appropriate adjustments to delivery arrangements as required. For example, they recognise that most counselling sessions involve one-to-one discussions where the counsellor and client are in close proximity for extended periods, typically up to an hour per session, and the rooms allocated to such one-to-one sessions are usually small.
- 51 In such circumstances, providers have ensured that alternative larger rooms are allocated for these sessions and give careful consideration to appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE), such as face coverings, in order to support a

return to in-person sessions where sufficient social distancing and adequate ventilation can be maintained.

- 52 Specific training on remote working is recommended by counselling professional bodies to help counsellors work ethically and effectively online or over the telephone. However, only a minority of counsellors have completed specialist training required.
- 53 Clinical supervision at least in line with recommended or mandatory requirements is in place for counselling staff who are registered or accredited members of recognised professional bodies for counselling. In a very few cases providers have recently extended supervision support arrangements to include other staff in front-line support roles who are dealing with learners with the most complex and challenging mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. However, generally most providers are not yet providing any form of supervision for other support staff dealing with similar issues.
- 54 All further education colleges and most work-based learning providers are able to access Welsh Government support cost funding to support individual learners with their additional learning needs. However, a very few providers have not accessed this additional funding since the first lockdown, which may result in missed opportunities to provide funded support to these learners during these unprecedented times.
- 55 In the adult learning in the community sector, all partnerships have sought additional funding to support learners, in particular through the purchase of IT equipment for those learners most in need. Partnerships have submitted bids for Welsh Government grants to support mental health by providing bespoke courses, training mental health mentors and one-to-one support sessions.

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### 3 Learning for the future and next steps

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- 56 During engagement calls providers were also questioned about their plans for the future provision of support beyond the pandemic. For example, providers were asked whether they were planning to retain some, or all, of the additional options for how support is being provided during the pandemic into post-pandemic arrangements.
- 57 Many providers told us that putting learner and staff wellbeing as the overriding priority following the outbreak of the pandemic has been crucial in maintaining morale and continuity of learning. They feel strongly that support for staff mental health and emotional wellbeing is essential to complement support available for learners.
- 58 When leaders were asked to reflect on the impact of the pandemic, a majority identified benefits and opportunities despite the challenges they faced. These include reductions in travel requirements for both learners and staff, especially in the work-based learning sector where staff often travel substantial distances for one-to-one sessions with learners and learners may travel to learning centres for some off-the-job and assessment sessions.
- 59 Providers also told us that the enforced switch to remote delivery of support sessions following the initial lockdown provided unexpected additional flexibility in meeting learner needs. For example, several colleges reported difficulties pre-lockdown in meeting demand for support at some of their sites while simultaneously having excess capacity elsewhere. Following the switch to remote delivery by telephone or video online, providers were able to schedule sessions more flexibly as staff were not tied to delivery in specific site locations.
- 60 Similar benefits have also been reported in terms of providers being able to provide greater access to support to learners in remote geographical locations and those requesting support sessions which are conducted through the medium of Welsh.
- 61 A few providers also described how, for a minority of learners, they had switched to shorter, more frequent support sessions in order to fit in better with learners' work or home commitments. Staff were also able to schedule sessions more flexibly to provide support in the evenings or weekends where necessary.
- 62 A few providers told us that learner feedback on remote delivery of support sessions indicated that a minority of learners preferred remote delivery to in-person contact. Feedback from providers also highlighted that while some learners prefer remote support that is provided online others are more comfortable with telephone support. In particular, providers report that a few learners feel uncomfortable having their cameras on when taking part in support discussions and prefer to keep their camera switched off.
- 63 As a result of their new experiences with more flexible approaches to the delivery of support, a majority of providers are planning to review support delivery methods for the post-pandemic period. For example, several providers told us that they are likely to retain mixed delivery options rather than return to previous arrangements, which often saw in-person delivery used for nearly all sessions.

64 The questions that follow are not an exhaustive list, but we offer them as possible prompts for discussion about our experiences, both before and during the pandemic, and the potential ways forward with supporting learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing in further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community. They are:

