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**COLEGAUCYMRU POLICY ASKS FOR  
THE NEXT WELSH GOVERNMENT**

**THEME 3: ENTITLEMENT TO WELLBEING FOR  
LEARNERS AND STAFF**

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March 2021

This briefing expands on Theme 3 of ColegauCymru's *Further Success: Policy Recommendations for the next Welsh Government in Post-16 Education and Lifelong Learning in Wales*. Together with our *Enabling Renewal: Further Education and Building Better Citizenship, Occupations and Business Communities in Wales* report, these documents present a vision and practical action for further education in Wales.<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

ColegauCymru highlights the need for learners and staff at further education institutions (FEIs) in Wales to receive high quality wellbeing and mental health provision.

With this in mind, the next Welsh Government should:

- Support the sector through the consolidation of the existing Mental Health Wellbeing budget within the further education funding allocation, to consistently apply a 'whole college approach' to mental health and apply existing best practice.
- Improve the quality and provision of physical activity in support of active wellbeing, to enhance the emotional and physical resilience of the college community through consistent long-term funding.
- Ensure that all mental health policy and strategy is coherent across all educational settings including work-based learning and takes full account of the further education sector. This should include extension of the schools-based counselling service into further education settings for the equivalent age group to which it applies in school settings.
- Support ongoing flexibility in delivery and learning – for example, elements of home-learning and home-working – for learners and staff in any future policy development.

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<sup>1</sup> John Buchanan et al., *Enabling Renewal: Further Education and Building Better Citizenship, Occupations and Business Communities in Wales*, ColegauCymru, 2021, available at: <https://www.colleges.wales/image/publications/reports/Enabling%20Renewal%20-%20FE/Enabling%20Renewal%20-%20FE.pdf>

## Consolidating budgets, applying a ‘whole college approach’ and delivering more coherent education policy

There has been much good work during the current Welsh Parliament on the mental health of children and young people. ColegauCymru strongly welcomes this commitment. However, on occasion, it has been disjointed with a predominant focus on schools and pupils, rather than young people in the full range of education settings.

Half of all mental health problems appear before the age of 14, with one in four enduring mental health conditions by the age of 24.<sup>2</sup> This means that whilst mental health support is key in a school setting, it is also vital that appropriate provision is carried through to all post-16 settings, including further education, youth services and higher education. An often overlooked area is that of work-based learning (WBL) and the wellbeing of apprentices. The COVID-19 pandemic is reported to have had a serious impact on the mental health of children and young people, as well as adults, making this issue even more important. Apprentices, as well as the added stress of achieving their qualifications on completing their framework, have the additional concern about the future of their employment. Younger apprentices can also face the challenge of adapting to the world of work after their time in formal education. 1,690 apprentices were fully furloughed on 29 January 2021 and, according to Welsh Government statistics, the number of apprentices furloughed continued to rise as the economic impact of lockdown was felt with significant numbers also being subject to furlough.<sup>3</sup> It is important that as younger people are encouraged to follow an apprenticeship route, that the needs of this group of learners is not overlooked.

In the “Mind over matter”<sup>4</sup> (2018) report, the Senedd’s Children, Young People and Education (CYPE) Committee looked at what changes were needed in emotional and mental health support for children and young people in Wales. While the report referred to “schools and colleges” together, the focus was on delivering a “whole-school” approach, embedding wellbeing into the entire school ethos, the curriculum, and staff training. ColegauCymru agrees that mental health support should begin at a young age and support learners whenever they need it. However, the term “whole-school approach” marginalises post-16 institutions and work-based learning, and risks suggesting that mental health support finishes once a young person leaves school. During oral evidence to the CYPE Committee in January 2021, the Minister for Education said, “Children and young people's mental health needs don't necessarily stop when they finish school; we need to make sure that there is support there within further education and higher education”.<sup>5</sup> ColegauCymru is supportive of this statement and

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<sup>2</sup> Young Minds, *Impact Report 2018-2019*

