Refresh of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework

Stakeholder and Youth Consultation Report

September 2021

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Introduction

This report summarises feedback on the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) obtained during stakeholder and youth engagement activities delivered by Learning & Work Institute (L&W) on behalf of the Welsh Government. The stakeholder activities were carried out during March and April 2021, while the youth engagement activities took place in May and June 2021.

Aims of the consultation

The consultation activities were designed to obtain views from stakeholders and young people to inform the current refresh of the YEPF.

The Welsh Government wished to explore how it could strengthen approaches to prevent young people becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training), and also to consider other areas that create barriers to engagement with a focus on current policy priorities relating to mental health and wellbeing and youth homelessness. The feedback is intended to help identify:

- what works in the current YEPF and what parts need to be clarified;

- what parts of the current YEPF need to be updated to reflect changes in systems and processes and wider policy contexts;

- how we could strengthen approaches to prevent young people becoming NEET;

- how YEPF systems and processes could be strengthened to support young people to overcome other barriers, by supporting their mental health and wellbeing and preventing youth homelessness; and

- potential challenges and tensions to be addressed in delivering the updated YEPF.

Implications of a changed policy landscape

A key consideration for the future of the YEPF will be the new policy environment in which it will operate. First published in 2013, the policy and legislative landscape is very different today and likely to be shaped even further by the response to the impact of the pandemic

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and by the priorities of the new Welsh Government. This will need to be reflected in the new framework accompanying guidance.

Through the workshops with external stakeholders and with Welsh Government officials, some of the key drivers of a refreshed framework have been identified. Below are summaries of some of these and the evidence of how these impact on the operation of the YEPF:

Well-being of Future Generations: this was identified as an important policy driver in which a refreshed framework should operate. While across the external stakeholder sessions there was a high recognition of the requirements of the legislation there was less evidence of systematic implementation of the ways of working to date.

Specifically there was little evidence that young people were being systematically involved in the planning, design, and delivery of services, although it was noted that engagement with young people did underpin much of the work of different organisations within the YEPF. This may be as a result of the pressure on those working in the service to help meet the day-to-day demands, but it is clearly a relative weakness in the service currently. There was better evidence of the service working preventively, which is arguably the main purpose of the YEPF. Specifically there is evidence of preventative action where local authorities are implementing earlier identification and interventions (for example, at Year 5) and there was strong evidence of a high degree of collaboration between partner organisations.

Overall participants in the external stakeholder groups reported on an inconsistent implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations by their own organisations and the need for a more systematic adoption of the ways of working. However, there is a strong commitment from partners to embedding the goals and ways of working of the Well-being of Future Generations and recognition that the new strategic vision for the PCET sector published in November 2020 helps to provide a clear policy framework for many of the organisations engaged with the YEPF.

New strategic body for post-16 education and training: draft legislation has been published detailing proposals to establish a new regulatory and planning body for the post-16 education and training sector. Subject to legislation it will have extensive funding, planning, and regulatory powers to help it to improve the quality of provision and to deliver greater efficiency and efficacy across the sector.

One purpose of the proposed legislation, and the body it will establish, is to bring a greater degree of coherence to post-16, and while the changes did not register significantly in the discussions with external participants, it was a factor in the workshops with the Welsh Government. In particular there is an opportunity that the new body could help to generate a greater degree of coherence across the framework as a whole and in respect of the actions of individual partner organisations. While it is not known to what extent a new body could impact on the framework, it would clearly have an impact on different organisations

involved in the delivery of the YEPF and could alter lines of accountability. A refreshed YEPF would need to be sufficiently flexible to be able to adapt to these changing circumstances.

Careers and Work-Related Experience: one of the most significant policy developments of the last Senedd term has been legislation and development work to reform the school curriculum. Long-term there is a clear link between the curriculum and tackling young people not in education, employment, or training. The four purposes of the curriculum will all have a long-term impact on the capabilities of young people to access opportunities for training, education, and good quality work.

The purposes of the new curriculum are a) ambitious capable learners ready to learn through life, b) enterprising, creative contributors ready to play a full part in life and work, c) ethical, informed citizens who are read to be citizens of Wales and the world, and d) healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society. While these will have a long-term, positive impact for learners, there is also the potential for the specific benefit from the introduction of the **Careers and Work-Related Experience**. This element of the new curriculum offer, and the associated professional learning for teaching staff, will be important parts of ensuring young people at risk of not being engaged in education, employment or training are given appropriate work experience and robust, impartial careers advice and guidance in school and through transition at 16 to post compulsory education and training settings. This may require more intensive support for young people at risk.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) interventions: since the YEPF was first introduced there have been changes in the scale and type of DWP interventions. This includes the continued rollout of Universal Credit and the widening of provision in response to the pandemic (for example, Kickstart, increased work coach support, and Youth Hubs). While this offers a greater range of support for young people, it has also created a more complex landscape to navigate and potentially more complicated referral routes into appropriate support for young people.

During the external stakeholder sessions, some concerns were expressed at the difficulties of data sharing between DWP and other organisations and the impact this was having on being able to appropriately support young people between the ages of 18-24. Stakeholders gave specific examples of good local partnerships with DWP and there is clear evidence of strong operational relationships between DWP and both the Welsh Government and Careers Wales. However, more effective data sharing and co-ordinated tracking and provision will be important elements of a refreshed YEPF if current weaknesses at post-18 are to be addressed.

Withdrawal of the European Social Fund (ESF). A number of our young people have been supported by ESF programmes aimed at those who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET. The EU funding programmes 2014-2020 are already beginning to tail off, having reached 100% commitment of available funding and projects ending in 2023.

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The UK Government is yet to publish its framework for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to replace EU funding. It is currently delivering a pilot Community Renewal Fund for 2021/22 worth £220m UK-wide which is a significant cut compared to the at least £375m annually that Wales would have had access to from January this year if the UK had remained in the EU.

The Welsh Government believes that UK Government plans will create unconnected investments, funding gaps for many areas and sectors, duplication, costly competition, and worse outcomes for Wales. It also believes that by supporting local authorities individually, UK Government plans threaten key strategic interventions such as Business Wales, the Development Bank for Wales, Skills and Employability, and infrastructure investment considered critical to Wales' recovery from the Covid pandemic.

The Welsh Government's motion setting out its concerns with UK Government plans was supported by the Senedd on 15 June 2021, while devolved governments in Scotland and Northern Ireland, two all-Party Parliamentary Groups and stakeholders across Wales have all raised similar concerns.

Working Wales: since 2019 the Welsh Government has supported a new, all-age advice and guidance service for adults. Run by Careers Wales, Working Wales is a gateway for adults into the Welsh Government employability programmes and also wider careers and employability advice and support.

The service will be an important gateway for adults into a range of services, and in the context of a refreshed YEPF it should be central to the support offered to the 18-24 age group. There is the potential for an enhanced role for the Working Wales and for it to provide a service to better track older YEPF participants.

Brighter Futures: Careers Wales have published a new strategic plan for 2021-26. This develops the service from the period covered by the strategic plan and gives an explicit commitment to maintain support for the YEPF.

'We will support the delivery of the Youth Employment Progression Framework with our local authority partners, ensuring that young people get the support that they require as they make the transition from education into further education, employment or training.'[1]

As well as the explicit commitment to YEPF by Careers Wales, the new strategy also sets out the commitment to providing high-quality, independent, advice and guidance to young people and to offering an enhanced service (relative to the previous period) to young people post-16. Support will include the continuation of the Activate programme, as well as targeted support to help young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities to ensure that no-one is left behind.

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[1] https://careerswales.gov.wales/about-us/brighter-futures

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While obviously the impact of the new approach will need to be seen in the delivery rather than in just the strategic planning, the future focus of Careers Wales will be aligned to the aims and practical delivery of the YEPF.

Social Model of Disability: the social model of disability was adopted in Wales in 2002, making us one of the first nations in the world to do so. In *Action for Disability: A Right to Independent Living*, the Welsh Government committed to *'embed the model visibly and effectively across all areas of work, including as an employer, and to encourage Welsh public services and other agencies to do the same.'*[2]

The Social Model, in contrast to the traditional medical model of disability, recognises that people have impairments but that they are disabled by barriers in society (such as negative attitudes or physical barriers). The emphasis is placed on organisations and agencies to remove barriers and to work with disabled people to identify solutions.

Any new iteration of the YEPF should reflect the responsibilities of organisations to implement the social model. This would require those co-ordinating and delivering services to remove barriers to access and participation and to involve disabled young people in the delivery and design of services.

Young Person's Guarantee: while a Youth Guarantee was referred to in the original YEPF it has not been developed to date. A commitment was given in the Welsh Labour manifesto in the May 2021 election to introduce a new Young Person's Guarantee as part of the response to the pandemic and consequent impact on youth unemployment. The new guarantee will offer the opportunity of employment, education, or training to all 16–24-year-olds. The guarantee and the new YEPF will need to be developed together and ensure that appropriate support and guidance is in place to engage all young people, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds and groups.

Learner Travel: access to transport was highlighted by stakeholders as a barrier to accessing provision. It was recognised that there is variation across Wales but there were specific challenges in learners being able to access transport in rural and Valley communities. There is a further specific challenge with access to transport for post-16 learners as this is discretionary and can create further inequalities in access between different local authority areas. The Welsh Government has undertaken an initial review of the existing Learner Travel (Wales) Measure, with a recommendation that a wider more detailed review takes place during the new Senedd term.

It will be important to specifically consider the difficulties faced by disabled young people in being able to access learner transport. This was specifically referenced by different stakeholders in the context of removing barriers and working to the principles of the social model of disability.

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[2] https://gov.wales/action-disability-right-independent-living-framework-and-action-plan

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): the focus on ACEs as an important factor in impacting on life chances has been given considerable focus in Wales over the last five years. Public Health Wales, the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner, the Welsh Government and Welsh public services more generally have focused on the development of ACE aware and trauma informed services.

This considers the impact of ACEs (such as substance misuse, domestic violence and parental incarceration) on the life chances and experiences of individuals. During the stakeholder workshops there was discussion of the value of ACEs in forming one of the core indicators for the purposes of early identification and support, based on experience, of ensuring that their impact on young people is better understood and supported. This is a complex policy area and will depend in part on future ministerial priorities, but there is evidence that ACEs could be more effectively used, alongside other indicators, to develop a fuller understanding of the challenges facing young people. A refreshed YEPF should be informed by the work of Public Health Wales in this area and look to embed ACEs and trauma into service design.

Programme for Government 2021-2026: The commitments in the Welsh Government's Programme for the 6th Senedd show a focus on supporting young people. The Young Persons Guarantee has been referenced above, other commitments include:
- Roll out child and adolescent mental health services 'in-reach' in schools across Wales
- Strengthen the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework
- Appoint a Cabinet level minister to develop and take forward the proposals of the Youth Board for Wales
- Legislate for a new framework for youth services in Wales

Where applicable, commitments made in the programme for government will need to be reflected in the refreshed YEPF.

Consultation approach

Stakeholder consultation: engagement with stakeholders was carried out through a series of ten structured online workshops. These consisted of two workshops for Welsh Government officials and eight thematic workshops for external stakeholders.

- **Participant engagement and recruitment**

  The Welsh Government provided a list of contacts to be invited to participate. This included: Careers Wales, local authority youth services; local authority engagement and progression co-ordinators, youth homelessness co-ordinators, schools, the voluntary youth work sector; FE colleges; specialist colleges; independent training providers (ITP); youth justice service; regional skills partnerships; business support organisations and third sector organisations working with young people.

Invitations were emailed to prospective participants and follow up communications were also sent.

- **Workshop planning and delivery**

   We planned the workshops in partnership with the Welsh Government. They were structured around the six components of the YEPF:

   - Early identification
   - Brokerage
   - Tracking
   - Provision
   - Employability and employment opportunities
   - Accountability.

   To enable each of these elements to be explored in detail, the workshops for wider stakeholders were planned on a thematic basis and each workshop was delivered twice. The themes and participant numbers for each workshop were as follows:

Theme	No. of participants
Accountability and tracking	80
Early identification	101
Brokerage	60
Employability and provision	90

   In addition, 22 participants attended each of the dedicated workshops for Welsh Government officials.

   A few days before each workshop, we sent participants the workshop agenda and consultation questions together with a short thematic briefing / stimulus paper to help them to prepare.

   The workshops were delivered via Zoom and facilitated by L&W. Each workshop included plenary introductory inputs from the Welsh Government and L&W. Participants were then split into two breakout rooms to allow everyone greater opportunity to share their views. Discussions were structured around the consultation questions and recorded to ensure that we had an accurate record of the feedback.

Young people's consultation: A combination of methods were used to gather the required information, including facilitated focus groups, one-to-one interviews and an online consultation portal. A wide range of organisations which support young people were contacted, to see if they would host focus groups; further education (FE) colleges and private training providers responded and agreed to host.

For the young person's consultation, an important consideration has been including young people who might themselves have been disengaged at one time or other, and who therefore know what kind of support has worked or could have worked for them.

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Further details are provided in Annex C.

Purpose of the report

The report provides thematic summaries of the consultation feedback. It also includes a summary of key points arising from the discussions from the stakeholder groups and from the youth consultation.

One caveat to the report is the imbalance in the evidence between the 11-18 age group and the post-18 cohort. This reflects the balance of evidence received, which in turn likely reflects the balance of activity and provision within the YEPF itself. In itself this reflects an important finding and highlights that the YEPF remains less well developed for the older age cohort.

The consultation questions used with stakeholders are included as an appendix.

Summary of evidence from stakeholder consultation

Below is a summary of some of the key points raised across the stakeholder workshops. This is not an exhaustive list and these points are covered in more detail in the main body of the report.

- **There was evidence of a strong commitment to and understanding of the aims of the YEPF from partner organisations.** Across the range of stakeholders that participated in the consultation events there was a high degree of support for the aims of the YEPF and a sense that it was important for the work to continue in the future. The aims and objectives of the YEPF were understood and shared by participants and this provides a strong foundation on which to build.

  However, there were areas where further clarification of roles and responsibilities within the YEPF may be required. There were also examples in the stakeholder sessions where specific knowledge gaps or misunderstanding of how the YEPF works were evident. Some of this focused on the understanding of Careers Wales within the framework, but there were other specific gaps and challenges identified. This suggests there may be value in increased networking and information events around the refreshed YEPF to embed understanding further.

- **Elements of the YEPF have developed more than others since it was introduced.** The weight of evidence gathered shows the framework is well developed between the ages of 11-18 but remains less developed and effective post-18. In part this reflects the challenge of engaging adults relative to supporting younger age groups on the framework, but also the challenge of data sharing at post-18 and the effectiveness and appropriateness of tracking adults. There is evidence of a well-developed and mature system for supporting young people up to the ages of 18 and also emerging evidence of the effectiveness of interventions before the age of 11 (in Years 5 and 6) in helping to support young people in their transition to secondary school.

- **Participants working across the different strands of the framework reported challenges with the sharing of data**. Importantly this is making it more difficult to track and to support young people. While this was a challenge across the different age ranges supported by the YEPF, specific issues were highlighted around support at different transition points, tracking young people no longer educated at school, and understanding destinations post-18.

  Participants reported that the challenges were now more significant since the introduction of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (both in terms of barriers to sharing data and also perception of GDPR requirements). There is variation between different parts of Wales and examples included challenges of sharing data between different departments within the same local authority, as well as variable access to data through schools. There was support for a clearer and

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more consistent approach to data sharing and greater clarity for all partners about the expectations on them.

- **There is evidence of mature and well-developed systems for the early identification of young people at risk of becoming NEET.** This was identified by participants as a strength of the current YEPF, with robust procedures in place that utilise both available data and multi-agency professional judgements. However, participants in the stakeholder workshops also felt there was a strong case for a greater degree of standardisation in approaches across Wales (in relation to data collected) to help ensure a greater level of equity in access for young people. This greater standardisation would need to be balanced however by a level of flexibility to be able to respond to specific local circumstances. There was also general agreement around the importance of professional judgement as part of ensuring appropriate decisions are taken by the different agencies involved.

- Participants supported a refreshed YEPF having clear and strong lines of accountability for performance. **However, while individual providers and organisations understood their own roles in the YEPF, participants also felt there was still not a sense of collective accountability across all partners working within the framework.** Specifically there were concerns from local authorities that they are seen as primarily accountable for the level of NEETs and that this is not appropriately shared with other partner organisations.