- What is our future model of support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing?
- Is there a continued role for remote and blending support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing in our sectors in the future?
- What has worked well in supporting learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing, and why?
- What has not worked well in supporting learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing, and why? Is there anything we can do to improve our support?
- If we are to keep aspects of remote and blended support in our plans for supporting learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing, what key issues do we need to take into consideration?
- What are the benefits and disadvantages of using remote and blended support in our plans for supporting learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing?
- How can we best promote positive mental health and emotional wellbeing for learners?
- How can we make it easy for learners to find their way around the resources and support services which are available to them to support their mental health and emotional wellbeing and to select those most relevant for their individual needs and circumstances? How do we avoid overloading learners with too much information?
- How do we identify and prioritise those learners who have the most urgent mental health and emotional wellbeing support needs so that support is provided in the most timely and effective manner?
- How do we minimise waiting lists and wait times for access support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing?
- How do we gather, monitor and learn from feedback from learners on support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing?
- How do we monitor and evaluate engagement with the various types of support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing?
- How do we evaluate the impact of support on learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing? What are the key quantitative and qualitative indicators?
- What types of professional learning do we need to provide for staff to help them deliver high quality support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing?
- How do we ensure that initiatives introduced as a result of project funding support are sustainable?
- What can we learn from other providers within our sector which can help us develop and improve our support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing? Should we consider adopting or adapting any of this practice?
- What can we learn from other education sectors which can help us develop and improve our support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing? Should we consider adopting or adapting any of this practice?
- What can we learn from organisations beyond the education sector which can help us develop and improve our support for learners' mental health and

emotional wellbeing? Should we consider adopting or adapting any of this practice?

- How can we collaborate with others to learn from each other and improve our support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing, including building their resilience?
- What can we learn from our experiences of supporting learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing to help develop and improve our support for staff mental health and emotional wellbeing?
- What do we think the major challenges will be in relation to learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing as we come through this pandemic and progress to a 'new normal'?
- What are the most important actions for developing and improving our support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing?

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## Appendix 1: Evidence base

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Inspectors reviewed recent reports on the emerging impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people's mental health and emotional wellbeing in Wales and the UK. We also undertook a series of engagement calls to speak to senior leaders in further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community partnerships across Wales. These remote meetings from May to July 2020 focused on how providers were working to maintain learners' engagement and to support learners' emotional wellbeing.

Inspectors followed up initial engagement calls with further remote meetings between September and October 2020 to find out more about the main developments, successes and challenges of supporting learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing within the post-16 sectors during the pandemic. In December 2020, based on this engagement work, alongside the Annual Report (Estyn, 2020e), Estyn (2020a) published a post-16 sector update report.

Between November 2020 to January 2021, inspectors contacted a sample of four providers from each of the sectors across Wales to find out the key successes and challenges of supporting learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing as well as any emerging interesting practice. This involved online meetings with senior and middle leaders and review of relevant documentation.

The providers and partnerships contacted were:

- Neath Port Talbot & Powys adult learning partnerships
- Bridgend adult community learning partnership
- Merthyr Tydfil adult community learning partnership
- Greater Gwent adult learning partnership
- ACT
- People Plus
- Torfaen Training
- Quality Skills Alliance @ Cardiff and Vale College
- Bridgend College
- Coleg Cambria
- Pembrokeshire College
- Coleg Sir Gar and Coleg Ceredigion

Inspectors wish to express their thanks to all the leaders and staff who took part in online meetings to provide insight into their experiences of supporting learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing in unprecedented times. We would also like to thank the Welsh Government for sharing the outcomes of the post-16 learner survey, which was conducted between October and December 2020.

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## Appendix 2: Additional resources, sources of support and contact details

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### Activate Your Life

The “ACTivate Your Life” online video course shares practical ways to cope with thoughts and feelings causing distress and help live life with more confidence.

Website: [phw.nhs.wales/activateyourlife](http://phw.nhs.wales/activateyourlife).

### Anna Freud Centre

A research and policy centre focused on developing, disseminating and delivering evidence-based policy and mental health support for children and young people throughout the UK.

Website: [www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing](http://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing)

### ‘Beat’ eating disorders helpline

Beat provides helplines and information for adults and young people, offering a supportive environment to talk about eating disorders and how to get help.

The following helplines are available 9am to 8pm on weekdays and 4pm – 8pm at weekends and bank holidays

Helpline (free): 0808 801 0677  
Studentline (free): 0808 801 0811  
Youthline (free): 0808 801 0711

Website: <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services>

One-to-one webchat: <https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/support-services/helplines/one-to-one>

### Bloom

Bloom is a UK-wide programme, which supports 14-18 year old young people’s mental health resilience. The free programme is designed to be delivered in schools and colleges.

Website: <https://mentalhealth-uk.org/partnerships/projects/bloom/>

Online teacher training: <https://mentalhealth-uk.org/bloom-online-teacher-training/>

### **Charlie Waller Memorial Trust**

Mental health charity supports and educates young people, and those with responsibility for them – so parents, educators, employers, GPs and Practice Nurses - about their mental health and wellbeing.