<https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3396/impact-report-2018-19-low-res.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Welsh Government, *Apprentices furloughed or made redundant during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: up to 29 January 2021* <https://gov.wales/apprentices-furloughed-or-made-redundant-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-29-january-2021>

<sup>4</sup> National Assembly for Wales Children, Young People and Education Committee, *Mind Over Matter* (April 2018)

[The Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People in Wales \(senedd.wales\)](https://www.senedd.wales/~/media/Assets/Committees/Children%2C%20Young%20People%20and%20Education/2018-19/Mind%20Over%20Matter/Mind%20Over%20Matter%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [Children, Young People and Education Committee 21/01/2021 - Welsh Parliament \(senedd.wales\)](https://www.senedd.wales/~/media/Assets/Committees/Children%2C%20Young%20People%20and%20Education/2021-22/21-01-2021-Children%2C%20Young%20People%20and%20Education%20Committee%20-%20Welsh%20Parliament.pdf)

the Minister's preceding comment about moving from a whole-school approach to a whole-system approach. The next Welsh Government should ensure that there is a consistent approach to learners' mental health and provision of support at all stages of education. The support a child may receive in school should follow them on to college, sixth form, youth services and beyond. Likewise, and this has not been a focus of the current Welsh Parliament in the same way, consideration needs to be given to support services in adult learning, including in community settings.

During scrutiny of the Draft Budget 2021-2022 on 21 January 2021, the Minister for Health and Social Services, Vaughan Gething MS, could not specify how much of the £9.2 billion within the Health and Social Services Main Expenditure Group (MEG) had been allocated to provision specific to children and young people<sup>6</sup>. However, he did state that children and young people are getting a fair share of funding in comparison to adult services, with priorities around mental health. Although budgets are allocated on a hypothetical basis, ColegauCymru argues that the next Welsh Government should consolidate funding for mental health in further education into the general allocation to further education to ensure that colleges can plan their support with greater certainty. Recommendation 15 in the CYPE Committee's scrutiny report of the Welsh Government Draft Budget 2021-2022<sup>7</sup> states that the successor committee should "keep a watching brief on allocations to support learners' mental health during the next financial year, when higher and further education funding is distributed to institutions". This will be vital in monitoring the activity of the next Welsh Government.

There is much excellent practice in all colleges across Wales when it comes to mental health and wellbeing support, but assistance is needed to spread good practice.<sup>8</sup> Funding allocations for mental health support need to be part of the general allocation to colleges, not least because learners' mental health needs will have drastically changed since 2018 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Children's Commissioner published the "Coronavirus and me: survey responses for 15-18 year olds" in October 2020.<sup>9</sup> Even though lockdown had just begun at the time of the survey, it reveals that the uncertainties faced by young people were already taking a toll on their mental health. Positively, over half of respondents said they would turn to college (or school) staff for emotional and mental health support should they need to. This confirms that colleges are seen as a trusted source of support by learners, but also highlights the need for continuous funding in areas like training so that staff can be confident in offering support.

The provision of apprenticeship services is secured via a procurement exercise that is fulfilled via a procurement framework. The service that is provided is classified as a support to business, e.g. the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://senedd.wales/media/xtho221a/cr-ld14081-e.pdf> p.5

<sup>7</sup> <https://senedd.wales/media/xtho221a/cr-ld14081-e.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> For example, in December 2018, ColegauCymru was awarded £175,000 to work with FE colleges in Wales on mental health pilot projects that would enhance existing provision, develop new interventions and importantly to encourage collaboration and sharing of best practice amongst institutions. With Welsh Government funding, the sector as a whole has created 25 resources as a result of this project, all of which are available to learners on the Hwb website. Due to the success of the project further funding was allocated for its continuation in 2020 with colleges taking ownership of the funding and dissemination.