  The evidence also shows that the complexity of the policy and provider landscape (including ESF funded provision and support funded by different governments and agencies) contributes to a lack of collective accountability. There was evidence of different organisations and programmes working to different key performance indicators (KPIs) and objectives. Participants supported a refreshed framework which emphasised the importance of placing the needs of the young person at the centre of activity and before programme targets or individual organisational KPIs. Where KPIs and targets do exist there is support for them to be collectively owned.

  Within local authorities there was evidence of the impact of austerity, with restructuring and a churn in staffing leading to a weakening of lines of accountability. Participants highlighted the value of having clear lines of accountability, supported by clear data, to a named senior director within the local authority.

- **Post-ESF provision:** there is considerable concern and uncertainty about the impact of the loss of ESF provision post 2023 and the gaps that this could lead in support for young people. There was evidence already of some provision coming to an end as result of the changes and the likelihood that this would lead to both a loss of specific pathways of support and also of experienced staff working within the framework.

Alongside these concerns there was also support from participants for ensuring that ESF provision (and successor programmes) and support from third sector organisations are better integrated into YEPF activity. There are concerns that the added value the third sector can bring to the provision offered to young people can be lost as projects are funded for the short term and are not planned and co-ordinated within the system as a whole.

- **There was support from participants for considering the age range across which the YEPF operates.** There are good examples in different local authorities of earlier interventions having a positive impact on young people, including starting support in Year 5 to help support the transition to secondary school. Given the relative underdevelopment of the YEPF for the older age groups and plans to introduce a Young Person's Guarantee there was discussion amongst participants about considering a more distinct approach between the pre- and post-18 elements of the framework.

- **In recognising the different pathways young people supported under the YEPF may need or want to follow, participants supported a broader and more flexible range of vocational options being made available.** In part there should be a focus on ensuring those co-ordinating support are made aware of the provision that is already available, but there was specific support for more flexible options for young people to experience vocational pathways to better prepare them for the world of work. This included support for better routes to self-employment as an important option that should be more readily available to young people.

Summary of evidence from young person consultation

The report of the consultation with young people is included as an annex to this report. A summary of the key findings is included below, and this reflects the common themes that emerged throughout the process.

- **Recognition of the support available in post compulsory education.** Many young people felt that the availability and accessibility of support to help them stay in education increased considerably once they'd left compulsory schooling and moved on to either college, sixth form or a work-related training programme such as Traineeships.

  The majority of young people who were attending college or work-related training praised the support they had received, specifically citing the relationships with their tutors and/or other support staff. Several individuals stated that because the tutors and support staff in college or on Traineeships were more 'approachable', they felt far more confident in asking for support when required.

- **Support to explore options, in compulsory and post compulsory education.** There was a contrast in young people's awareness of, and experience in accessing,

support to explore their options in pre- and post-compulsory education. Most young people we engaged with reported feeling far more informed about their options at college or on a programme such as Traineeships than they did when deciding their options at GCSE, and many individuals expressed that they felt very unsupported and uninformed during this time.

Several respondents were of the view that they were not given enough information regarding how their options at GCSE could affect their longer-term options and indicated that they would have made different choices had they received such information. Many also felt that their options at GCSE were severely limited if their academic ability was lower than that of other students.

- **Valuing all learners.** A particularly common theme amongst those individuals pursuing Traineeships or vocational qualifications was a feeling of having been overlooked in school in favour of more academic students, and this having a negative effect on how they viewed themselves, their potential, and future prospects.

- **Support at transition points.** A number of respondents also highlighted the need for greater support to negotiate key transition points such as the progression from school to post-compulsory education and also where transferring from one educational setting to another to meet their particular needs.

- **Support to develop skills for adult life.** Another common theme throughout the feedback was the need for a greater focus on the provision of practical support to help young people make the transition to life as an independent adult. This was raised on a number of occasions by different groups and individuals, with many young people reporting that they felt unprepared for the practicalities of adult life and citing a desire for increased knowledge and understanding of matters like housing options, bank accounts, payslips and wages, and taxes, bills and insurance.

- **Positive relationships help improve engagement.** Of those individuals who spoke positively about the support they received to help stay engaged in their education, some common themes were also identified, including the importance of positive relationships with individual teachers and support staff, and their feeling that this support was an essential contributor to their successes in their education and longer-term progression.

- **Employment/self-employment support and advice.** Many also felt that, in relation to employment support and advice, they were very well served by specialist departments set up to provide this support in Further Education colleges and other training providers, and were of the view that the support they had received in this area was a significant improvement on the support they had received in their earlier education.

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A number of young people felt that they were strongly encouraged to pursue further learning, either at college or sixth form, whilst other options such as employment or apprenticeships were not discussed at all, with many stating that they would have made different decisions had they had access to this information on all of the options open to them at an earlier stage. Several young people also felt that they would have liked to have had the opportunity to learn more about self-employment options and reported that, unless they studied Business, which a lot of them were not given the option to do, they were unable to access any support or information in this area.

- **Including mental health and youth homelessness in the YEPF.** In relation to support for mental health issues, young people were overwhelmingly in favour of more support and greater accessibility of this support, at all stages of education. However, many reported that they were unable to access such support themselves whilst in compulsory education and, in a number of cases, cited long waiting lists to speak to school counsellors, whilst some felt that little or no mental health support was available to them in school. This is in contrast with FE colleges and work-based training providers, where the feedback was more positive, with respondents reporting not only that they were more aware of and more empowered to access the mental health support available to them, but also that such support had been integral to them continuing with their education. As a result, respondents felt that mental health issues were given greater importance in colleges and work-based training providers.

  Young people were also hugely supportive of risk of youth homelessness being included within the YEPF, although responses on this area were less detailed than for the mental health aspect.

- **Support from agencies**. In relation to external agencies and support in schools and colleges, the feedback contained a broad range of responses, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the quality of support received in this area. Some individuals positively highlighted organisations such as Careers Wales, the Youth Service or Social Services for the support they had received, whilst others were equally negative about the availability and/or quality of support.

- **Young person's guarantee.** Young people broadly welcomed the idea of a guaranteed place in school, college, training or apprenticeship, with many reporting that this assurance would enable them to focus more on their academic performance by removing much of the uncertainty and anxiety around the transition to further/higher education, training or employment (ETE). Respondents did however raise a note of caution in relation to the potential flexibility of any such guarantee and, specifically, what would happen if they changed their mind after initially deciding on a chosen route.

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- **The Covid-19 pandemic**, and specifically how it has affected the opportunities available to young people, was a strong theme highlighted throughout the consultation process. Many felt that their prospects and options had been severely restricted as a result of the pandemic, with a number of individuals referring to an inability to progress at the same rate and into the same range of opportunities as those before them, and several feeling that they had missed out on aspects of social development as much as their educational development.

- **Involving young people.** With regard to increasing and improving engagement with young people in future planning, many felt that the process simply of seeking feedback from young people directly as part of this consultation process was, in itself, extremely positive, making them feel both valued and listened to. In respect of the format for such engagement, while young people acknowledged that social media and other forms of electronic communication were useful in communicating quickly to a larger audience, face-to-face communication was felt to be more personal and therefore far more likely to secure stronger engagement of young people in issues and decisions to be made around their future.

Detailed stakeholder findings

1. Accountability and tracking

Stakeholders were asked for their views on the effectiveness of current systems and processes for securing accountability for YEPF implementation and for tracking learners at all ages and stages. The consultation discussions focused on the following key topics:

- Accountability for implementation of the YEPF

- Tracking systems and processes

- Data sharing

1.1   Accountability for implementation of the YEPF

The YEPF aims to create accountability for reducing NEET figures by regularly holding local authorities and partners to account for implementation of the YEPF. Participants were asked whether there is clarity regarding lines of accountability for the YEPF as a whole and with regard to the individual partner organisations.

1.1.1 Accountability for the YEPF as a whole

Participants repeatedly stated that multi-agency working underpinned by a shared sense of accountability needs to be revived and strengthened. Consensus was evident across the workshops that when the YEPF was first implemented these were strong features of the new approach. However, over time the local authority services with

which formal accountability for the NEET target sits have experienced a weakening of accountability for delivering the YEPF among both external and internal partners.

> *"When the YEPF was set up it was designed to support those who are NEET and at risk of becoming NEET. The target for local authorities on destinations at 31st October every year and NEET figures certainly focused the mind. Where we can improve outcomes going forward is in terms of that coordinated multi-agency support. The weakness that I've found is making sure that all agencies sign up to supporting that most vulnerable group of NEET or at risk of becoming NEET."* (Local authority participant)

> *"The local authority, particularly the EPC YEPF team, are still working strongly towards that goal of working within the YEPF framework, but that wider partnership is not as supportive as it once was."* (Local authority participant)

There was broad agreement among participants from across different parts of the sector that the following factors together explain this shift.

The extent to which YEPF KPIs do not sufficiently encourage a multi-agency approach was consistently identified as the key barrier to shared accountability. It is perceived that accountability for the annual NEET figure ultimately rests solely with the local authority service which leads on the YEPF.

> *"As a local authority we were holding partners to account but the onus was always on the local authority because they were the ones who had the measure against them. Even though the other partners were involved, they didn't have the measure against them of the NEETs figure."* (Local authority participant)

However, it was also noted that despite this perception other stakeholders operating within the YEPF do have specific KPIs attached to reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training. There is perhaps a lack of understanding of the ways in which different partners are held accountable (both internally and externally) but also a sense from some local authorities that they are held principally accountable for the key YEPF KPIs despite the framework being designed as a collaborative, multi-agency programme.

Participants suggested that this has resulted in partners prioritising KPIs attached to other, funded, activity. **Participants highlighted in particular the impact of ESF**[3] **and other funding on driving a competitive approach to supporting young people, especially at 18-plus.**

> *"What has happened over time is that rather than an accountability model we've created a competitive model, with the introduction of ESF and statutory post-16 funding. Unintentionally, we're all competing against each other without really being accountable to the YEPF. So we come to these meetings and we talk about individuals, and work in a collaborative way, but we've still got the sustainability of*

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[3] ESF funded projects will all have finished by the end of 2023.

our own services in mind. A lot of that is driven by the lack of KPIs. Against the five-tier model we're not seeing KPIs and these need to be very clear for all the organisations as it might help to address some of that competitiveness."
(Independent Training Provider participant)

It should be stressed that participants were not suggesting a diminished commitment to supporting young people, but rather that partners seem less focused specifically on working with local authority leads to deliver the YEPF. However, some participants explicitly stated that while learner choice was important, a degree of **unnecessary competitiveness at post-16 undermines a consistent focus on meeting the needs of individual young people.** One EPC observed:

> *"YEPF provision and interventions are made up by individual projects funded from a plethora of sources, ESF being one, and you do find yourself in a position sometimes where each project and intervention has its own set of goals, targets and outcomes and where different provision competes against each other, and sometimes tends to hold on to a young person, rather than looking holistically at which provision is most suitable for that particular young person. That can be quite a challenge to coordinate."* (Local authority participant)

Several participants argued that a somewhat paradoxical situation exists in which the YEPF has enhanced the ability of partners to attract funding to work with young people, but once it is secured that drives behaviour which is detrimental to YEPF implementation. It was noted a number of times that this kind of competition even occurs between departments within individual local authorities.

Participants also suggested that **the marked drop in NEET figures after the YEPF was introduced led to it being treated as less of a priority by some partners.**

> *"At the start and for the first three or four years, it was a new thing and everyone signed up to it and wanted to play their role. When the figures came down, a sort of complacency set in."* (Local authority participant)

To illustrate this point, a local authority participant described how their NEET figures had recently begun to rise, which they attributed to a weakening of the joint working between their YEPF team and Careers Wales. With the introduction of a range of processes to re-establish the relationship, including weekly Keeping in Touch meetings, at which Careers

Wales reports data on young people at risk of disengaging so that appropriate interventions can be swiftly put in place, the NEET figures have started to fall again. It was noted that the heads of service from both organisations were involved in rebuilding the partnership.

In one of the workshop groups, participants agreed that **the national guidelines on YEPF governance arrangements have allowed local flexibilities at the expense of encouraging robust structures to ensure shared accountability.** This was felt to have been particularly detrimental in the context of austerity which participants agreed has led to unprecedented churn across the youth support system and the loss of senior leaders who understand and feel a sense of ownership for the YEPF. It was suggested that a clearer accountability framework is needed to mitigate the effects of this.

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"We have seen a constant restructuring across all organisations and services, so there has been constant and significant organisational change. That has two impacts. First, the consistency of relationships is constantly disrupted and it is much harder to sustain those positive relationships at all levels Secondly, particularly where we have seen a lot of change in our strategic leadership we lose a lot of that organisational memory and we have a lot of senior leaders coming in who aren't familiar with the YEPF. If you don't have that consistency it means that it is much more difficult to meet challenges around things like data sharing because you don't have that trust." (Local authority participant)

1.1.2 Accountability of different parts of the sector

Participants explored the extent to which it is clear what organisations in different parts of the sector are accountable for with regard to YEPF implementation.

Building on the discussions summarised above, **there was broad agreement that accountability across the sector needs to be reviewed and clarified as part of the YEPF refresh.** Participants stated that the position of local authorities is understood as they are accountable for the NEET KPI. However, the weakening of the multi-agency approach which was intended to underpin the YEPF underlines the importance of reviewing and restating how accountability is shared across agencies. Several participants observed that the YEPF was meant to reflect an understanding that interventions from multiple organisations and services can impact on the life chances of a young person and to share some of the accountability for outcomes. A number of key issues in relation to the accountability of different partners were raised.

Across the workshops, participants discussed concerns around accountability in relation to the five-tier model. They broadly agreed that when the YEPF was introduced, accountability against the various tiers within the model was clearly understood. However, participants from both local authorities and Careers Wales stated that the picture has subsequently become "blurred." They indicated that in reality there is crossover in responsibility, and generally felt that this should be reflected in shared accountability within the framework. Local authority participants in one workshop stated that **there are particular weaknesses in terms of accountability when young people move between tiers.**

"There is an issue around accountability when people move between tiers, and especially in a negative way. Who is accountable for those? What happens is, when they go lower down the ladder they become youth services' responsibility, but maybe from an early identification and prevention perspective there's something that could have been done upstream to help those young people. We need to think about that." (Local authority participant)

Participants noted that local authority services across Wales which are held accountable for local NEET figures regard accountability for tracking young people is a key issue. Concerns were expressed about the quality of data, particularly at Tiers one and two. It was noted that data was often out of date or missing and that this required significant time and resource to fill these gaps to be able to contact young people.

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It has been noted that since 2018 the supply of PLASC/SIMS data (from Year 10 onwards) to Careers Wales has been patchy and that the data has been difficult to obtain. These inconsistencies are hindering the effectiveness of the framework in that changes in the status of young people are not always being updated, meaning the data is less robust than it should be. While some participants felt Careers Wales should be accountable for this process, it was noted that responsibility for facilitating the sharing of data is dispersed across the YEPF, including with EPCs and with providers.

It was also noted that there can be particular difficulties in being able to maintain contact with some young people and their families, particularly where they have been disengaged from services.

It is clear however that stakeholders across the YEPF have identified that a more effective approach to collecting, updating, and sharing information is required in a refreshed YEPF. This should include clearer lines of accountability across all organisations involved.

> *"The tracking is really difficult because of the data that we don't have initially. It's trying to track tier ones or twos, when the addresses, phone numbers, etc are incorrect. That's really time consuming for whoever is responsible. That's a massive gap in the process that we need to track young people. Somewhere along the line we need to go back to get the data correct because they just disappear into tier one and then we can't find them."* (Local authority participant)

Additional discussions on the accountability of agencies and organisations in different parts of the sector raised the following key points:

- **The extent to which schools engage with YEPF and take accountability varies considerably not only between local areas but also between individual schools.** Some participants reported that when the YEPF was introduced they showed a high level of commitment but this has since diminished. They attributed this change to a range of factors including: the impact of the pandemic on schools' priorities and capacity to engage; and the introduction of local ESF projects targeting young people of school age (e.g. TRAC in North Wales) which offer provision and have attracted schools' attention away from YEPF. However, there is evidence of a renewed focus on ensuring greater multi-agency engagement over the last twelve months. This has included Careers Wales asking all EPCs to ensure schools based careers advisers are invited to multi-agency meetings to ensure the lists of young people at risk of being NEET are consistent for all partners.

At the same time, some local authority participants stated that they have strong relationships with their local schools around the NEET agenda, although they acknowledged this was not necessarily underpinned by the YEPF. Several participants indicated that they have seen more engagement with the YEPF by schools because of concerns about transitions of school leavers. The feedback suggests that the context for these concerns is generally either the pandemic or the change to a tertiary system.