Website: <https://charliewaller.org/>

**Free downloads of guides and workbooks (includes FE industry specific teaching guides):** <https://charliewaller.org/resources>

### **Childline**

National helpline for anybody under the age of 19, offering advice and support on a range of issues including self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

Telephone support line (24hr): 0800 11 11

1-2-1 Counsellor Chat (9am – 10.30pm) available via <https://www.childline.org.uk/get-support/1-2-1-counsellor-chat/>

e-mail: Available via registration on the website

Website: [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

### **Children in Wales**

Umbrella organisation for groups working with children in Wales that provides training courses and information on child protection, self-harm and safeguarding.

Website: [www.childreninwales.org.uk](http://www.childreninwales.org.uk)

Telephone: 029 2034 2434

Email: [info@childreninwales.org.uk](mailto:info@childreninwales.org.uk)

### **Community Advice and Listening Line (C.A.L.L.)**

A mental health helpline for Wales offering a confidential listening and support service. Offers emotional support and information/literature on mental health and related matters to the people of Wales.

24 hour Freephone helpline: 0800 132 737

Text messaging service: text help to 81066

Website: <https://www.callhelpline.org.uk/>



### **Cruse Bereavement Care**

For anybody needing support after the death of a loved one.

Support line: 0808 808 1677

Email: [helpline@cruse.org.uk](mailto:helpline@cruse.org.uk)

CruseChat: online chat facility available via the Cruse website 9am-9pm Mon to Fri

Website: [www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

Local branches throughout Wales – see website for details

### **Hafal**

Hafal is a member-led charity supporting people with mental health problems, with a special emphasis on those with a serious mental illness, and their carers and families. They also support others with a range of disabilities and their carers and families.

Website: <https://www.hafal.org/>

Email: [hafal@hafal.org](mailto:hafal@hafal.org)

Telephone: 01792 816 600 or 01792 832 400

### **Heads above the Waves**

A not-for-profit organisation that raises awareness of depression and self-harm in young people.

Website: <http://hatw.co.uk>

### **Kooth**

Digital mental health services provider operating across the UK

Website: <https://www.koothplc.com/>

### **Meic**

Confidential, anonymous helpline offering information, support and advocacy for people aged up to 25 living in Wales.

Support line (8am - midnight): 0808 80 23456 (Freephone)

Text support: 84001

Website: [www.meiccymru.org](http://www.meiccymru.org)

Online chat: accessible via website

### **Mental Health Foundation**

Mental health charity most well known for running Mental Health Awareness Week across the UK each year. Also undertakes community and peer programmes, research, public engagement and advocacy.

Website: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/>

### **MIND Cymru**

Welsh arm of the national mental health charity that provides information and support on mental health and related issues (including self-harm).

Information line (Mon to Fri 9am – 6pm except Bank holidays): 0300 123 3393

e-mail: [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

Legal line (Mon to Fri 9am – 6pm except Bank holidays): 0300 466 6463

e-mail: [legal@mind.org.uk](mailto:legal@mind.org.uk)

Website: [www.mind.org.uk/about-us/mind-cymru](http://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/mind-cymru)

### **National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH)**

The National Centre for Mental Health brings together researchers from Cardiff, Swansea and Bangor Universities to learn more about the triggers and causes of mental health problems.

Website: <https://www.ncmh.info/>

### **National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health (NCCMH)**

Collaboration between Royal College of Psychiatrists and University College London who develop evidence-based guidance and reviews to support the delivery of high-quality mental health care.

Website: [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/improving-care/nccmh](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/improving-care/nccmh)

### **NHS 111 Wales**

The 111 service is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and can be used both for health information and advice and to access urgent primary care.

Website: <https://111.wales.nhs.uk/LiveWell/>

## Papyrus

A service for children and young people under the age of 35 who are thinking about suicide, or for anyone worried that a young person may be contemplating suicide.

Hopeline telephone support line (9.00 am –12:00 midnight everyday): 0800 068 41 41

Text support: 07860 039967

e-mail: [pat@papyrus-uk.org](mailto:pat@papyrus-uk.org)

Website: [www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org)

## Royal College of Psychiatrists

The Royal College of Psychiatrists provides practical and up-to-date information about the emotional and psychiatric disorders for young people as well as educators and parents/carers.

Website: [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people)

## Samaritans

A totally confidential, twenty-four hour support service for anyone experiencing emotional distress and/or suicidal thoughts.