<sup>9</sup> The survey was originally taken in May 2020, near the beginning of the first national lockdown, and overall 4,357 young people responded. [https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Briefing\\_Report\\_1518\\_FINAL\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Briefing_Report_1518_FINAL_ENG.pdf)

employer, when in effect it is of course an important vocational education service to the apprentice. The current separation of the provision of work-based learning and further education presents particular challenges in terms of safeguarding the wellbeing of the younger apprentices. There are a number of reasons why a future Welsh Government should consider a reform of work-based learning provision, not least the need to address the evident mental health and other wellbeing challenges.

This links to the need for support across education settings to be more coherent. As an example of inconsistent approaches, in 2020, the current Welsh Government consulted on framework guidance on embedding a whole school approach, without taking into account other educational settings.<sup>10</sup> In many cases, colleges and work-based learning settings are dealing with learners of the same age range as school sixth forms and it is inequitable for support to be provided determined by setting, rather than need or life stage. The next Welsh Government needs to take a much more joined up approach to consideration and provision of support.

Likewise, the approach to counselling is also variable. Under Section 92 of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013, local authorities are required to make reasonable provision of independent counselling services for children and young people aged between 11 and 18 and pupils in Year 6 of primary school. According to the most recent Welsh Government statistical release, 11,753 children or young people received counselling services in 2018/19, an increase of 3 per cent compared with 2017/18.<sup>11</sup> Figures for 2019/20 and 2020/21 are yet to be released and we await the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ninety percent of children and young people who received counselling in a school setting did not require any form of onward referral once counselling sessions had been completed. This highlights the success of these school counselling sessions. Colegau Cymru urges the next Welsh Government to match available school provision with that in further education and work-based learning, so that learners can continue to access support as they transition between education settings.

Support for learners must be readily available in their language of choice. If a learner has accessed their mental health services through Welsh while they attended school, for example, then this service should still be available to them as they transition to a post-16 institution. The further education sector should receive adequate support to be able to provide bilingual services to learners. The next Welsh Government should ensure that enough professionals receive training in the mental health field to be able to work confidently through the medium of Welsh. People who choose to access these services through the medium of Welsh should not have to wait any longer than those who chose to access through the medium of English. All relevant resources, reading materials and online services should be available bilingually.

When considering a “whole-college” or “whole-system” approach, it is important to remember that the mental health impact of COVID-19 reaches adult learners too. The support they require may be

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<sup>10</sup> <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2020-07/consultation-document-draft-framework-guidance-on-embedding-a-whole-school-approach.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Welsh Government, Statistical Release (March 2020)

<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2020-05/counselling-children-and-young-people-september-2018-august-2019.pdf>

different from that of young people. Adult learning has many health benefits, including positive impact on a person's mental health. Research shows that adult learning fosters: a sense of identity, an ability to cope and a feeling of purpose in life (Hammond, 2004); and a greater level of wellbeing (UK Office of National Statistics, 2012 LA). Addysg Oedolion Cymru / Adult Learning Wales – The National Community College, who provide access to education from pre-entry level learning to level four qualifications to all adults across Wales, recently celebrated one of their learners who overcame his depression and anxiety by attending a course in the community<sup>12</sup>. This is just one real life example of how adult and lifelong learning can have a profound effect on learners of all ages and should be taken into account when considering “whole-system” approaches to mental health provision. The next Welsh Government needs to consider how best to meet the needs of adult learners in terms of mental health and wellbeing support so that they can realise their full potential.

## Supporting physical activity and active wellbeing

Physical activity is key to developing healthier and happier citizens in Wales and the further education sector already plays an important role. In Wales, further education currently provides education for 45,000+ full time learners aged 16-19 years.<sup>13</sup> ColegauCymru, via Sport Wales grant funding, currently engages with around 11% of this population through Active Wellbeing project activity.<sup>14</sup> This is typically designed to engage less active and harder to reach groups rather than sports learners. This delivery works with around 5,000 learners per year.<sup>15</sup>