- **Third sector organisations are heavily involved in delivering support to young people but are not part of the YEPF.** To general agreement, participants from the voluntary youth work sector stated that there needs to be better embedding of the

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sector in the YEPF and proper accountability. Participants stressed that this would help with the coordination of provision and support between the public and third sectors, and would be particularly beneficial in reducing duplication and competition across projects and interventions.

1.2 Tracking systems and processes

The YEPF aims to improve tracking at all ages and across key transition points by strengthening systems and processes and promoting more effective sharing and use of data. Participants discussed the barriers to effective tracking and **identified key ages and stages** where tracking is not working as well as it should. It was noted that tracking the destinations of adults across multiple settings did not only present practical problems but there is also the question of the appropriateness of tracking adults in this way.

1.2.1 Eighteen-plus transitions

Eighteen-plus transitions were identified by participants in all the workshops as the most challenging stage in terms of tracking, and they confirmed that across the sector this is generally acknowledged to be a problem. This reflects the difficulty of tracking adults across multiple settings and their contact with different government and non-government organisations and providers.

> *"Tracking varies at different ages across the YEPF. There are systems in place in schools to monitor where young people are and in the main they are in school. As you start to progress up the ages, there are different databases and systems. For example in our area the Careers Wales database is effectively the Bible after year 11 up to the age of 18. At 18-plus it becomes very vague to say the least. The 18 plus issue hasn't been resolved. That is the gap."* (Local authority participant)

Tracking at this stage was described as "a minefield" and "a struggle." **Participants attributed this to the difficulties of data sharing in the context of a fragmented and competitive system of provision and support for young people post-18. Some participants also highlighted the appropriateness of tracking the destinations and activities of adults in this way and not just the associated practicalities.**

Specific reference was made to long-standing blockages associated with the challenges for the DWP in sharing data on the young people whom it is supporting, and therefore no data sharing arrangements are in place.

> *"The gap for me has always been 18-plus in terms of coordinating data and putting in place that information sharing protocol."* (Local authority participant)

Local authority participants reported **relying on referrals into local authority led projects to track individuals.**

> *"The way we deal with tracking for that age group is to try and combine those that are participants within our projects but this doesn't give a full picture of need."* (Local authority participant)

There was general agreement that this approach yields patchy and unsatisfactory information, which is compounded by peaks and troughs in the flow of referrals, depending on what employability provision is available within a local area.

> *"When DWP and other partners don't have any funding for specific projects then the referral pathways can be quite busy, but when they get a new project that is also to work with particular cohorts they drive all their referrals into their projects and our pathways dry up."* (Local authority participant)

1.2.2 Young people in elective home education

Participants expressed widespread concern about their ability to track and support the growing number of pupils who are in elective home education (EHE). One participant said:

> *"We can't over-emphasise the importance of this EHE issue." (*Local authority participant)

It was reported that there has been a significant increase in EHE during the pandemic and participants stressed that young people being taken off school rolls can easily become "lost". This is reflected in the current data supplied by the Welsh Government, which shows a 37% increase in the number of home educated children in the year to Feb 2021, taking the overall total to just under 4,000.

> *"My huge concern going forward is that to drop out of the system they only have to write a letter and give a week's notice. And then who picks them up because the school takes them off their rolls? We currently have over 100 EHE students and one person dedicated to tracking them. Some of them are moving into EHE because they have disengaged, and the parents may have their own reasons for disengagement, so they're not going to engage with anyone coming to knock on their door, as it were."* (Local authority participant)

Participants agreed that the word "elective" is becoming problematic. While they acknowledged that some young people thrive in EHE when it is a positive decision, they feared that much of the current rise may be driven by a number of negative factors

- Some young people are being removed from school because parents want to avoid paying fines for poor attendance.

- Anecdotal evidence that school may be encouraging families to home educate because of poor behaviour, poor attainment or poor attendance.

- Mental health and wellbeing issues related to lockdown.

1.2.3 Gaps in data from Careers Wales

Local authority participants across the workshops stated that **missing or incorrect contact details in the data that they receive from Careers Wales are a fundamental barrier to effective tracking of 16 to 18 year-olds.**

> *"The tracking is really difficult because of the data that we don't have initially. It's trying to track tier ones or twos, when the addresses, phone numbers, etc are*

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incorrect. That's really time consuming for whoever is responsible. That's a massive gap in the process that we need to track young people. Somewhere along the line we need to go back to get the data correct because they just disappear into tier one and then we can't find them." (Local authority participant)

Participants acknowledged the challenge for Careers Wales of managing this process as many young people change their phone numbers on a regular basis. It was also suggested that a key reason why some young people "disappear" is that they have disengaged towards the end of school so Careers Wales have not seen them to update any details.

"From the age of about 15 onwards they start to disengage, and then they slip through the net because by the time they get to post-16 we can't find them because the data is so old." (Local authority participant)

There was also recognition that a key reason for missing data centred around providers not sharing data with Careers Wales (this is discussed in more detail later). Barriers around data sharing with Careers Wales is clearly then having a knock-on impact on the quality of the data that is shared with local authorities.

There was general recognition that a considerable amount of resource is invested by local authorities in trying to track down young people in tier 1. Youth services, ESF projects and some third sectors will do door knocking after 6pm, although this has not been possible during the pandemic. It was also stressed that a lack of good quality data to support tracking of under-18s raises safeguarding issues. Some participants stated that they are aware of young people who have not been contacted by support services for a significant period of time.

1.2.4 Young people who "drop out"

Feedback from two of the workshops suggests that processes for tracking young people who leave their course early are not always working effectively. Participants stated that they were not aware of a formal process being in place for ensuring that a college or training provider informs Careers Wales if a young person leaves their course before completion. They reported experiencing an element of chance about whether the local authority becomes aware that they have disengaged which can lead to delays into putting in place support for the young person and helping them to access something more suitable.

It should be noted however that despite these views being expressed by some participants there is a formal process for all colleges, sixth forms, and training providers to notify Careers Wales when a young people drops out of provision. This should include the reasons for leaving and the proposed new Tier. That some participants were unaware or unsure of the process for notifying Careers Wales potentially reflects a lack of understanding across different providers about the aspects of the YEPF.

1.2.5 Potential and emerging solutions

Several participants stated that they would like to see **examples of effective practice in tracking young people** that they could draw on to develop their own YEPF work. A

number of approaches that are in use or in development were mentioned in the feedback, including:

- One local authority described how they are working with their health authority to explore the potential for using an individual's NHS number as an identifier which will enable their engagement to be tracked across services and interventions.

- Careers Wales reported that they had previously managed to get a data sharing arrangement in place with DWP for young people on Jobseekers Allowance, but this came into effect at the point when Universal Credit (UC) was introduced and UC was not covered by the agreement.

1.3 Data sharing

The conversations around data sharing focused primarily on the gaps and barriers which hamper effective monitoring and tracking. Much of the feedback centred on the challenges at 18-plus and is reported above. However, participants also explored data sharing issues more widely, and raised the following additional key points.

There was broad consensus that the current localised approach to data sharing between local authorities, Careers Wales and providers means that arrangements are inconsistent across Wales and vary greatly in their effectiveness. Participants stressed that they endeavour to "make it work at local level" and some described how they have put in place information sharing protocols with partners. However, it was repeatedly stressed that the extent to which effective local arrangements have been implemented depends on interpersonal relationships between key individuals within stakeholder organisations.

> *"We've got a very good relationship with Careers Wales but it's important to recognise that this is based on personal relationships and the people involved. We've now got processes embedded because the people involved have been there a considerable amount of time."* (Local authority participant)

> *"Data sharing needs to be based a bit more on the framework and a bit less on personal relationships, because those relationships change and what tends to happen then is that the data sharing processes tend to drift off. It shouldn't matter who is in role."* (Local authority participant)

Several participants noted that GDPR has exacerbated challenges around data sharing, with a detrimental effect on operational activity. While some participants noted some practical challenges as a result of GDPR, others highlighted that it was in part down to the fear of sharing data and a more risk averse environment.

> *"We have had some issues due to GDPR in our area, and the fear of sharing and concerns. Some information has stopped being shared [by providers] with Careers Wales and it means that their data isn't up to date. This has a knock on effect for us doing our tier one and tier two chasing. There's a misunderstanding or a misinterpretation of what can be shared with Careers Wales. Clarity about what the*

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local authority or the school is allowed or obliged to share with them would have an impact." (Local authority participant)

Across the workshops, there was consensus among participants that data sharing needs to be systematically embedded across the YEPF. They suggested that national guidance to underpin a greater clarity, consistency and certainty in data sharing would be very welcome and would help to overcome difficulties experienced at times with some individual local authorities.

"It would be helpful in the refresh of the YEPF to have better guidance to support more sharing between systems." (Local authority participant)

Participants unanimously supported the idea that the Welsh Government could provide leadership to help with facilitating data sharing agreements in a standardised and consistent way.

"The biggest barrier to us being able to work effectively is not being able to share data. If there's legislation, if there's policy support for effective and timely sharing of data, particularly for organisations that don't have expertise in this area and don't know what can be shared, it's going to make everything much simpler. A really clear piece of legislation that says this is how you do it, this is why you do it, this is when you do it." (Local authority participant)

2. Early identification

Stakeholders were asked for feedback on the effectiveness of early identification systems and processes. The consultation workshops, which focused largely on early identification and transition in pre-16, included the following key areas:

- Early identification indicators.

- National consistency and local flexibility.

- Data sharing.

- Earlier identification.

- Using early identification data for other purposes.

It is worth noting that participants in one of the four discussion groups broadly agreed with a participant from the voluntary and community sector who suggested that early identification is the element of the YEPF which has so far been most successfully implemented. They felt that significant improvements have been apparent in quite a short space of time.

2.1 Early identification indicators

2.1.1 Core indicators

The YEPF states that early identification systems should focus as a core on attendance, behaviour (exclusion) and attainment indicators, with local areas having the flexibility to use other relevant local indicators. The general consensus among participants across the workshops was that the three core indicators are the right ones and should be retained. However, participants stressed that the upheavals in education caused by the pandemic currently presents a serious challenge in terms of using these core identifiers. As young people have not been in school for much of the past year, there is a lack of robust data on attendance, exclusion and attainment. Several participants from local authorities reported that they do not intend to use attendance as an early identification indicator for the foreseeable future as the data is too unreliable. A further shortcoming of attendance data was highlighted by a participant who explained that a young person who is on a pastoral support plan may have excellent attendance record, but in reality that attendance amounts to only a few hours a week.

The focus on attendance, behaviour and attainment data prompted discussions across all the workshops on elective home education. The concerns raised broadly echoed those summarised in section 1.2.2. above, although participants suggested that the challenges of keeping track of young people in elective home education have particular implications in terms of early identification:

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"It's a ticking time bomb and it's going to get worse, and it's a point of concern regarding early identification. You identify a pupil and you suddenly can't contact them and can't communicate with them". (Local authority participant)

Careers Wales indicated that they face particular barriers to providing support to young people outside the school system because they are not able to make home visits to young people without the permission from the individual to do so.

> *"We find ourselves in a really difficult position at Careers Wales. We are able to have the list from the local authority of children who are home educated then we send out information to them all and if they want to engage with us then we are able to offer them the service. But if we don't hear back from them, we can't offer the service, and we also can't share any data with EPCs."* (Careers Wales participant).

As a result, young people are falling out of the early identification system and missing out on careers support.

2.1.2 Other indicators of risk

Participants identified a range of other factors which could be considered as key indicators to improve the early identification of young people who are at risk of not making a successful transition into education, employment or training. **It was highlighted that there was emerging evidence of the use of different indicators in different areas, as well as support for a greater degree of consistency across Wales.**

The feedback suggests that **there is widespread support among stakeholders for more systematic use to be made of data on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) within early identification, in addition to the core indicators and as part of ensuring the broadest and most holistic approach possible is taken.**

Some LAs report that they discuss ACEs as part of school review meetings and the indicators play a part in identifying those young people who are at risk of becoming NEET.

Participants reported that some local authorities are already successfully using ACEs indicators to help identify young people who are at risk of becoming NEET. For example, they have successfully expanded their vulnerability indicators and vulnerability assessment tools to include ACEs-oriented characteristics and discuss ACEs as part of school review meetings. While participants recognised that there are concerns within schools that this could lead to the stigmatisation of young people, on balance they felt that the probable benefits outweigh the risks.

> *Once the school has acknowledged that someone has ACEs, it's harder for the school to disengage later on when the individual is not looking like a dead cert from a GCSE point of view.* (Local authority participant)

It would also help to promote shared responsibility across services and agencies for supporting young people's successful transitions.

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Participants stressed that questions about when and how ACEs data is used would need to be addressed to maximise its contribution to early identification. For example:

- Much ACEs data is based on professional judgement, which raises questions about how and where the information should be recorded to ensure quality and consistency.

- Timing is critical. To be most effective, it was suggested that ACEs screening should happen at the point of transition from primary to secondary school, which would enable preventative support to be put in place from Year 7.

There was also general agreement that **wellbeing needs to be more systematically considered.** It was argued that young people who are categorised as not at risk may have wellbeing needs that act as risk factors but are missed if focus is overwhelmingly on educational criteria.

The following examples of local initiatives which illustrate evolving practice in the use of indicators of early identification were highlighted in the workshops.

- **Swansea has developed a vulnerability assessment profile (VAP) approach** which has a broader scope than just identifying people at risk of becoming NEET. It aims to collate data on a wide range of determinants of vulnerability to inform multi-agency discussions. Alongside the three core indicators, the VAP process draws on data including: free school meals; Wales indices of multiple deprivation; and school moves

- **Rhondda Cynon Taf uses a weighted aggregated model** which includes around 15 indicators with six or seven core indicators related to aspects of disengagement. The results are used to allocate individuals to one of four categories – white, green, amber and red - which determines the targeting of services. Young people identified as amber and red are passed to EPCs. Data is passed back to schools on an individual record basis and shared with local college and Careers Wales. This was working well until Covid when data on some of the key characteristics – attendance, exclusion, special educational needs support – ceased to be available in the same way. The local authority has decided temporarily to use the Welsh Government's five indicators for targeting social services (on child protection register, care and support plan, looked after, young carer, SEN need).

- **The consortium of North Wales local authorities that are part of the ESF TRAC programme are using a common early identification tool.** The three core indicators of attendance, behaviour and attainment are assigned the highest weighting. Other indicators used include: free school meals; not having English or Welsh as the first language; special educational needs support; Gypsy / Traveller status; and whether a young person is known to social services. The "known to social services" indicator scores looked-after status and also picks up any engagement with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). This

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ensures a more consistent approach across the local authorities in how they identify young at risk of becoming NEET.

2.2   National consistency and local flexibility

In view of the differing indicators being used by local authorities to measure young people's risk of becoming NEET, stakeholders were asked whether there would be value in having a more consistent approach.

The feedback indicates that **there is broad support in principle for a standardised overarching framework for early identification, with some scope for local flexibility.** There is scope to develop this by building on existing best practice.

> *A template for a Wales wide approach to early identification would be very useful.* (FE college participant)

Participants expressed concerns that the current system can create an element of unequal access for young people being able to access services. While the use of the 'core indicators' helps mitigate against some of this, there was a strong feeling from participants that greater national consistency would be beneficial for both providers and young people.

> *It's not acceptable to have different levels of service and eligibility across Wales.* (Local authority participant)

The lack of a common approach was seen as a barrier to collecting reliable national data on the scale and type of support needs and to undertaking benchmarking in a meaningful way.

> *If you're going to make any kind of national comparisons, just identifying how many young people in each category we have across Wales is the thing that's needed. If you're looking at apples in RCT and oranges in Denbighshire then any sort of benchmarking is going to be really difficult. There must be some way we can come up with a core set of indicators.* (Local authority participant)

At the same time, participants stressed that they did not wish to see an approach that was entirely prescriptive. Within a national framework, it would be vital to have enough flexibility to enable local authorities to take account of key variables that are known to be risk factors for young people in the area, such as rurality, language and the number of secondary schools.

> *You need to have a set framework so that you get consistency, but there still has to be the chance for local information and local knowledge to be imparted. We work through quite a few different counties and with referrals there is huge variation in the amount of information we get. There's some set information that we need, with a chance for local information.* (Independent training provider participant)

On the whole, participants agreed that it should be possible to reconcile moving towards a more standardised national approach with the retention of local flexibility. It was felt that there is a broad understanding of the factors which identify someone as being at risk, but currently these may be interpreted differently in different localities. Standardisation would create greater consistency and thereby improve support for young people.

> *So, if a young person was transferring from one local authority area to another, when their data was transferred, if you had a flag against a risk indicator, say mental health, then the local authority that they were going into would understand exactly what was implied by that.* (Local authority participant)

It was suggested that, as a starting point, a core list of individual indicators could be developed with nationally agreed weighting.