24-hour national support line: 116 123

e-mail support: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

Welsh Language support line (variable hours): 0808 164 0123

[www.samaritans.org/wales/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/welsh-language-phone-line](http://www.samaritans.org/wales/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/welsh-language-phone-line)

Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

Self-help app: <https://www.samaritans.org/wales/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/self-help/>

Webchat: <https://webchat.samaritans.org/>

## SilverCloud

SilverCloud is an online course which offers support for anxiety, depression, and much more, all based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

Website: Anyone aged 16 or over can sign up at [nhs.wales.silvercloudhealth.com/signup/](http://nhs.wales.silvercloudhealth.com/signup/).

## YoungMinds

Charity dedicated to improving mental health of children and young people.

Website: <https://youngminds.org.uk>

YoungMinds Crisis Messenger 24/7 text support: Text (free) YM to 85258

Parents helpline (Mon to Fri 9.30am to 4pm) : 0808 802 5544 (Freephone)

Parents email contact form: <https://youngminds.org.uk/contact-us/parents-helpline-enquiries/>

## Young Person's Mental Health Toolkit

The Young Person's Mental Health Toolkit links young people, aged 11 to 25, to websites, apps, helplines, and more to build resilience.

Website: You can access the toolkit at [bit.ly/ypmhten](http://bit.ly/ypmhten).

## Youth Access

National membership organisation for youth information, advice and counselling services (YIACS).

Website: <https://www.youthaccess.org.uk/>

## Apps

### BeyondNow

Free safety planning app.

Website: [www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/beyondnow-suicide-safety-planning](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/beyondnow-suicide-safety-planning)

### Calm Harm

Private, password-protected app that gives tasks which help distract from thoughts of self-harm.

Website: [www.stem4.org.uk/calmharm](http://www.stem4.org.uk/calmharm)

### Headspace

Meditation and mindfulness app.

Website: [www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com)

### **Stay Alive**

An app that provides help and support to people with suicidal thoughts, or people worried about someone else.

Website: <https://www.prevent-suicide.org.uk/find-help-now/stay-alive-app/>

### **Togetherall**

A safe online community established to provide 24/7 support to people with anxiety, depression and other common mental health issues.

Website: <https://togetherall.com/en-gb/>

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## Appendix 3: Timeline of significant events from March 2020 – February 2021

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You can find a more extensive timeline about the Welsh Government's response to COVID-19 here:

<https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/coronavirus-timeline-welsh-and-uk-governments-response/>

### March 2020

- Inspections were suspended.
- National lockdown started.
- Minister for Education announced the suspension of the summer examination series.
- Furlough scheme was introduced.

### April 2020

- Minister for Education confirmed that the 2020 Wales results day for AS and A level students, and for GCSE students, would be as originally scheduled.

### May 2020

- Minister for Education set out an approach for thinking about how and when schools and other education providers would reopen called 'the decision framework for the next phase of education and childcare: considerations, planning and challenges' (Welsh Government, 2020h).
- Welsh Government (2020b) published its COVID-19 Resilience Plan for the post-16 sectors, including further and higher education, apprenticeships, employability and adult learning. This strategy set out three phases of Rescue, Review and Renew from March 2020 to March 2021.

## June 2020

- Minister for Education and the Minister for Health launched the 'Young Person's Mental Health Toolkit' (Welsh Government, 2020j).
- Welsh Government (2020f) published guidance to support a safe return to face-to-face further education and work-based learning.
- Further education colleges and work-based learning providers began to reopen for face-to-face learning from 15 June for priority groups of learners who needed to return to college or training centres to carry out practical assessments to complete their qualifications, and those learners who needed extra support and guidance to stay in education.
- Qualifications Wales (2020a) published its aims that underpinned the way that GCSE and A level grades would be calculated in summer 2020, together with the requirements for the appeals process.

## July 2020

- Welsh Government announced additional funding of £23 million to support learners in further education colleges and sixth forms. For learners in sixth form, vocational courses or at further education colleges, funding would allow an increase in teaching support and provide digital equipment as well as supporting a variety of other approaches for learners in Wales.
- Welsh Government published updated guidance to support further education (2020e) and work-based providers (2020i) as they continued to prepare for the autumn term and beyond. This included guidance for safe operation in post-16 learning from September 2020 (Welsh Government, 2020e) and a strategic framework for learning delivery (2020d).
- Welsh Government (2020a) published blended learning guidance for further education institutions, work-based learning and adult learning in the community
- Estyn published brief insights into how further education (2020c), work-based learning (2020d) and adult learning in the community providers (2020b) had worked to support their learners and community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## August 2020