In July 2020, ColegauCymru published an Active Wellbeing Strategy 2020-2025, aimed at enhancing the health and wellbeing of college communities across Wales.<sup>16</sup> The Active Wellbeing Strategy will support colleges in improving the emotional, social and physical wellbeing within the sector, promoting both healthier college communities and a workforce fit for future employment. Active Wellbeing provides ColegauCymru and member colleges with the opportunity to make a difference to the future health, wellbeing and prosperity of learners, communities and Wales as a nation. It complements the Welsh Government strategy, *Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales*, especially in respect of the Active Environment aspirations.<sup>17</sup> The further education sector can play an even greater role in supporting active citizens and communities in the future. However, to ensure the continuation of this

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.adultlearning.wales/en/news/277/0/>

<sup>13</sup> [Unique learners enrolled at further education institutions by age group, mode of learning and gender \(gov.wales\)](https://gov.wales)

<sup>14</sup> ColegauCymru data, collected via Upshot system

<sup>15</sup> Colleges provide education to over 3000 learners in sport related vocational and A Level programmes. This figure does not include other subjects with a physical activity or volunteering element like performing arts, travel and tourism, childcare and health and social care, but would include public services and outdoor education

<sup>16</sup> [ACTIVE WELLBEING STRATEGY eng.pdf \(colleges.wales\)](#)

<sup>17</sup> Welsh Government, *Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales*, 2019, [North Wales Regional Partnership Board Annual Report \(gov.wales\)](#)

work, longer term funding for sport and wellbeing must be a priority for the next Welsh Government, especially if the goals of *Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales* are to be achieved by 2030.

This is especially important in light of COVID-19 and its associated impact on physical activity levels. Adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a priority for the further education sector in Wales since the original lockdown in March 2020. Engagement has continued with an innovative approach supporting adapted delivery. Colegau Cymru, using Sport Wales recovery funding, has recently begun work on a new project looking into further education sport and its role in the recovery from the pandemic. Research by Sport England published in January 2021 showed that both adults and children have reduced levels of physical activity during the course of COVID-19.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Sport Wales released the results of their National Survey which covered April 2019 – April 2020. This report can be used as a baseline to determine the activity of adults (ages 16+) in Wales pre COVID-19. In 2019-20, 59% of adults reported that they had taken part in some sporting activity in the last four weeks (1,468,000 people). This rate remains unchanged when compared with the results from the previous years (2016-17, 2017-18, and 2018-19).<sup>19</sup> A follow up online survey of 1,007 adults taken in October 2020 showed that overall levels of adult physical activity appear to be similar to those before the first COVID-19 restrictions were first introduced in March. However, the pandemic appears to have widened inequalities in participation across gender, socio-economic status, long standing illness or conditions, and age.<sup>20</sup> The further education sector can play a big role in tackling these inequalities and helping to reengage learners in activity.

The recent “Coronavirus and me” survey by the Children’s Commissioner for Wales asked how young people were keeping a healthy body and mind during the pandemic. Of the three top activities selected outdoor exercise ranked third (68%) behind using social media to stay in touch (74%) and speaking with friends (70%).<sup>21</sup> This shows that while the percentage is still high, physical activity faces competition from less active forms of wellbeing strategies adopted by young people.

A better understanding is needed of what the overall impact has been on learners, physically, emotionally and socially during the pandemic. All citizens should be entitled to physical and wellbeing activities, and further education can provide a particular focus not just for young people but also the wider community. The next Welsh Government should ensure that all colleges are able to continue to offer a wide range of physical activities to learners of all types, including disabled learners and those with additional learning needs.