Although participants were in favour of greater standardisation, **some participants voiced reservations about the extent to which it is achievable in practice.** The following issues were identified:

- Responsibility for the YEPF sits in different places in relation to wider support services within different local authorities. This reflects the huge variations in the way that local authorities are structured, and in turn is product of the diversity of local areas.

- Weighting presents a major challenge, due to differences in levels of disadvantage across Wales. Consequently, individuals who need support may be missed. For example, an individual identified as being in the top 20% at risk in an affluent local authority might not register as being at risk if they moved into a less affluent area. Similarly, a school in a rural area might identify a risk factor as red which would not register in a large, urban school with a relatively high number of young people who are at risk of becoming NEET.

- The composition of the group at risk of becoming NEET is likely to be different across different local authorities.

Participants from Careers Wales suggested that there may be other ways of improving consistency in early identification which would be less practically challenging to develop than a national framework and process. They suggested: a good practice guide to early identification; and a set of "key features" expressed through KPIs.

2.3   Data sharing

YEPF implementation guidance states that early identification systems should be data-led, so data sharing agreements need to be in place. However, because there are clear signs that data sharing does not happen consistently across Wales, stakeholders were asked for their views on the challenges and barriers that inhibit early identification data sharing between organisations.

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2.3.1 Challenges and barriers

Feedback from the workshops indicates that the key concerns around data sharing in relation to early identification broadly echo those discussed in section 1.3 above. That is, there is a lack of consistency across Wales, with limited evidence of effective practice; GDPR has exacerbated difficulties with establishing data-sharing agreements; and stakeholders would welcome a coordinated national approach to bring greater clarity and consistency to local arrangements.

In addition, participants identified the following principal challenges and barriers to effective data sharing that relate specifically to the early identification of individuals at risk of becoming NEET.

- ▪ **There are difficulties with obtaining data from schools in a timely and consistent manner.** As key partners such as local authorities and colleges are reliant on schools for their early identification data, this presents a significant issue. A number of factors contribute to these difficulties.

  FE college participants reported that schools do not always share data at the point when young people are applying to college, preferring to wait until enrolment. From an early identification perspective, this means that there is a delay in establishing what support individual young people need and with the result that appropriate transition support may not be put in place until well into the autumn term.

  A local authority participant stated:

  "We have had difficulties getting [destinations] data from schools on year 11, 12, 13 leavers. Information Sharing Protocols are not signed off so the data hasn't come through to us and we are left then chasing an awful lot of young people in October without destinations. And literally then, youth workers are being left with caseloads of 300 young people in my local authority that they need to go and knock doors for, because we don't know where they are. (Local authority participant)

  Comments from other participants suggest that this kind of experience was not uncommon, although it was not universal and there are examples of good practice.

  There are also huge variations in the approach to data sharing of individual schools within some local authority areas. Consequently, local authorities can end up with very patchy data.

  Every school is different. We have seven secondary schools in our area and some will give us complete access to SIMS, some close down areas of it, and others say "no way." (Local authority participant)

  Furthermore, there is not a single system for collecting and reporting school pupil data in use across Wales. SIMS is the most widely used, but it is not universal.

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- **Participants from Careers Wales highlighted the difficulties that the organisation faces as a result of having to set up individual data sharing arrangements with each of the 22 local authorities.** It was suggested that there are "differing levels of maturity in the information sharing processes across Wales," with data officers in some local authorities struggling to articulate the benefits of data sharing agreements to those who are responsible for signing them off.

- **The existence of multiple different data systems,** not only between organisations but also between different services within a local authority, creates a range of issues because datasets do not easily align and it can be difficult to identify and match data on individuals. Some local authorities are currently looking at how a single system can be implemented to address this.

- **In some instances, looked-after children are placed into a local authority from outside the area without the necessary transition plans in place.** As a result, information about their needs is not available to enable the receiving local authority to take appropriate steps to ensure that they are placed in appropriate educational settings and have other relevant support.

- There can be **difficulties around partner organisations not having secured consent to discuss individual young people** within multi-agency meetings.

2.3.2 Data limitations

Discussion of the issues and challenges around data sharing prompted participants across the workshops to reflect on the kinds of data that are valuable in the early identification process. The prevailing view was that, while the information that can be obtained from the datasets held by schools and other partners is important, the indicators are only the starting point for understanding which individuals are at risk and the support that they need. The information needs to be augmented by professional judgement and detailed conversations between professionals who know the young people and their circumstances.

> *Those core indicators are a springboard. When you're talking about young people who are at risk of dropping out of mainstream systems often there are complex sets of circumstances wrapped around those individuals. So they are good as a starting point, but that rich, multi-agency conversation is key in identifying the right kind of packages of support Who has got the best relationships with those young people? What factors might affect these young people? Where you tend to draw out some of the key factors for individual young people is through a rich conversation with a multi-agency partnership team in a very consistent and constructive manner, across the period of transition.* (Local authority participant)

Underlining this point, one participant described evidence from a longitudinal study of Pembrokeshire which found that 40% of school leavers who became NEET in 2018 were not flagged up as being at risk in any dataset.

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There was general consensus among participants that the key to getting the right balance and mix of data and professional judgement are the multi-agency groups led by EPCs where professionals analyse the data together and then share their wider knowledge and expertise to inform understanding young people's risk status. Indeed, **several participants stated that the dialogue which the YEPF has fostered between organisations is its most valuable feature.**

> *"When we look at making information sharing clearer within the new Framework, it needs to include small third sector organisations. When we have worked with a lot of young people who have been not in education, employment and training and we have never been able to identify where they would be on the* Vulnerability Assessment Profile*, and having that insight would allow us to go to the local authority lead worker and look at doing joint working and look at support plans in place rather than duplication services or hindering the young person's support from both organisations."* (Third Sector participant)

2.4   Earlier identification

The YEPF covers ages 11 to 25. Stakeholders were asked whether a refreshed YEPF should consider earlier identification and what the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach would be.

Without exception, participants expressed support for earlier identification. They argued that the earlier that risk is identified and appropriate support put in place, the more beneficial this is for the young person. The point was also made several times that early identification should be treated as an on-going process in which takes place in a constantly changing context. Starting it sooner would help to pick up needs more quickly.

> *The makeup of the group that is NEET changes over time and individuals' circumstances can change at any time, so identification needs to be a repeated cycle.* (Careers Wales participant)

There was consensus that early identification should start at primary school, in Year 5 or 6. This would allow preventative interventions to be made sooner and support to be put in place over the critical transition from primary to secondary school. Participants felt that it is a significant weakness in the current arrangements that they do not cover this key transition. Furthermore, it was suggested that because it concentrates on the period of secondary schooling, YEPF activity can become oriented towards Year 11 transition plans and fail to pick up risk at an early enough stage.

> *You want to be drawing out some of the key risk factors for individual young people across the period of transition. And that's starting at primary school. Picking it up at year 10, 11 is too late. You want to be picking these issues up much sooner, monitoring and tracking, before they start to hit crisis point when you get to year 11 and the young person has no destination and you've got three months to sort that out before their formal schooling comes to an end.* (Local authority participant)

Participants all recognised that **earlier identification has resource implications**, as the necessary infrastructure would need funding.

- The early identification workforce would need developing. This is not only a questions of staff numbers but also of staff having the skills to work with younger age groups. It was noted that youth workers within local authorities generally have skills and experience in working with young people aged 11-24, so the mix and balance of skills within teams would need to be reviewed.

- The appropriate services must be in place to provide support to young people and their families / carers when a need is identified. Some anxiety was expressed that schools would be expected to provide support, and consequently individuals would continue to show up as being at risk.

Some participants argued that it would not be appropriate to revise the YEPF to include earlier identification without also addressing the need for additional funding. However, notwithstanding the resource challenges, it was felt that this would be a welcome and worthwhile change.

To emphasise the potential benefits of earlier identification, participants highlighted a range of examples of existing practice where this approach is already being used.

- **In Swansea the vulnerability assessment profile (VAP) is well established.** It is used with young people from primary school age and tracked and updated as pupils move through the school system. The profile forms the basis for discussion at transition points and also to support referrals to other services. Participants with experience of the VAP stressed that there are usually very clear indications at an early stage that intervention and support is needed, and leaving it until just before school transitions would be too late.

- **In Monmouthshire, use of the early identification tool has been extended to start at Year 5.** A pilot is currently underway to support transition from Year 5/6 up to secondary school. It has demonstrated significant need in this area, doubling number of young people identified as being in need of support. Covid has presented some challenges to getting it off the ground, but experience so far suggests that in working with younger age groups the relationships, conversations and professional judgements are even more critical to early identification.

- **The ESF TRAC Programme in North Wales** targets young people aged eleven to -24. It is using this as an opportunity to begin working with young people in Year 6, with the aim of providing better support with the transition from Key Stage 2 to 3 for those identified as being at risk. The programme uses an adapted early identification tool based on the methodology for Years 7-11 and "known to social services" is a key indicator. Education social workers have been well-placed to provide information at TRAC referral panels. Early signs are that there is a definite advantage to this earlier identification.

Anecdotally, what they are finding is that when they are moving through Key Stage 3, we don't necessarily pick them up as part of our core TRAC offer or that where we do it is lighter touch support that they need compared to when we look at their peers who haven't had that engagement.

The programme would like to be able to engage young people even earlier but the funding criteria do not allow this.

2.5   Using early identification data for other purposes

Stakeholders were asked to what extent they believe early identification data showing young people who are at risk of becoming NEET could also be used to inform early identification of young people who are at risk of becoming homeless or at risk of developing mental health issues.

Workshop participants felt that in principle, more effectively bringing together data from across these policy areas would be very beneficial. They argued that there is a clear overlap between the indicators for risk of becoming NEET, becoming homeless and developing mental health difficulties. It was stated that anecdotal evidence is emerging which suggests that all three risks are associated with adverse childhood experiences and the consideration of ACEs **as part of a broader set of indicators** could help support the development of a more comprehensive analysis of the challenges young people are facing in their lives. Participants suggested that all the professionals who could support this process locally may have already been identified. From the perspective of the individual young person, it was felt that a more aligned or integrated approach could potentially save them having to repeat their stories and lead to more joined up support being in place.

Alongside general support for the principle of data sharing across policy areas, participants expressed some concern about how it would work in practice. Not least, they pointed to the challenges of data sharing even within the education and employment context as grounds for reservations about how effective data sharing across a wider scope could be achieved. One participant described the kinds of gaps that currently exist across the system.

When a family is placed in temporary accommodation with young people there is no notification to schools or the youth services, even though those young people are way more likely to become homeless themselves in the future. So there's no flow of information. So not only have they maybe not got access to Wi-Fi or IT in that accommodation, maybe not being able to get to school. There's no feed of information to schools or from schools back to the local authority homelessness team to be able to do anything out it. I think there should be duty on housing departments to notify schools or youth service of placement (Local authority participant)

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Local authority participants stressed the importance of effective and collaborative working arrangements with secondary schools and colleges. Some participants highlighted their strong relationships with schools and that this involved a sustained process of building trust and mutual understanding. The evidence highlighted that relationships were not as strong with every school and that this should be an area for further development. However, it was also noted that individuals are often around 21 years old when they present with mental health or housing needs, which means that in many cases there will be no current school data to triangulate.

Some initiatives were identified which participants suggested could provide a helpful basis for better joining up and use of data across services which have a role in early identification of young people at risk of poor outcomes.

- The new **Framework on embedding whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being** was published in March 2021. It will place wellbeing officers in schools who should make links to local authorities, health and other support services, together with five implementation leads based in the local health boards whose role will be to link with schools and other services. This is part of a whole system approach which includes the Together for Children and Young People Programme which includes Early Help and Enhanced Support Framework. It was stressed that YEPF needs to link into the Whole School Approach, to ensure that they do not develop as twin track processes.

- **The new Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing and Homelessness team in one local authority** has started to work across the housing department and social services to share information about young people who become homeless. This intelligence is also shared with the NEETs coordinator who can then take it into school review meetings and have conversations with schools and make them aware of any of these issues that are affecting the young person. A new homeless pathway has been developed with the youth service and social services and is in the initial stages of implementation.

- **In Rhondda Cynon Taf, the local authority has developed data sharing arrangements to enable main partners to work together and is now looking at how it can work more effectively with the health service.** This interest has arisen as they have begun to develop an early identification system around homelessness and this has highlighted that health and mental health factors are strongly linked. Conversations are underway with the health service about using the NHS number as the key identifier to link the different data systems together. Governance issues have been resolved and technical questions are now being addressed.

- **The Upstream Cymru tool for the early identification of risk of youth homelessness is being piloted within two local authorities.** Workshop participants described how the tool starts from the point of view of the young person

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to develop a narrative which highlights key areas which professionals recognise as indicators of risk of becoming homeless. It was suggested the YEPF should be developed to give more space for young people themselves to feed into the data.

3.   Brokerage

Stakeholders' views were sought on how effectively brokerage is being carried out to achieve coordinated support for young people who have disengaged or are at risk of disengaging from education, training and employment. The workshops focused on the following three aspects of brokerage:

- Coordination of support;

- The lead worker role;

- Quality improvement.

3.1   Coordination of support

The vision for brokerage set out in the YEPF is based on the engagement and progression coordinator (EPC) and lead worker functions working together. Stakeholders stressed that, in practice, **securing effective support for young people requires a wide range of different agencies and organisations to work together** including local government, the Welsh Government, schools, education and training providers, Careers Wales, the youth justice service, Department for Work and Pensions and voluntary and community organisations. They were asked to provide feedback on how effectively support for young people is being coordinated, and to identify any blockages or gaps in coordination that need addressing. Inevitably, the discussions focused primarily on identifying and exploring coordination challenges. However, it should be noted that **some participants did highlight aspects of coordination which are working well in their experience.** For example:

- An EPC reported effective coordination of support for both pre- and post-16s. They attributed this to the monthly Keeping in Touch (KIT) meetings which are held respectively with schools and with multi-agency teams involving Careers Wales and other partners.

- A local authority participant stated that KIT meetings involving Careers Wales, colleges and other providers are working "really well".

- Another local authority participant reported that they have made good progress in bringing together EPCs, youth homelessness coordinators and principal youth officers, although they would like to do more. This has been achieved to date by inviting representatives in other roles to join team meetings to share information and expertise.

On the whole, though, participants felt that **effective practice in coordination was inconsistent and there were significant differences between local areas.** They identified a number of key challenges, which are discussed in more detail below.

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3.1.1 Data sharing

There was broad consensus that the effectiveness of data sharing systems and processes is the single biggest factor in determining how effectively support is coordinated. It was consistently raised and discussed at length in all four workshops. Participants raised issues and challenges with data sharing that reflected those already summarised in section 1.3 above. They stressed that gaps and weaknesses in data sharing arrangements present the greatest single obstacle to effective brokerage.

> *"The biggest barrier we face is being able to share information as effectively as we would like to. You want to be able to offer the young people the support as soon as possible, because if they fall through the gap it's harder to re-engage. The problem is, by the time we get the information and then get the contact information, quite a few weeks or months have gone by and it's harder to re-engage them then into anything substantial."* (Local authority participant)

A Third Sector participant working in an organisation which supports young people's mental resilience reported that delivery of a partnership project with local health boards has been delayed due to data sharing arrangements not being in place. The project was intended to run for three months from January to March 2021 but has so far been unable to receive any referrals as data sharing issues have not been resolved. It should be noted that this project was not part of the YEPF, but nonetheless demonstrates some of the wider challenges around data sharing.

As has already been stated, there is a resource implication for when contact information is missing for individual young people. While the reasons for incomplete data have been outlined previously, participants reported being hampered in their efforts to identify and address young people's support needs as a result of this.

> *"A massive challenge and a massive gap for us on brokerage, is we then don't have any way then of knowing where those young people are. The youth workers, who are predominantly doing the work in tier one and tier two for us, have to turn into investigators."* (Local authority participant)

Although this may be not be widespread, there was some frustration expressed that in some areas even when the correct contact details have been found they are not updated on the system.

> *"There's a hell of a lot of work being done by lead workers, where the information is passed on in multi-agency meetings and put into a spreadsheet, and then the information we get back the following month is incorrect or missing."* (Local authority participant)

Broadly speaking, the comments reflected a consensus on a system wide need to improve the quality of the data and to data sharing more generally, as well as the important role of Careers Wales as part of this process.

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3.1.2 YEPF scope and focus

Participants highlighted two issues relating to the strategic scope and focus of the YEPF where they believed more could be done which would help with coordination on the ground.