- Wales' Minister for Education guaranteed a learner's final A level grade would not be lower than their AS grade. After public outcry following the publication of A-level results, the Minister for Education confirmed that A level, AS, GCSE, Skills Challenge Certificate and Welsh Baccalaureate grades would now be awarded on the basis of Centre Assessment Grades.
- GCSE results and revised A level results were released, based on teachers' assessments in line with the rest of the UK. At A level, results also increased, particularly those achieving A-A\*. This rose substantially to 41.3% compared with the originally published result of 29.9% and a figure of 27% in 2019 (Qualifications Wales, 2020b)
- Welsh Government announced further funding to support a range of services, including £3.6 million for further education colleges, for additional cleaning costs to ensure that learners and staff are able to work in a safe environment during the pandemic.
- Welsh Government (2020e) released updated guidance to support the safe operation in post-16 learning from September 2020 and advice for teachers and lecturers (Welsh Government, 2020c) and for learners studying AS, A levels and the Welsh Baccalaureate in school sixth forms and further education colleges.
- Following advice from the Chief Medical Officer for Wales, Welsh Government amended guidance to require settings and local authorities to undertake risk assessments to determine if face coverings should be recommended for their staff and young people in communal areas, including school and college transport.
- Minister for Education announced an independent review of the arrangements for awarding grades for the 2020 summer exam series for general qualifications to be chaired by Louise Casella, director of The Open University in Wales.

## September 2020

- Additional funding was provided to further education colleges to support the use of face coverings.

## October 2020

- OECD (2020) education review was published.



## November 2020

- Post-16 learners remained at home for the week after half-term as part of the national 'firebreak'.
- The Minister for Education announced that there would be no end of year exams for learners taking GCSEs, AS levels or A levels in 2021. In place of exams, the Welsh Government intends to work with schools and colleges to take forward teacher managed assessments, including assessments that will be externally set and marked but delivered within a classroom environment under teacher supervision.
- Strategic vision for post compulsory education and training published (Welsh Government, 2020g). <https://gov.wales/post-compulsory-education-and-training-strategic-vision>

## December 2020

- Minister for Education decided that all secondary schools and colleges in Wales would move to online learning for the last week of term.
- Estyn published its annual report (2020e) and a separate update report on post-16 providers' response to COVID-19 (2020a).
- Wales went into lockdown with all post-16 learning continuing online, except for the most vulnerable learners and those needing to attend for examinations.

## January 2021

- Independent Review of the Arrangements to Award General Qualifications in Summer 2020 published (Casella, 2020) (<https://gov.wales/independent-review-summer-2020-arrangements-award-grades-and-considerations-summer-2021-final>).
- Detail was provided about how the Centre-determined Grade model will work for schools and colleges assessing students for GCSEs, A levels and AS levels.

## February 2021

- Welsh Government announced extra funding of £26.5 million to support learners on vocational learning programmes and remove barriers that may prevent completion of their qualifications this academic year. An extra £2.5 million will also support Welsh colleges and private training providers provide additional mental health support in recognition of the increased mental wellness issues as a result of the pandemic.
- Minister for Education announced £1m of extra funding for further education colleges to support learners with additional learning needs to remove barriers to learning due to COVID-19.
- Learners in further education colleges and work-based learning providers returned on site to complete assessments to demonstrate occupational or professional competence from 22 February.

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## Glossary

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<b>ACEs</b>	Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events, particularly those in early childhood that significantly affect the health and wellbeing of people.
<b>CAMHS</b>	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) offers assessment and treatment for children, up until their 18 <sup>th</sup> birthday, who have or who are thought to have mental health problems or emotional health difficulties.
<b>DBS</b>	Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check is a process through which employers can check the criminal record of someone applying for a role in a specified occupation or organisation.
<b>HMCI</b>	Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales
<b>In person</b>	Meeting with someone in their physical presence rather than talking online, on the telephone, by email or other form of communication
<b>NTfW</b>	National Training Federation Wales (NTfW) is a membership organisation of over 100 organisations involved in the delivery of learning in the workplace.
<b>PPE</b>	Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is equipment, such as masks and other protective clothing, worn to minimise exposure to hazards that can cause serious illness or injuries.
<b>RAG</b>	Red Amber Green (RAG) traffic light rating system often used to rate or denote either status, risk or priority when managing projects or action plans
<b>Resilience</b>	The ability to withstand adversity and bounce back from difficult life events
<b>TRAC</b>	The TRAC project is aimed at 11-24 year olds across the six counties of North Wales who are at risk of disengaging from education and training.
<b>Triage</b>	The process of rapid initial assessment of support needs in order to decide which type of support is most appropriate and to assign priority for urgency of appointments

**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%

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