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<sup>18</sup> Sport England, *Understanding the impact of Covid-19*, January 2021, [PowerPoint Presentation \(sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com\)](https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com) – p.5

<sup>19</sup> Sport Wales, *National Survey for Wales 2019-20: Sport and Active Lifestyles* <https://www.sport.wales/files/6d37acbb10c06bc46c595c9b77dce7dc.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.sport.wales/comres-research/comres-survey-2-october-2020/>

<sup>21</sup> Children’s Commissioner for Wales, *Coronavirus and Me: survey responses from young people aged 15-18 Briefing Report 1518 FINAL ENG.pdf* ([childcomwales.org.uk](http://childcomwales.org.uk)) p.11

## Support ongoing flexibility in delivery and learning

Increased online delivery as a result of COVID-19 has brought about both challenges and benefits regarding learner and staff wellbeing. Colleges have noted the benefits of using technology to encourage digital competence and using the internet to contact friends and family. However, there are also wellbeing concerns regarding digital learning. Colleges have also noted that digital burnout was a real issue amongst learners, and that digital learning should also involve asynchronous (“catch up” or “on demand”) methods of learning. This type of learning can be especially useful to those such as carers who will benefit from such opportunities. The next Welsh Government should ensure that the positives of flexible delivery and learning are maintained in future education policy and initiatives, post-COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has developed a “new normal” for citizens, including young people, in Wales, not just in the area of teaching and learning, but day to day life in general. There will be new, specific areas of mental health which will need a focus with more children and young people learning from home, experiencing digital exclusion or anxiety caused by COVID-19. The anxieties faced by young people with regards to their learning are highlighted in the “Coronavirus and Me” report. It states, “The temporary closure of businesses and educational settings, along with the shift to remote or online learning, has meant that many young people have experienced a significant period of uncertainty in regards to learning and their futures. For those in this age group (15-18) who responded to our survey, more young people lacked confidence in their learning than those who felt confident. 21% did not feel confident at all, 26% were not confident; 21% were confident and 7% very confident.” The next Welsh Government should ensure learner experiences and views are taken into account as part of any reviews of future provision of learning or assessment moving forward.

Flexibility is not only needed for learners but for staff too. Since the beginning of the pandemic, college staff have been working from home wherever possible. Post-pandemic, it is important that the flexible work/life balance is maintained, and good practice gained by home working is continued where practical. Face to face teaching and learning remains invaluable for learners and staff.

According to the August 2020 report from Wiserd “Homeworking in the UK: Before and during the 2020 lockdown”,<sup>22</sup> nine out of ten (88.2%) of employees who worked at home during the lockdown would like to continue working at home in some capacity with around one in two employees (47.3%) wanting to work at home often or all of the time. Furthermore, employees with little previous experience of homeworking had not been put off by the experience of working at home – half (50.0%) of new homeworkers would like to work at home often or always even when COVID -19 restrictions permit a return to ‘normal’ working. This suggests that a key characteristic of the new normal will be much higher levels of homeworking than in the past.

Apprentices have had their learning as well as their employment disrupted by COVID-19 and can face the challenges of being in precarious employment as highlighted earlier. Support for digital learning

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<sup>22</sup> Wiserd, *Homeworking in the UK: Before and during the 2020 lockdown* (August 2020)  
[Homeworking in the UK Report Final 3.pdf \(wiserd.ac.uk\)](#)



has been one additional area that has proved hard to address due to the procurement of work based learning. In keeping with the concerns regarding the mental health and general wellbeing of apprentices, the next Welsh Government should explore reform of the funding basis and adopt an allocation based model similar to that for further education and sixth form funding. The next Government could then use this greater flexibility to deliver more shared apprenticeships.

Colegau Cymru encourages the next Welsh Government to ensure the issues of home and remote working are taken into account as we seek to support further education staff who in turn continue to support learners. As an example of recognised good practice, Bridgend College have won numerous awards for their work on supporting staff and learner mental health. Recently, they were awarded the Association of Colleges Beacon NCON Group Award for Mental Health and Wellbeing 2021. The college have created a Wellbeing Strategy which aims to create a work and learning environment where everyone can thrive and achieve their full potential. They take both learner and staff mental health into account and measure the impact of their interventions and support through frequent staff and learner surveys, combined with continuous dialogue and analysis of key data. This is just one example of best practice from a further education college in Wales.

This briefing is the third in a series of five covering each of the themes identified in *Further Success: Policy Recommendations for the next Welsh Government in Post-16 Education and Lifelong Learning for Wales*.



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