- Participants stated that closer strategic alignment is needed between different policy areas, and in particular between the YEPF and other youth work provision. It was remarked that "These aren't talking to each other enough." The lack of alignment was felt to be a general issue, but the disjunction is particularly evident when the YEPF does not sit within youth services within a local authority

- YEPF does not sufficiently recognise and engage the voluntary youth work sector. More could be done to identify how to make it easier to broker in the more expert support that some Third sector organisations could offer, without giving them the challenge of undertaking the full breadth of lead worker role. One Third Sector participant stated:

  "There is a general feeling that the voluntary sector is looking from the outside in on the YEPF rather than being part of the YEPF." (Third sector participant)

  It was suggested that closer working between EPCs and some of the leads of the voluntary youth work sector would be highly beneficial. This was felt to be particularly important because much of the support provided through the Voluntary Community Sector (VCS) is based on short term funding which can create a risk of gaps in some provision and duplication in other areas. One local authority participant described running informal meetings to bring together the range of organisations across VCS that work with young people.

While each of these points was only raised in one workshop, they both attracted general agreement from the other participants in those sessions.

3.1.3 Resourcing and capacity

Participants pointed to the following resourcing challenges which it was stated can impede effective coordination.

- **Existing capacity challenges within local authority youth services:** Participants stated that this was already the case prior to the pandemic and has subsequently become even more acute due to the growing support needs of young people who have become disengaged as a result of lockdown.

- **There is an over- reliance on short term funding to provide support to young people,** such as some support delivered through the Youth Justice Service and through ESF projects. Services end up being reactive because the funding does not encourage working over the longer term with young people to develop their resilience. The different timescales of individual projects add the challenges around

coordination. Participants expressed specific concerns about the withdrawal of ESF funding.

"The coordination is a little bit clunky. We are using our European money until this May ... It's a perfect storm in terms of coming out of Covid and trying to get young people into whatever opportunities are there in hospitality or whatever, and not having staff to do that engagement and motivational work." (Local authority participant)

3.1.4 Gaps relating to ages / stages

Stakeholders were asked whether there are gaps in the coordination of support for young people linked to ages / stages. From across the workshops, a general consensus is apparent that the key transition points at ages 16-plus and 18-plus are the most problematic in terms of coordination.

With regard to **post-16 transitions,** participants stressed that the effective handover of data is critical at this stage to enable the move between organisations, systems and funding streams and ensure that young people who have been identified as in need support continue to receive appropriate interventions. A local authority youth service participant stated:

"The biggest challenge we face is once they leave school. That's an issue we've got within the local authority where the destination data is not communicated effectively because [the youth service] sits outside of education. That's something we have been working on, to try and improve the information we receive back so that we can act as quickly as possible." (Local authority participant)

It was suggested that the data sharing and wider coordination challenges at this stage reflect the different contexts and cultures of education and training provision that exist pre- and post-16:

"When a young person reaches 16, they move from statutory education where there's very much a feeling that we're all in this together, we're all working together to support the learners are at risk. Suddenly when they leave school at age 16, you move into this competitive market where you've got all these different partners who are actually competing for these learners. All the activity attracts additional funding to these partners, and sometimes that competitive element of it loses the core ethos and values behind what we're trying to achieve together through YEPF." (Local authority participant)

This echoes the comment cited from an FE college participant who suggested that competition between colleges and school sixth forms hinders effective coordination at this stage.

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Several local authority participants expressed concern that the pandemic has exacerbated the difficulties supporting people across this transition. The lack of opportunities for face to face contact has made building relationships with young people aged 16 to 17 who have been newly referred for support very difficult and the attempted use of alternative digital methods has been only partly successful.

> *"The biggest challenge post-16 has been making contact during the pandemic In terms of that initial brokerage of a relationship to work with them, it's particularly difficult on cold referrals, where the young person hasn't been working with anyone before or has been disengaged for a little while."* (Local authority participant)

Participants also suggested that it is likely that some young people in Year 11 who have become disengaged over the year of lockdown may simply not return to school after the Easter break.

For work with **young people aged 18+,** participants reported that the gaps in coordination arise because of the difficulties of obtaining data from DWP / Jobcentre Plus, with which the YEPF has little influence.

> *"18-plus is the big gap. We don't get information in the same way. Processes look a lot different, services and support look a lot different. In the 18+ bracket we often don't even know who half the young people are who need support because of data sharing barriers."* (Local authority participant)

Several examples were cited of ways in which local authorities have developed new ways of working to address this issue, and it is clear from the discussions that there is interest in exploring these further. For instance, one participant described how youth workers are co-located within Jobcentres for one or two days per week. JCP staff manage their diaries and book appointments for young people needing support to see a youth worker. This referral process offers a way around data sharing issues and was described as "brilliant". Participants also reported that the availability of ESF funding to support young people up to the age of 24 had helped to "unblock" some of the channels to working with DWP. For example, ESF-funded lead workers have provided additional capacity to support the growing number of young adults claiming Universal Credit. Feedback from a participant from DWP confirmed the importance of this relationship:

> *"We have seen a massive impact on young people since the pandemic. We totally rely on the providers funded by ESF to work with our 18-24 year olds. We couldn't do the work without it."* (DWP participant)

Participants voiced concern that when the funding stream ceases, this will undermine the work that EPCs have done to try and engage DWP and mean cutting back support to younger age groups.

2.1.5 At-risk groups

Participants were also asked if there are any gaps in providing coordinated support for particular groups of young people. **Overwhelmingly, and across all workshops, the group which attracted most discussion was young people in elective home education (EHE).** The points made broadly reflected those summarised in section 1.2.2 above.

The other group that was mentioned several times in the workshops where there is a gap in coordinating support is graduates, specifically recent graduates who have returned to their parental home and are staying there due to the pandemic.

> *"We have a lot of graduates coming in. You'd be surprised how many are coming in from university and just can't find a job. They get a lot of help from the careers service in their university, but because of the pandemic, it's put a hold on what they want to do. So there's a little gap there." (DWP participant)*

It was stressed that graduates are a cohort who under normal circumstances would not access these services. They have different needs from those with whom young people's support services usually work, and staff have some gaps in their skills to provide appropriate support. For example, skills to manage expectations can be important. Participants from DWP reported that they support "a lot" of eligible graduates to apply for Kickstart vacancies.

The discussion of the support needs of graduates and young people in EHE prompted some participants to reflect that in general the pandemic has led to new groups emerging as most in need of extra support and at risk of becoming NEET, and the structures have not necessarily been there to work with them. One Local authority participant noted that some of the most traditionally at risk groups, such as young people who are under social services or the Youth Offending Service, have at least had a statutory contact in place through which they have been able to maintain some level of engagement over the past year.

3.2 The Lead Worker role

3.2.1 Allocation of Lead Workers

Lead Workers are named individuals responsible for keeping in touch with young people at risk of becoming NEET and brokering appropriate support. Allocation of Lead Workers is expected to begin for young people in Years 10 and 11. For under-16s, Lead Workers are primarily drawn from the youth service, and post-16 a range of organisations undertake the role depending upon where the young person has been placed in the Careers Wales five tier model.

Stakeholders were asked what challenges are experienced in the allocation of Lead Workers. It is worth clarifying that this question was interpreted to mean the allocation of

organisations to undertake the Lead Worker function, and not of individual Lead Workers. Participants indicated that this better reflects what happens on the ground. Illustrating the approach, a local authority participant stated:

> *"It's more of a lead agency than a Lead Worker on our patch."*

and described how they have taken the concept of a Lead Worker and allocated the role out among partner agencies including Youth Offending Service, youth service and the VCS. These organisations are then responsible for providing support through the Lead Worker function for young people who fall within their remit, and the work is coordinated through multi-agency meetings. Using a case loading approach, the accountable agencies then allocate a mentor or support worker to each young person to build a relationship and fulfil the Lead Worker role.

In situations where **statutory support arrangements are in place** – for example, for young people who are in touch with the Youth Offending Service or social services – then the picture is relatively straightforward as that service provides their Lead Worker. Otherwise, the feedback indicates that, **particularly in the post-16 context, that there can be a strong element of local negotiation in determining which organisation will carry out the Lead Worker function.** One participant described this process as "challenging, locally." Participants expressed general agreement that post-16 multi-agency meetings are critical to ensure that the right agency takes on the role of Lead Worker, and that EPCs should be advocating on behalf of the young person to ensure that the right support is in place.

Issues linked to capacity and resources to carry out the Lead Worker role were identified as the greatest obstacle to effective allocation. Participants repeatedly stressed the high and increasing level of need and the scale of the challenge that it presents from a capacity point of view. The picture described by one local authority participant was agreed to be fairly typical:

> *"March figures showed that we have 102 young people in Tier 2, 16-17 year olds. 71 are being supported by the post-16 team, which just exemplifies the amount of investment we are putting in around that work as a service and the challenge it represents in terms of resources and capacity. And out of those young people, most of them have significant challenges. A lot of those tier 2s have been in there for over 90 days, and we're still getting the steady flow of new referrals coming in every month."* (Local authority participant)

Several local authority participants reported that, during the pandemic, they have been able to re-deploy staff from universal youth work to provide additional capacity as that has been temporarily suspended, but that is not a long-term solution.

Participants suggested that **some organisations which would be well-placed to undertake the Lead Worker function with specific cohorts of young people are reluctant to take on the role.** They indicated that there is considerable scope for

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organisations in the voluntary sector to be formally allocated as Lead Workers where their staff have already built trusted relationships with young people, for example as support workers in supported housing projects.

> *"It's trying to encourage those individuals to take on that role as the central person in that young person's life. They need to see themselves as the lead worker, and the rest of us help and support them with that. We need to get together a bit more and have those conversations."* (Local authority participant)

There was a general sense that it can be challenging to engage organisations where this is not backed up by statutory responsibility. However, participants also acknowledged that **it is difficult to expect organisations to take on the Lead Worker role without additional funding to support this.** Within local authorities, the Lead Worker function has meant requiring existing staff to take on more in their role. Some participants suggested that decisions are often based on resource rather than what is necessarily the best agency to provide support to an individual young person. ESF funding has been used to facilitate engagement of external agencies, but again, the ending of that funding stream raises questions about what will happen in future. Alongside this, it was felt by some participants that, **without strong lines of accountability in place to support the allocation of Lead Workers across organisations, it is preferable to keep the role within the local authority.**

> *"For post-16 lead workers, all of the people I can call on are local authority employees. It would be great to be able to allocate lead workers from the third sector. Where the challenge lies is that if I allocate a worker from within the local authority I can hold them to account a lot more easily than if they were staff employed elsewhere. The job description of a lead worker is limitless, and it's difficult to expect other organisations to pick that up."* (Local authority participant)

Linked to issues around capacity and resources, participants also indicated that **organisational targets impact on allocation of the Lead Worker role.** Careers Wales are the lead agency for providing Lead Workers for young people in tier 3. A Careers Wales participant stated that, although they may not always be the best organisation to provide that support in practice, their contract discourages allocating the role elsewhere:

> *"The young person may be already working with another organisation on their employability skills and it is going really well. We wouldn't want to interrupt that relationship, but it does become difficult. We have KPIs that mean they have to get everyone moved into ETE within 90 days and if we don't there are questions asked. So we can't really ask other partners to work towards our goals."* (Careers Wales participant)

It was noted that where young people are placed in tier 3 and are therefore deemed to be relatively close to the labour market, organisations are often keen to work with them.

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Participants were also asked whether Lead Workers are able to meet both the short term needs of young people and also provide support with longer term resilience building. **There was consensus that short term funding and the pressure of targets to move young people on as quickly as possible do not encourage a focus on building longer term resilience.** Participants argued that the pandemic has greatly increased the need for support with resilience, with growing numbers of young people experiencing mental health difficulties.

3.3   Quality improvement

Participants were asked what could be done to strengthen the culture of improvement across the Brokerage strand. To contextualise their responses, several participants made the point that partner organisations have cultures of self-improvement and processes in place to support this, and YEPF work sits within that. It should be noted the questions around quality improvement were allocated relatively little time for discussion in any of the workshops.

It was generally felt that the five tier model provides a narrow and limited measurement of success, because it does not recognise progress within tiers. For example, a young person in tier 2 may remain out of education and training but may have made significant progress in terms of their mental health or personal resilience. Although these variations within tiers can be recorded and reviewed through processes such as multi-agency KIT meetings, it would be helpful to have a more consistent way of recognising progress within tiers. Although participants did not want to see the creation of more tiers, they suggested that sub-categories within tiers to indicate different levels of engagement, for example, might be helpful.

Similarly, participants agreed that **the use of the number of young people who are NEET after Year 11 as the only outcomes measure is insufficient.** Several participants contended that the number of "unknowns" (tier 1) should also be reported.

There was widespread support for more consistent sharing of good practice between local areas. Currently, feedback suggests that sharing of good practice around YEPF tends to happen as a result of people "meeting, looking around and asking questions", rather than any formal process (although reference was made to greater national networking during the pandemic, facilitated by online meetings). Several participants specifically mentioned data sharing and the development of information sharing protocols as topics on which they would like to see examples of effective practice being developed and shared. It was also noted that almost all ESF projects linked to YEPF are going to be evaluated which will produce many examples of good practice and what has worked well that will be published over the next year. Participants stressed that it will be important to ensure that the findings are systematically shared and inform what happens next at an operational level.

Participants from local authorities stressed that the **engagement of young people in service design and delivery is central to their ways of working.**

"Participation is in the DNA of youth work and we wouldn't seek to do anything without involving young people as our customers in designing the service. Trying to give them something that they don't want makes your engagement twice as hard. The principles and purposes of youth work in Wales underpins our work." (Local authority participant)

"We are a youth service and young people's participation is key." (Local authority participant)

Local authority participants cited a range of examples to illustrate this commitment:

- Youth support services have bronze, silver and gold Quality Marks around involving young people in terms of getting their wishes on how the service is run.

- New provision is introduced for an initial trial period so that young people can test it out and provide feedback to inform the final roll-out.

- Young people are involved in interviewing new staff.

- Greater efforts are being made to include young people from the EOTAS group in any relevant consultations and forums to understand the challenges that they experience with learning.

- Surveys of young people are conducted to understand their interests and aspirations.

- Youth forums meet to discuss and provide feedback on different topics.

- However, it was acknowledged that participatory methods generally tend to involve those who are engaged and look like "success stories", and it is an ongoing challenge to reach more excluded young people.

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4. Employability and provision

The YEPF sets out key aims to ensure more young people move into skilled employment. It seeks to strengthen employer engagement and develop provision which promotes employability skills. Providers and partners work through the YEPF to improve the offer to young people by mapping provision and developing new opportunities which address unmet needs. The provision that is in scope includes that in schools, colleges and other training providers and covers courses and qualifications such as GCSEs, A levels, BTECs and NVQs, work-based programmes including Apprenticeships, employability programmes like Traineeships, and in-depth employability advice and guidance from Working Wales.

Stakeholders were asked for feedback on the following aspects of employability and provision:

- Gaps in current provision.

- Implications of the loss of ESF funding.

- The offer for young people who are NEET.

- Employer engagement.

- Information, advice and guidance.

- Lessons learned for delivery from the pandemic.

4.1 Gaps in current provision

The bulk of the discussions in the workshops focused on identifying gaps in current provision. There was broad consensus among participants from all types of organisations represented on the key areas of unmet need and the importance of addressing these to improve outcomes for young people.

4.1.1 Mental health and wellbeing

Participants reported that **there is a growing gap in relation to provision which supports young people with mild to moderate mental health difficulties to engage with education and training.** It was generally agreed that the pandemic has been a significant driver of the increase in the numbers experiencing poor mental health. Feedback suggests that the need for more support with mental health applies across the age range.

> *"Coming back after the pandemic, there's over £100 million being channeled through schools without any particular guidance as to how it's used. The biggest need is around mental health and emotional wellbeing and the model has got to look different to accommodate that. Many schools are looking to recruit more teachers to deliver more teaching when really we out to be looking at other needs – wellbeing, confidence building, enjoying school again"* (Local authority participant)

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"A load of the branches of mental health support for young people drop off when you leave school. You don't have regular contact with educational psychologists, school-based counsellors, school-based youth workers. So we're finding that post-16 young people are struggling to access approachable people who will help them with their mental health before they get to a critical level." (Local authority participant)

"What I've noticed on my caseload is the mental health issue. It's massive. The majority of young people that come on have some form of anxiety, depression, stress. It could have a lot to do with a year of lockdown and that has impacted hugely on young people's state of mind. There's a gap. I'm finding that they're struggling to access counselling unless it's extreme mental health. If it's extreme mental health then the community mental health team are brilliant. But otherwise, they can't access anything." (DWP participant)

Participants described how they have used Youth Support Grant and ESF funding to bridge some of the gaps, and it was noted that the loss of ESF means that the scale of unmet need is expected to increase. Some of this need is being met through funding provided to support mental health provision in FE, including additional investment provided during the pandemic. Participants also agreed that the current growth in support needs around mental health and wellbeing is not solely linked to poverty. They stressed that targeting disadvantaged areas risks missing a lot of young people who may require support.

4.1.2 Practical, vocational and work based provision

Participants stated that **a significant gap exists for provision which offers opportunities for practical, vocational and work based learning for young people for whom mainstream school and college provision is unsuitable.** They stressed that some young people simply cannot cope with school and college environments, which they find large, intimidating and orientated towards an academic style of learning which does not reflect their interests and abilities. A specific point was made about the availability of provision for young people with a learning difficulty and the cliff edge in support for them at particular transition points.

There was a clearly expressed view that a broader range of options are needed to enable young people to engage or re-engage, including in apprenticeships for young people.

*"We keep trying to hammer square pegs into round holes. We don't have the alternative provision for those young people who are disengaged. I think we need something that isn't based around the school curriculum, that is more practically based. There seems to be an absolute obsession with trying to get kids to learn in a particular way. For a lot of those who are not academic and have been disengaged for some time, some practical taster sessions would be a better approach. It's time to try something new." (*Youth Offending Service participant)

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This reflected the views of a number of participants (that alternative provision was needed for some young people who are disengaged) but perhaps also highlights work that is required to raise awareness of provision which currently exists (for example vocational taster provision is offered within FE and through Traineeships).

Particularly for those who are most disengaged or at greatest risk of disengaging, alternative approaches such as being able to try things out at taster sessions without making a full commitment and learning in small-group settings can be critical for helping them to stay in education.

> *"The gap in provision that we see is for young people with low ability, low skills and behavioral issues. The environments they are in pre-and post-16 are very different. They're coming from pupil referral units, say, and filtering them into college with big classroom settings, timetabling, can be really challenging. Previously in the local authority, Resource Base was really successful for that cohort of young people, just starting to experiment with learning skills and the trades and getting tasters through smaller groups with direct support. That's one thing that we feel is really missing in our local area."* (Local authority participant)

It should be noted that Traineeships and some supported employment provision offer some of the support called for by some participants, which could reflect gaps in knowledge, information and accessible pathways.

The point was made numerous times that **independent training providers have strengths in delivering opportunities of this kind to vulnerable young people and should play a greater role in the YEPF.** This view was expressed both by ITP participants and by others. There was general agreement that not enough is being done to promote work-based learning to young people and to make it available and accessible at 14-plus. Participants suggested that the extent to which schools provide information about work-based learning as an option varies considerably. One participant from an ITP described the difficulties that they experience in reaching and engaging young people aged 14 and 15 because schools often encourage progression to either their own sixth form or college. Participants stressed that the limited visibility and availability of more practical, work-based learning provision at this stage of young people's education is particularly concerning because it is known to be the point at which those who are at risk of disengaging become much more likely to do so.

As well as highlighting the extent of this gap, participants indicated examples of effective practice. In both workshops, the **Junior Apprenticeship programme** was discussed in some detail and several participants were involved in delivery of this provision. It provides small-group skills-based learning structured around vocational areas such as construction, automotive and childcare, while continuing to support young people to work towards Maths and English GCSEs. The programme is targeted at young people in Years 10 and 11 who are at risk of becoming NEET and aims to keep them engaged and learning and start them on a path towards employment. Although it is delivered in colleges, the young people are

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placed in small "bubbles". They attend for five days a week for up to two years. One participant reported that they had a 97% progression rate from the cohort of 82 learners on the programme last year. Other examples of tailored, flexible provision to promote engagement were cited including vocational workshops and sports-based courses. Several participants remarked that, while these examples are successful, they make only a small contribution in comparison to the scale of need. It was also noted that **this type of provision is often not accessible to young people in rural areas due to lack of transport.**[4] It was also reported that the accessibility of transport for disabled people is a significant issue and embeds further the inequality in access to provision.

4.1.3   Entrepreneurship and self-employment

Participants indicated that **there is a gap in support for young people in relation to entrepreneurship and self-employment.** There was a general sense from the workshops that the YEPF does not currently reflect the potential of these routes as ways into work for some young people. It was suggested that, while there is growing recognition among agencies in touch with young people that this can be both an attractive and a viable option, it is not routinely addressed in employability support. Participants representing organisations with strengths in supporting young people with entrepreneurship and self-employment stressed that these are the dominant forms of employment in sectors such as creative industries. There was recognition in the discussion with participants that the introduction of Curriculum for Wales (specifically the focus on developing 'enterprising, creative contributors ready to play a full part in life and work' will help in the long-term) would be an important development in this context.

Alongside this it is also worth noting the commitment by the new Welsh Government (made after the stakeholder groups took place) to a new Young Person's Guarantee. As well as a focus on ensuring access to education, employment, and training, the guarantee will also include offering the access to self-employment.

It was acknowledged that self-employment can be a challenging career path, and that it will require specific support to develop self-confidence and resilience amongst young people. Practitioners need to be able to identify young people with the interest and aptitude to pursue self-employment and support them to develop the confidence and creativity to believe that they could start their own business, including by linking them with support organisations such as The Prince's Trust and Big Ideas Wales. Participants highlighted the critical importance of timing interventions at age 14 to 16 when young people are preparing to leave school and take their next steps so that self-employment is not simply raised in a reactive way when a young person is subsequently unable to find a

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[4] The Welsh Government is currently working on a plan for buses in Wales which will take forward the Wales Transport Strategy 2021, Llwybr Newydd. This process will include the opportunity for stakeholders to contribute their views as part of the consultation process.

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job. However, it was generally felt that more could be done within schools to support self-employment. A Careers Wales participant stated that they discuss self-employment with clients during careers guidance and local authorities gave examples of work that they are doing with Careers Wales and Big Ideas Wales to provide information and advice to young people.

4.1.4 Support with transitions

Building on the points in section 4.1.2 which broadly relate to the transition stage around Year 11, other feedback confirms that **gaps in provision are often linked to the need for support across key transitions.**

The transition from Year 6 to Year 7 was widely identified as a stage at which the extension of transition support would help to ensure that young people at risk of disengaging successfully made the move to secondary school. A local authority participant reported that their school-based youth workers now support young people from the end of Year 6 until the end of October rather than September, because they recognised that some young people were disengaging during their first few weeks at secondary school. This presents capacity challenges in the system as a whole because the schools need the youth workers to work there, but it was noted that the new approach has been instrumental in reducing the number of young people who become NEET at this transition.

Participants stated that post-16 transitions can be challenging. It was suggested that young people who are at risk of disengaging often do so around age 14 to 15. An EPC reported that their local college has indicated that many young people coming from school are not ready for full time FE courses and need something to help them make the transition. Short six-week preparation courses are being developed to try and bridge this gap.

The transition at 18-plus was consistently identified as an area of significant need where there are currently gaps. It was suggested that age-based access to services fundamentally works against the needs of young people who are most disengaged, and that this is most apparent at 18-plus. Participants generally agreed that the termination of support from key local authority services with issues such as mental health and housing significantly increases the risk of a young person becoming NEET.

> *"That transition can be quite detrimental because of the classification on age. It's a big barrier."* (Local authority participant)

They stated that insufficient attention is paid to individuals' wider circumstances, for example, their emotional development, life skills, experiences and background, and a lack of consistent access to provision for those whose circumstances mean that they continue to require support.

The challenge of sharing information with DWP was also highlighted as a particular barrier to providing support to young people over 18. Although participants stated that

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they understood why data sharing restrictions were in place, they expressed frustration at what they perceived to be the impact of GDPR on their ability to work effectively. A participant from DWP described how a new element to the customer journey is being rolled out across Wales which enables some data sharing through direct customer consent. Young people claiming Universal Credit will be referred to Working Wales for an in-depth assessment of need and action planning, and intelligence gained through this process is shared by the young person with their work coach who can therefore see what support is needed.

A gap in support for the transition into employment was highlighted across the workshops. Participants pointed in particular to the need for more in-work support provision. It was suggested that provision which supports young people to get into work should "follow" them, so that "they are not just abandoned with an employer" and have help from a trusted source during this critical stage. One participant described plans that are in development to offer personalised, hands-on job coach support, including an in-work support element, to young people on other local employability programmes. There was also broad general agreement in one of the discussions that **more on-going support is needed to help young people's in-work progression.** Participants noted that many young people are in low-paid, insecure work, which overlaps with risks around homelessness and mental health.

> *"There's a gap there. We think that when they get into work that's fantastic and we can take the foot off, but actually it's about trying to move people on within that so that they have more secure work in the future."* (Local authority participant)

4.1.5 Several participants highlighted growing evidence of the need for more support to address youth unemployment. They reported seeing the re-emergence of youth unemployment as a key issue during the pandemic. One local authority participant stated that they have re-established the youth unemployment sub-group for their YEPF partnership and are looking at how partners can work together to develop suitable interventions.

> *"Knowing the young people who that's happening to, it isn't going to be a quick fix. So we've started looking again at the data we're using, asking if this is the right data. From our perspective, the route for young people coming through learning and support into training are fairly sound, and the employment part isn't, so that's still an issue. LMI is really important, but so is information about the young people coming through. What can we get from DWP, to help us to match young people to opportunities in the local area and get them ready for it?"* (Local authority participant)

Participants described how, in a challenging labour market, young people with low skills and qualifications are quickly displaced from the entry level jobs which they have relied on to take the first step into work. The need to support the upskilling of this group and to support their progression was also identified as a priority.

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"The labour market becomes significantly more difficult for those at the bottom in terms of qualifications and skills." (ITP participant)

4.2   Loss of ESF funding

Participants were asked how the YEPF will have to adapt to changes as a result of the loss of ESF funding. The relatively brief discussions did not yield any proposals for solutions to the challenge but rather tended to focus on the provision that is at risk of being lost.

Across the workshops, participants without exception expressed grave concern at the impact the change will make on services, unless alternative funding is secured. The unanimous view was that the impact will be huge and much key provision which works with young people most in need of support may disappear. Participants stressed that ESF work often provides on preventative interventions, tracking and supporting young people into destinations, and funds some of the key practitioners who work directly with young people. They gave numerous examples of ESF work which was described as critical to the YEPF. For instance, the TRAC project in North Wales currently funds nine wellbeing workers, one in each of the region's secondary schools and three in pupil referral units settings. In addition, school-based counsellors are TRAC funded and supplement the provision delivered through the local authorities' counselling services. It was stated by that the local authority counselling service typically has 70 to 80 young people on its waiting list, and if they are eligible for TRAC they can currently be seen through that route.

"It's going to be a huge loss when the funding ends. We've become fully embedded within the local authority, we're no longer just a project. Schools have said themselves they're no longer sure what will happen when TRAC ends." (Local authority participant)

The broad message from the feedback on the loss of ESF is summarised in the comments of a local authority participant:

"Across the board from 11 to 25 ESF plays a significant part in supporting those with barriers from anxiety, mental health, confidence, all the way to significant ones like being out of mainstream educational settings. I imagine it will have an impact on the NEET figures for all local authorities." (Local authority participant)

4.3   The offer for young people who are not in education, employment or training

Participants discussed what could be done to ensure that there is a realistic and appropriate offer in place for young people who are NEET. In general, they referred back to the need to address the gaps in provision already highlighted in the workshops. The following further key points were made.

More Traineeship provision is needed to improve opportunities, choice and access.
Participants across the workshops agreed that the way in which funding for Traineeships is

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allocated means that fewer providers are now involved and consequently very little choice exists at local level. Particular concerns were raised about the lack of support for young people with additional learning needs. It was stated that many current providers do not offer additional learning needs support, and effectively operate a selective recruitment process which excludes learners who are identified as having significant barriers to progression. An ITP participant whose organisation delivers Traineeships and offers additional learning needs support explained that, because providers are measured against targets for progression into employment, if they do not have this service in place they will inevitably be reluctant to take on learners deemed to be at risk of not progressing. The difficulties for learners in rural areas of accessing provision was also highlighted.[5]

The 'target culture' more widely was identified as a problem. Participants stated that it means programmes do not sufficiently respond to the needs of some of the young people most at risk of disengaging whom the YEPF is designed to support, although it has been noted that changes to the criteria for Jobs Growth Wales Plus (JGW+) should help to address the need for additional support required by young people. Young people may be unable to access programmes, or be moved off them, because they are perceived as posing a risk to providers' achievement of their contractual targets. Participants broadly agreed that there should be more recognition of the incremental steps in learning and employability which providers support young people to take, including generic / "soft" skills development. One participant observed:

> *"For some of these young people, just getting engagement is a critical thing."*
> (Local authority participant)

Similarly, participants were critical of some aspects of the five-tier model, which they argued does not adequately recognise types of engagement which may represent significant progress for some young people.

Greater volume and breadth of provision is needed to reflect the diversity of young people's needs. Alongside the discussion about Traineeships reported above, participants stated that there is a general need for more, and more diverse, provision which is tailored to the needs of those who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging. The starting point should be a recognition that mainstream provision does not work for everyone. Several suggestions were made of ways in which this need could be addressed, including: a greater role for the voluntary youth work sector and the development of work experience and work placement opportunities in public sector organisations. In particular there was strong support for developing more career opportunities in self-employment. It

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[5] The Welsh Government are currently developing a pilot project within the current traineeship programme, to test and trail new approaches with the aim of improving outcomes for learning-disabled young people. JGW+ has increase the funding for Additional Learning Support and we will be measuring contractors against this spend area.

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was felt that this was an underdeveloped resource and that some young people would respond well to this type of opportunity.

Young people must have a genuine voice in the design and delivery of provision. The point was made several times that this should be done in an on-going and consistent way, and needs to inform strategic planning and development as well as operational delivery.

4.4   Information, advice and guidance

Participants discussed whether young people who are at risk of becoming NEET receive the information, advice and guidance (IAG) they need to make informed choices in the transition to post-16 education and training.

Overall, participants suggested that the IAG service for young people in Wales can be regarded as a strength in the system. The following comments reflect the generally positive message:

> *"We're very lucky with the advice and guidance provision, as we've got Careers Wales."* (Local authority participant)

> *"The careers advice in general is essential and brilliant."* (Local authority participant)

It was noted that Lead Workers play a critical role in signposting young people to IAG services and supporting them to access these where necessary. A participant from Careers Wales provided an example of provision that they are developing which is tailored towards supporting successful transitions:

> *"Recently we've done a pilot in the south east region with DWP around the youth customer journey. As part of their youth customer journey for 18-24 year olds a referral is being made into Working Wales so that they can all undertake a guidance interview / skills assessment with a careers adviser and that's working really well. It's had really positive feedback. There are really close working relationships now developing with DWP."* (Careers Wales participant)

At the same time, participants highlighted several areas where IAG provision could be strengthened.

- In the context of the YEPF, **labour market information (LMI) needs to be local and identify the sectors, occupational areas and roles where opportunities exist.** For example, it is not helpful to know that there are strategic skills shortages in the creative industries in Wales, but rather that there is a need for film and television crew in Cardiff.

- More work is needed to **raise awareness among young people around the range of opportunities that exist in different sectors.** This was identified by several participants as a fundamental requirement for raising aspirations and developing young people's understanding of the introductory roles that could help

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them to get into work in different sectors. Allied to this, it was noted that some priority sectors have raised concerns that perceptions of the sectors are not based on up to date information.

They also identified the following key groups for whom there are gaps in current IAG provision.

- Young disabled people, especially those with learning difficulties or autism are often not receiving IAG on the full range of opportunities available to them[6]. A participant reported:

  "All too often it's, you'll continue in education or you'll go to day services. The option of getting a traineeship or an internship or even getting a job isn't even considered. And that's across the board. It should be about putting all the options in front of the young person and helping them to see what is possible with the right support in place." (College participant)

  This situation was described as creating a 'cliff edge' for young people leaving specialist college provision, when the skills that have been acquired during post-16 placements at specialist college can be lost. It was suggested that there is scope there for much more joined up working between specialist colleges, local authorities, and IAG services including specialist job coaches, to support effective decision-making and transitions. It has been noted the Welsh Government are actively considering a pilot programme to look at ways to address some of the issues raised.

- **Young people not in school.** The feedback suggests that access to careers advice for those not in school is inconsistent across Wales. In some local areas, young people can only access careers if they are in school, while in others Careers Wales and the youth service have developed approaches to reach those outside school settings, such as running outreach workshops in the community (although these have not been running due to Covid). Participants indicated that there are particular gaps around those who are in elective home education, have been excluded, or have become isolated at home and disengaged during the pandemic.

- **Young people with mental health needs or at risk of homelessness.** Participants stated that IAG for education, employment and training should be delivered in an integrated way with guidance and support on housing and mental health, and noted that some of this type of work has been developed via the Youth Support Grant. There was evidence of a willingness to develop a more integrated offer during the discussions and this is an area that could be considered more fully in the drafting of the refreshed YEPF.

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[6] The Welsh Government intend to take forward Supported Job Coaching pilot projects in 2021/22 with the aim of improving support for young people with a learning impairment and/or ASD, on their current traineeship and Apprenticeship programmes. Findings from these pilots will inform future programmes.

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4.5   Employer engagement

Participants discussed how they could better engage employers to create opportunities for young people.

Participants agreed that employers are generally keen to engage with young people, but there are barriers that need to be addressed. They identified a range of issues that should be taken into account and examples of effective practice.

- **From an employer perspective, employability programmes need to make it easier for them to engage.** The example of the Kickstart programme was cited by participants, as it initially only allowed limited companies to become involved and thereby served actively to exclude large numbers of employers who may wish to participate. It was noted that DWP is currently developing ways of involving other types of businesses through the 'Gateway Plus' element of the programme.

- On a more general level, **participants suggested that resources and the challenge of coordination are the main barriers to employer engagement.** They pointed to a range of activities being delivered locally which are designed to overcome these by facilitating links between employers and young people. For example, one local authority participant described how an employment liaison officer works across their employability projects and develops links with businesses both within the local authority area and regionally, then seeks to match young people to opportunities.

- **Employers should be incentivised to offer opportunities to young people who are NEET or at risk of becoming NEET.** It was stressed that the pandemic has created a "buyers' market" in the labour market. In this context, having in-work support in place for young people together with support for employers who take on those with fewer skills, qualifications and experience can be critical for reducing the sense of risk for employers.

  "Employers need to understand that there's a group of young people that they need to take a punt on, and get that in-work support. They need to understand that if they advertise a job, they're going to have 50 applicants, and 40 of those are going to be qualified at level 5 and above." (ITP participant)

- **Developing powerful messages to employers about the value and business benefits of engagement.** Participants described programmes that bring together secondary schools and businesses which engage employers with key messages around locality (in terms of language, geography and sectors) and around developing a talent pipeline. It was also suggested that there is potential to engage employers around diversifying their workforce, including promoting the benefits of bringing different perspectives and new ideas into the business. Again, it was noted that the provision of wrap-around support for both the employer and employee may be critical in this context, as employers may perceive that taking on a young person presents a risk and will be an additional cost.

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- **Working with partner organisations that are in touch with local businesses.** A local authority participant described how, through their work managing and overseeing the YEPF partnership, they have developed strong links with their Environment and Regeneration department which already has well-established business and employer forums. Through this they have been able to identify where opportunities exist to engage individual employers across the range of employability programmes.

4.6 Lessons learned for delivery from the pandemic

Participants were asked to identify whether the pandemic provided any lessons on the different delivery models that are relevant to YEPF, in particular the suitability of online and blended approaches.

The feedback was relatively brief but suggests a very mixed picture. **Participants reported that some young people have embraced blended and online learning and engage with it more effectively than face to face methods.** They welcome the flexibility, particularly where they experience challenges such as disrupted sleep, and it suits their preference for being at home rather than in formal education or training environment. Several participants said that they wished they had worked in this way sooner.

> *"Some young people are much more comfortable sitting in their own house having a virtual conversation with you, or being able to do work in their own timeframes that actually suits their life."* (Local authority participant)

Participants reported that young people have generally been willing to access support through digital methods such as text or WhatsApp in preference to by phone and may take part in one-to-one meetings online, although they do not want to use a webcam. One participant stated that they have been able to engage some young people who were unwilling to respond face-to-face.

However, it was also stressed that **online and blended models do not work for all learners and may actually promote disengagement and exclusion.** Several participants indicated that they felt too many assumptions had been made at the start of the pandemic about the readiness with which young people would engage through digital methods. It was stressed that being able to use a smartphone for personal contacts and social media is very different from being able to access online learning.

> *"For some of the young people who have the digital access it's worked very well. We've then got other young people who have become even more isolated than they were before. And in some cases they have lost some of those soft skills that they had developed through the programme. So we've got a complete mix."* (Local authority participant)

Participants broadly felt that online learning has failed many disengaged young people, and even for those that were initially keen, there are signs of 'online fatigue'.

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Digital exclusion was identified as a key factor which made online and blended models unsuitable for some young people. Several participants described how they had attempted to provide digital devices to learners, but this had not been successful as households did not have the digital skills or access to the digital infrastructure to make use of them. Economic poverty and rurality were identified as key factors which are often linked to digital exclusion. One participant estimated that 90% of their learners are digitally excluded and this has increased learners' anxiety because they cannot engage. Others agreed that during the pandemic they had discovered just how many of their learners are digitally excluded, although it should also be noted that many vulnerable learners had been able to attend school in person during periods of lockdown.

There was also general agreement that young people who are in difficult and unsupportive home environments want the contact that comes with going into a centre and mixing with their peers. The pandemic has shown that some learners who are most at risk of becoming NEET are unable to engage when they did not have a physical place to go and access learning and support. As the lockdown restrictions ease, some participants stated that they have been developing new methods such as "walk and talk" to resume delivery face to face support.

On the whole, participants felt that the emphasis should be on understanding what delivery models work for individuals and responding to that.

> *"It's not a case of one size fits all. It's about being flexible to meet the needs of the learners. We will continue to use the blended approach, but in a way that is right for the learners. It's come a long way, but it's no substitute for face to face."* (FE college participant)

Annex

Annex A: Consultation questions used in the thematic workshops

Early identification:

1. Reflecting on the criteria / variables currently used, what changes could be made to improve early identification? Attainment, exclusions, and attendance are core indicators, are there other factors which should also be considered as core indicators?

2. Would there be value in having a consistent approach to early identification across Wales or should local authorities continue to have this flexibility?

3. What challenges exist with data sharing between organisations and what difficulties is this creating at an operational level? Are there key blockages in the system that need to be addressed?

4. Should a refreshed YEPF consider earlier identification and what could be the advantages / disadvantages to this approach?

5. In relation to identifying and supporting young people at risk of becoming homeless, should the data that is collected be used to support this policy area? Could the data that's collected also be used to enable earlier identification of mental health and wellbeing issues and trends in younger children?

Accountability and Tracking

1. Are there clear lines of accountability for the YEPF as a whole and for individual strands? If not, how could they be improved?

2. Thinking of the different parts of the sector (local authorities, schools, colleges, Careers Wales, work-based learning providers), is it clear what they are accountable for and is this being implemented?

3. How can we strengthen processes for tracking young people across the YEPF? Are there particular ages or stages where tracking is not working as well as it should? What about young people who are 18+? If it's not working, what are the barriers?

4. What challenges exist with data sharing between organisations and what difficulties is this creating at an operational level? Are there key blockages in the system that need to be addressed?

5. What consideration is given to the Well-Being of Future Generations Act as part of the YEPF?

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Brokerage:

1. How effectively is support for young people being coordinated? Are there blockages or gaps in coordinating support that need addressing? Specifically, are there gaps at different ages / stages or for particular groups of young people?

2. What challenges are experienced in the allocation of Lead Workers? Are Lead Workers able to meet both short term needs of young people and also longer-term resilience building?

3. How can we help strengthen further the culture of improvement across this strand? For example, are lessons being learned where interventions don't succeed? Are there sufficient opportunities for the sharing of best practice and how can we better engage young people in the process of service design and delivery?

Employability:

1. What more can be done to work with partners to improve outcomes for young people? How can all partners ensure that the ongoing needs of young people not in education, employment, or training are met and that they are supported appropriately at different stages of their progression?

2. How can we better engage with employers to create more opportunities for young people? What are the barriers to employer engagement?

3. How can the YEPF be integrated with the Jobs Growth Wales+ and how a line of sight for progression on to other employability programmes be created? How do you see the fit between the YEPF and the referrals via Working Wales onto Jobs Growth Wales+ working in practice?

Provision:

1. Thinking about the YEPF as a whole, are there specific areas where delivery and impact has been strong? Are there specific areas where performance has not been so good and could be improved?

2. What can the Welsh Government do better or differently to improve the effectiveness of the YEPF (for example, one area mentioned by stakeholders was the more effective coordination of data sharing)?

3. Are there opportunities for the YEPF to be better integrated with other policy areas? Specifically, how could the data collected on young people at risk of being NEET be used to support policy around youth homelessness and mental health? How can we better ensure that where young people are identified as having vulnerabilities, that this information is shared (including between different teams within a local authority)?

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4. How will the YEPF need to change to reflect the new policy environment? Specifically, how can it be strengthened to reflect the Well Being of Future Generations and what are the implications of the new socio-economic duty?

Annex B: Five Tier Model

The Five Tier Model was referenced extensively in the stakeholder workshops and is an important component of the YEPF. The five tiers reflect the status of the young people and the helps to determine the level of support they require.

Tier 5 - Young People in Further Education, Employment or Training (EET)
Tier 4 - Young People at risk of dropping out of EET
Tier 3 - Unemployed 16 and 17 year olds known to Careers Wales
Tier 2 - Unemployed 16 and 17 year olds, known to Careers Wales, who are not available for EET (e.g. due to sickness, young carers, pregnancy, custody or young people with significant or multiple barriers requiring intensive personal support
Tier 1 - Unknown status on leaving Careers Wales services

Annex C: Young Person's Consultation

The report from Gower College Swansea is below. The key themes of the youth consultation have been placed in the main report. The Annex gives more details from the consultation around the key questions asked in the survey and through the focus groups.

Executive Summary

Working in conjunction with Learning and Work Institute, Gower College Swansea were commissioned to run consultation activities with young people as part of a wider stakeholder consultation to inform the Welsh Government's review of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF).

The consultation aimed to elicit feedback on how the Welsh Government can strengthen approaches to prevent young people becoming NEET, and to consider other areas that create barriers (such as mental health and wellbeing and preventing youth homelessness) to reflect national policy priorities and approaches. In conducting the consultation it has been an important consideration to include the views of young people who might have been disengaged whilst at school, and who are therefore more likely to have lived experience of being supported through the YEPF.

The feedback sought to identify:

- what works in the current YEPF and what parts need clarification;
- what parts of the current YEPF need to be updated to reflect changes in systems and processes and wider policy contexts;
- how the Welsh Government can strengthen approaches to prevent young people becoming NEET;
- how YEPF systems and processes could be strengthened to support young people to overcome other barriers, by supporting their mental health and wellbeing and preventing youth homelessness; and
- potential challenges and tensions to be addressed in delivering the updated YEPF.

A combination of methods were used to gather the required information, including facilitated focus groups, one-to-one interviews and an online consultation portal. A wide range of organisations supporting young people were contacted to see if they would be interested in hosting focus groups. In the event, further education colleges and private training providers were the organisations who expressed an interest in doing this.

Overview of Methodology

During the consultation process the data and responses discussed below were gathered using three distinct methods.

The first method was via **facilitated focus group sessions** with young people which, with the exception of one face-to-face session, were organised and delivered through Microsoft Teams. These sessions took the form of a presentation designed to introduce the YEPF in an accessible way, followed by a facilitated discussion based on a standardised set of questions. These sessions varied in length between 1-2 hours and detailed notes were taken for the purpose of recording the feedback.

The second method was **one-to-one interviews** with individuals identified during the group sessions who were interested in providing further detailed feedback based on their individual circumstances or where a group session was not feasible due to practical considerations.

Thirdly, information was gathered on a more general basis through the use of an **online portal**, which provided accessible materials explaining the background to the consultation and an overview of the YEPF and seeking feedback via an online questionnaire using the same standardised questions utilised in the group and one-to-one interviews.

Focus Groups:

During the focus group sessions, we engaged with 51 young people aged between 16-22 years old, of which, 17 were female and 34 were male. A total of six focus groups were facilitated, four of which were with young people studying at college (Pembrokeshire College and Gower College Swansea) and the remaining two with young people engaging with work-based training providers (ITEC and Llanelli Rural Council). The sessions varied in length between 1 to 2 hours.

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One-to-one interviews:

One-to-one interviews were conducted with the following individuals, and varied in length from 60 - 90 minutes:

Male, 22, educated through the medium of Welsh in Llanelli area, university graduate.

Female, 16, left secondary education in Llanelli without qualifications.

Male, 17, excluded from school in Cardiff at 14, attending ITEC, working towards apprenticeship.

Female, 17, born in Somalia, educated in Uganda, moved to Cardiff at 14 years old.

Online Portal:

During the consultation period of four weeks, we received 49 individual responses through the online portal, and due to the nature of the questions asked, these produced a combination of quantitative and qualitative data.

Detailed Findings and Summary of Feedback

1. Is the YEPF focusing on the things that are most important to young people?

Upon analysis of the data, it is clearly felt by the young people who took part in the consultation process that while the YEPF is indeed focusing on the things that are most important to young people, there are also a number of disparities, both in young people's experiences and their perceptions of support.

To begin firstly with the information derived from respondents to the online portal: 84% of respondents felt that that the YEPF is focusing on the things that are most important to young people. A more detailed look at the responses continues to echo this positive theme, with some comments from individuals included below.

"Yes, they help support and reduce the number of young people not in a form of education."

"I believe they are focusing on the most important things such as educating young people."

"Yes, they listen and take the feedback to make progress on issues that young people feel are important".

However there are also some negative trends in the responses recorded from online respondents, particularly where young people reflect on their experiences of secondary education.

Some of these negative responses are centred upon recollections of pressure, stress and anxiety around GCSE examinations, and some respondents also felt that education in secondary school is very much homogenised in its approach, and that there is not enough understanding of the individual needs of young people. For example:

"Yes, though schools put a lot of pressure on young people especially around GCSE time, support in that area would be good or just have schools not stress out their students."

> *"Yes. Although, I do think there needs to be more support that suits the student, no one is the same and some people prefer different ways of learning."*

This trend was also echoed across the focus group discussions, with a mixture of positive and negative responses. However, in keeping with the information recorded from the online portal, there seemed to be more positivity around young people's concept of the support they have received in post-compulsory education.

During the group discussions around this question, the general consensus of the individuals with regard to support to keep them in education was that more early support and signposting was needed, with one learner expressing that they received neither while at school. There were also a number of comments relating to the lack of support around key transition points, both in relation to progression from one stage to another and in respect of transition or gaps between educational settings, for example where a young person has changed school or setting, as illustrated by the comments below:

> *"When I moved schools no one from my old school contacted the new school."*

> *"My English teacher contacted the other schools for me and was very supportive, no-one else from the school bothered."*

> *"I had six months when I didn't go to school at all, and no one got in touch with my family."*

> *"Comp doesn't prepare you for college."*

However, in one case, an individual referred to having received positive transition support:

> *"When I moved to the [school] all my transport was arranged, and it made everything so much easier for me."*

There was also a feeling amongst some respondents that the YEPF needed to do more to enable and encourage greater involvement of young people in their educational choices and how education worked for them.

Another common theme of the focus group discussion related to young people feeling "*disconnected from the school system*" because they didn't want to go to university or

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college, and also that *"there was not enough support for students who didn't wish to go down the academic route."*

In addition, the majority of the young people we spoke to also felt that there should be specific support for people who want to work as soon as they are able to, and that there should be focused support in compulsory education to help young people find work so they can progress towards becoming independent. As one individual put it, *"They need to realise that some young people just want to go to work."*

2. Have you received extra support which has helped you to stay in education or training, or to move into employment? If so, what sort of support did you receive?

There was a very mixed response to this question, which makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions, however the data gathered through the online portal does point towards a majority of the respondents having received some form of support which they felt helped them stay in education or training or move into employment, with 65% of the young people said that they had received support, 25% saying they hadn't received any support, and 11% responding that they didn't know whether they had or hadn't.

This pattern of inconsistency was also present during the focus group sessions, with some individuals recounting very positive experiences of support in compulsory education. One 17-year-old male in Llanelli took us through his journey of support as he progressed through secondary school:

> *"I had behavioural issues in Y7, and I was given support straight away, and in my GCSE's."*

> *"I had to have weekly meetings with my Form Tutor, Head of Year, and my Support Teacher."*

> *"My parents were contacted straight away."*

> *"I had support all the way through school in English and Maths, and I was in smaller classes which was much better for me."*

By contrast, another individual from the same area, but who attended a different school felt that:

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> "*They* [Secondary School/High school] *were just getting everyone ready to go to University.*"

The same young person also told us that this experience left them feeling isolated from some of their peers, and they felt that there was a lack of support for those interested in pathways other than the traditional academic route.

He also wanted to tell us about his experiences regarding communication between the school and his parents. He told us that after he began missing lessons the school attempted to contact his family *"for a short while after, but this contact eventually dropped off altogether".*

However we were also told on several occasions during the focus group sessions, particularly by the young people who had more negative experiences of support during their time in compulsory education, that they now felt some level of responsibility for not accessing support when they needed it.

Of those young people who attended a sixth form in their comprehensive, their recollections of support were on the whole very positive, with one individual telling us:

> *"When I was in sixth form we had revision sessions on the morning of the exams if we wanted to attend, it was really helpful."*

> *"I didn't have too many problems in school, and the teachers were very helpful, particularly in sixth form."*

> *"A-Level teachers put in a lot of effort."*

When it came to support in colleges or work-based training providers there is further information pointing towards contrasting experiences, although in the areas of employability and support for mental health issues, the feedback is largely positive.

Some young people felt more supported in college, with several relating this to a better understanding of their mental health needs, e.g. knowing that a learner may need a day off if they are struggling.

> *"In college they boost you, it makes you feel good about yourself."*

> *"I feel supported in college, and I know who to speak to if I need support."*

Additionally, the majority of respondents attending an FE college expressed a feeling that there was more respect and equality among staff and learners, and this fact in itself made them feel more supported, and therefore more likely to stay engaged with their education.

The students we spoke to in Pembrokeshire College were also very complimentary about the support they received around employability, with many pointing to the 'Employment Bureau' as being incredibly useful in preparing them for work following the completion of their studies or assisting them in finding part-time employment while they are still at college.

A similar story around the quality of employability support was provided by the students attending Gower College Swansea:

> *"I went to Futures* [Employment Bureau] *and they helped me write my CV, and we worked through an application form together."*

> *"Futures have been great, really supportive throughout the pandemic."*

Of those individuals who had previously attended an FE college and were now accessing support from work-based training providers, responses suggested a variation in the availability and quality of support, in some circumstances praising some areas and individuals, but predominantly negative about their experiences related to academic support or support around mental health.

When contrasting the support they feel they are receiving through their training provider with the support they received in college, the most common responses focused on the accessibility and range of the support available to them in the smaller environments they were now experiencing.

For example the focus group we spoke to in Cardiff who were attending ITEC told us about several examples of additional support they had received. This included having access to a dedicated employability office and in-house counsellor.

As alluded to above, this question drew an interesting response in relation to the association of positive perceptions of support with class/group sizes. This subject came up a number of times across all the focus groups and interviews, with many young people wishing to stress how they felt much more supported in smaller groups, and how important they felt this was in keeping them engaged.

In their responses to later questions, a few respondents also referred positively to the additional support they had received from the Youth Service or from Social Services, as well as from Careers Wales, whilst others referred to the financial support available e.g. via Education Maintenance Allowance as having been critical to them remaining and progressing in learning:

> *"EMA is massively important without it I wouldn't be able to go to college."*

3. Do you feel you are informed enough about your options? If not, why not?

Responses to this question varied across the different consultation methods, with information gathered through the online portal appearing to show that the vast majority of respondents (87%) feel they are informed enough about their options, as illustrated by the following quotes:

> *"Yes, I have been informed about the options available to me."*

> *"Yes, as when I switched course the college was very helpful on what course I could join."*

> *"Yes, everything has been explained clearly to me. I've had any questions answered and I feel confident about my choices."*

However, a deeper look into the details of the responses does highlight some negative experiences and some of these are detailed in the quotes below:

> *"I feel like it was explained in a way that helped me understand but there wasn't anyone that I could talk to."*

> *"Sort of. I feel as if I don't know enough about all possible options available to me and what could help me get a job."*

> *"No I feel like communication is a weak point in education. When I've been given options I've not fully understood what they were."*

Moving onto the focus groups however, the picture is similarly negative in relation to the information individuals had received in their earlier education and in particular regarding their options both at GCSE and in post-compulsory education.

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Common themes emerged around a perception that those achieving fewer GCSEs were far more limited in their options – as one young person in Llanelli told us, "*subject choice wasn't made a priority for more challenging learners"*, whilst others felt that restrictions due to timetabling resulted in them choosing subjects based more on availability rather than interest or indeed future choices or aspirations:

> *"There were things I wanted to take (at GCSE) and I couldn't because it clashed with other subjects."*

> *"There's not enough options (at GCSE)."*

In some cases this impacted on young people's experiences of further learning, with one individual stating "*I didn't know if I was ready for college because I didn't feel confident in the subjects I had chosen."*

In some cases, respondents highlighted specific instances where the choices on offer did not appear to align with local labour market opportunities, one example being a perceived lack of opportunities to pursue agriculture-related studies cited by a young person living in Pembrokeshire:

> *"There's no farming courses, I took animal care, but it wasn't what I wanted to do, there should be more options for young people to study agriculture because we live in Wales."*

Another strong theme was around the age at which young people were informed about, and required to take decisions on, their GCSE options, with many feeling that the implications of taking certain subjects (i.e. how this could affect their continuing education and longer-term employment options) were not sufficiently explained to them and several feeling strongly that they were too young to make such a big decision with limited information, as illustrated by the following quotes:

> *"I wasn't told about what grades I needed (to get into college) I had to look myself."*

> *"It was a big decision to take at that age without knowing what I needed to get (in my GCSE's) to get to college."*

In contrast, a few individuals reported that they had received good support, including one individual who said he did a 'course' in Year 11 to help him decide what to do after he

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finished school, which helped him feel much more confident in his chosen progression routes.

An overriding theme throughout the feedback was a feeling that GCSE options were skewed in favour of more academic pupils, with many young people highlighting that they had felt unsupported, "*forgotten about*" or "*leftover*" during the process of making their choices. A few individuals spoke about their complaints being ignored during this time, whilst some felt that they were pressured into choosing a particular route, regardless of whether or not it was the correct choice for them:

> *"They (school) weren't interested in you unless you were going down a particular path."*
>
> *"I felt like I was on my own, because I didn't want to go to college or uni."*
>
> *"I didn't know enough about my options, no one told me."*
>
> *"I wasn't told about sixth form, I was pushed towards going to college."*
>
> *"I know more about my options now than I did then, and I wish I'd known more then."*

With regards to options post-compulsory education, there was again a mixture of experiences. However, in contrast with some of the feedback relating to choices at GCSE, a common theme was that there were too many options in post-compulsory education, with some young people feeling unsupported in deciding which route to take.

Taking into account the impact of the pandemic, the majority of the young people we spoke to felt they had been hugely disadvantaged by Covid-19, both in terms of the breadth of options open to them, delays in progressing their plans, and the impact that limited interaction has had on developing their wider social skills and general employability.

4. Do you think that areas such as mental health and wellbeing and being at risk of homelessness should be included in the YEPF?

This question elicited the most unequivocal response across all methods of gathering feedback, as illustrated through the quantitative data derived via the online portal, with 93% of respondents who answered this question agreeing that areas such as mental health and wellbeing, and being at risk of homelessness should be included in the YEPF, 0 respondents disagreeing, and only 7% being unsure.

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From a qualitative perspective, this question also drew the most detailed responses via the online portal, as illustrated via the quotes below:

> *"Absolutely, many students suffer from mental health and wellbeing problems and I think it'd be great to give others an understanding of what these people go through, I myself go through these problems sometimes."*

> *"Yes definitely, I think that the past 12 months has really made homelessness rise and people's mental health and wellbeing deteriorate."*

> *"Yes they should definitely be included they are the most important thing that can stop a young person getting what they need in life."*

> *"Yes. Not everyone feels comfortable enough to speak up about what they're struggling with, so listening to their needs and what would make them feel more comfortable would improve their attendance and learning."*

> *"Yes, these are massive factors in this day and age that have been shoved under the rug for years now. More people need to be focusing on these issues and taking them more seriously."*

This trend was also reflected throughout the focus group discussions and in every one-to-one interview. Of the young people we spoke to, the vast majority had a strong sense of the importance of support around mental health and, with very few exceptions, felt that it should be seen as an essential aspect of the support young people receive to help them stay in education and progress:

> *"It's really important (mental health) and it should be part of what we do in school and college."*

> *"We need to learn how to cope with it (mental health)."*

> *"People are struggling and they don't understand why."*

In relation to young people's experience of accessing support in these areas, the majority of the young people we spoke to reported issues with accessing mental health support during their time in school, with many telling us that the services available to them were either over-subscribed with long waiting lists or provided on a very sporadic basis, or that they did not feel confident or informed enough to know who to speak to in order to access support.

Some respondents did, however, express sympathy with the support staff in schools, telling us that they felt that staff were too stretched attempting to provide support across too many learners, leaving young people waiting up to 2 months to see a counsellor:

"There's not enough counsellors. In my school there was a 2 month waiting list."

"I was meant to have a counsellor, I ended up with a teacher who wasn't qualified."

"I was told I could get a counsellor, but they put me in a room instead."

We were also told of occasions when young people had asked for support in school, but felt this was ignored:

"They didn't care about it in school, we did one lesson on bullying or something, and that was it."

"They just didn't care, there were students who asked for help, and nothing happened."

A number of individuals also referred to having accessed support from external services due to the waiting list for accessing school-based support.

"My mother arranged counselling for me after I had problems in school."

There was more positive feedback in relation to young people's experiences in post-compulsory settings, with the majority of young people we spoke to speaking favourably of their experiences of accessing mental health support. One clear trend was the perceived approachably of tutors in college, in comparison with school, with young people feeling more able to speak to their tutor about any issues they might be experiencing and a perception that tutors were more likely to offer or arrange additional support where needed.

Young people reported this having added benefits not only in relation to feeling more emboldened to talk about any issues they may be experiencing, but also in respect of the positive impact that these discussions had on their mental health regardless of any additional support they might subsequently be signposted to.

In addition, there were some positive examples provided of support received by college learners to help them cope with the stress around examinations and assignments, which were identified as critical to enabling them to complete the course and achieve their qualification.

5. Is there anything else missing from the YEPF or something that needs a greater focus? What do you feel could be improved?

As this was a more open-ended question, it is difficult to derive a clear quantitative analysis of the data received, however there are some themes and trends that can be derived from the qualitative responses, particularly in relation to provision aimed at equipping young people to become work ready and more general life skills.

During the focus group discussions, the desire among young people for greater focus on employment, employability and work experience came across very strongly. We were told in every focus group that most of the young people felt unprepared for the end of their education, and for what comes next. Many of the young people we spoke to felt there was a lack of focus on 'life skills' during their time in school, and several reported that they had received very little information around employment and other practical skills.

There was a clear view that young people would like to see the YEPF place a greater focus on the importance of provision of support for dealing with finances and other day-to-day matters to enable them to make a more informed and smoother transition into adult life as opposed to what one respondent described as being things *"we're just expected to know"*. The quotes below further illustrate these points:

"We should be taught more life skills, like tax and things like that."

"We should learn how to pay bills and look after our own place."

"We need to learn about money and things like that, we waste a lot of time learning things that don't help."

"We should learn about housing and how to get your own place."

Work experience was cited by many young people as an area requiring greater focus, consistency and direction, with a number of respondents feeling that a lack of meaningful work experience options at school had made them feel largely unprepared for work and prompting suggestions that there should be greater attention given to work experience throughout the different stages of education.

This was a particular issue for those individuals who wished to progress straight into employment following compulsory education, several of whom reported feeling overlooked

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and unsupported in exploring their employment options. For some, this resulted in them opting to continue in education or training rather than progressing down their chosen route – as one individual put it: *"I was pushed into college…I didn't think I could do anything else."*

The value of meaningful work experience was further supported by those who had received a positive experience, with two respondents highlighting how influential this had been in deciding on their post-compulsory education options, as well as their future preparation for the world of work:

"It (work experience) really helped me make up my mind on what I wanted to do next."

6. Would a guaranteed place in school, college, training or apprenticeship give you confidence and what would that look like?

The feedback across all methods demonstrated strong agreement that some form of guarantee would give young people confidence, amounting to 83% of respondents via the online portal and prompting a range of supportive comments as illustrated below:

"It would be a relief, to know that there's something there rather than just work which can be hard to get."

"Yes a guaranteed place in a school or college would give me confidence and would help me with work I still have to do."

"It would give me confidence to know that I will be going to college or further education, meaning I wouldn't have to put extended pressure on myself and my anxiety level would be less because I wouldn't have to worry for weeks wondering if I got a placement or not."

There was similarly positive feedback via the focus group sessions and one-to-one interviews, with young people reporting that they would feel more confident if such a guarantee was in place. Interestingly, there was a strong feeling that such a guarantee would bring added benefits in reducing stress and anxiety, thereby contributing positively to young people's mental health and wellbeing, as illustrated by the comments below:

"It could help with your mental health, reduce your anxiety."

"You'd know what's going to happen, you'd have security."

"This could really help those who struggle in school."

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"If this is got right, it could reduce a lot of the stress for people."

Similarly, a number of young people identified additional benefits in removing some of the pressure in relation to future choices by knowing there was a guaranteed option in place. They also felt this would have a positive impact on their educational performance by enabling them to focus more on their studies. Again, this was identified as a positive mental health benefit, as illustrated below:

"This would be good, because if I worked really hard and if I knew where I was going (after GCSE's) I'd concentrate more on those exams, I wouldn't worry so much about my other GCSE's and I'd have been less stressed and done better."

Whilst the response to this question was overwhelmingly positive, one note of concern emerged in a number of the discussions in relation to flexibility to change course if a young person subsequently changed their mind or if their wider circumstances changed in any way. As one individual put it, *"I think it's important to take time making a decision like that, and what if I changed my mind?"* A minority of individuals also raised the prospect of a guaranteed place potentially acting as a disincentive for some young people to focus on their educational achievements.

7. What more do you think could be done to engage young people in future plans?

Two clear themes emerged in the response to this question, in relation to young people's feelings of involvement in decision-making processes around their education, and communication more generally.

The vast majority of young people we spoke to expressed a desire to feel more involved in decisions around their education, and in particular felt this could have been strengthened in relation to decision-making during their time in school, with a number of individuals contrasting their perception of involvement and a feeling of greater control of their education at college, as opposed to their experiences in school.

This feeling of control came across as a key factor in enabling and empowering young people to feel more involved and engaged in their education, with a number of individuals reporting that this would make them more likely to get involved in engaging with other organisations, like the Welsh Government, on the issues that affect their lives.

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With regards to communication, most of the young people we spoke to told us that they felt much more valued when outside agencies came in to talk to them and, whilst they acknowledged the benefits of social media and other forms of digital communication in reaching large numbers of young people, the vast majority told us that they preferred face-to-face communication on the matters that meant most to them:

"It's nice to speak to people about these things, it makes you feel involved."

"We can talk to people online, but it's better to do it face-to-face."

"Social media (as a communication tool) is brilliant, but you can't always guarantee people will take it seriously."

A large number of individuals also expressed the view that they wanted more information from organisations that they perceived as being outside of the education 'system' as they felt this would result in more impartial advice, in particular relating to those routes other than continuing education:

"We need more people coming from outside to do talks with us."

"We need to have more conversations with more people."

"The people who speak to us have to be independent."

A number of individuals also suggested having impartial staff within educational settings to act as champions or advocates in order to enable their voices to be heard. Some described this as a 'middle-man' who could receive feedback from learners and pass this to head teachers and senior staff or external stakeholders, which would help them feel more comfortable in raising any issues they had with their education.

8. Any other feedback?

Given the broad scope of the previous questions, additional feedback here was fairly limited. However a few recurring themes did arise during the focus group sessions.

Firstly, in relation to bullying, which some respondents felt is an issue that is insufficiently addressed in some settings. One individual expressed the view that bullying was pushed to the side in schools, with information being ignored once it had been relayed to senior staff, and with no follow up/tracking. Similarly, in one of the focus groups there was general

agreement that those who had experienced bullying felt unsupported, with little follow-up after reporting issues, and a resulting feeling that they had to deal with situation by themselves.

Secondly, one of the focus groups used this question to again stress the need for a greater focus on employability in schools, as they felt very let down by their own experiences. They felt that that there needs to be more regular discussions and sessions around employability, and more meaningful work experience opportunities.

Finally, one of the young people we spoke to during the focus group sessions, and who also took part in a follow-up one-to-one interview, felt that there should be more information and support for young people who had moved to the UK during their education.