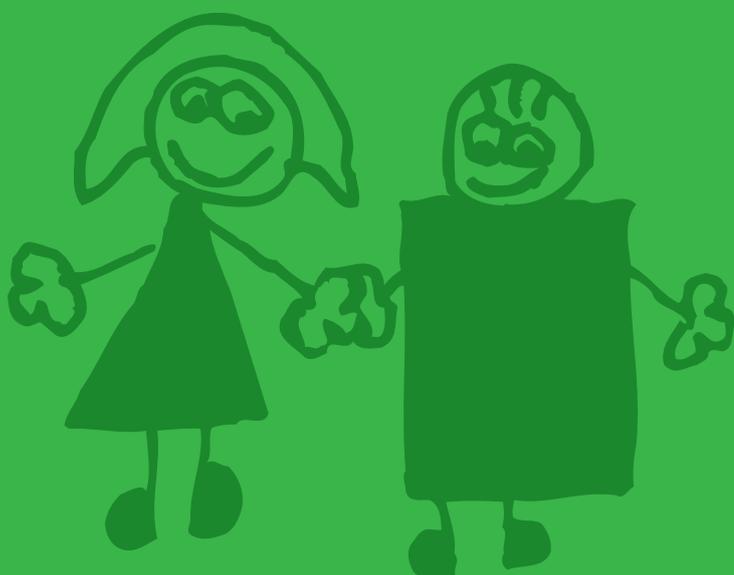


The right to learn

Supporting children and young
people at pupil referral units
to reach their potential



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There is a set of laws, including the Care Standards Act 2000 and Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001, which explains the role and responsibilities of the Commissioner. We want to see Wales as a country where children and young people are respected, valued, listened to and supported to lead safe and happy lives. There's a team of people who work with Keith – in Swansea and Colwyn Bay - to help him:

support children and young people to find out about children's rights

listen to children and young people to find out what's important to them

advise children, young people and those who care for them if they feel they've got nowhere else to go with their problems

influence government and other organisations who say they're going to make a difference to children's lives, making sure they keep their promises to children and young people

speak up for children and young people nationally on important issues – being the children's champion in Wales.

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Foreword

The well-being of disadvantaged learners has been a key issue for me throughout my time as Children's Commissioner for Wales. Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides that children should get an education directed to the development of their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. However the gap in education outcomes between disadvantaged learners and their peers has yet to be closed. There is strong evidence that in schools where there is a clear focus on supporting pupil well-being and who provide children and young people with opportunities to be listened to, pupils are more likely to reach their full educational potential.

Estyn¹ published the findings and recommendations of their survey of the arrangements for pupils' wellbeing and behaviour management in pupil referral units (PRUs) in January 2012. The survey findings suggest that systems and measures to support pupil well-being through effective behaviour management need to be improved. The cases involving misuse of seclusion in Pembrokeshire that were dealt with by my office in 2012 also raise issues for me in relation to a lack of minimum standards for pupil referral units and the need to secure consistent application of accredited behaviour management training and clear behaviour management policies in such units.

I have been working with Pembrokeshire local authority where there are now clear actions in place to ensure that the safeguarding and well-being issues are addressed across their education provision. However Estyn's latest annual report (2012-2013) highlights the fact that practice in pupil referral units remains inconsistent, with some units evidencing excellence in supporting pupil well-being while others have poor attendance, high exclusion rates and poor management of behaviour so that pupils do not feel safe. For this reason, I decided to embark on a piece of work focussing on the views of learners at PRUs, their well-being and their right to education.

PRUs are maintained by local authorities and are organised to provide education outside a school setting for pupils who might not otherwise receive and education.

'Listening and Learning... the Right Story' was one of the first publications issued by my office in the year following my appointment as Children's Commissioner for Wales in 2008. The publication is a resource designed to provide those working in the education sector with an insight into what children and young people think about their learning experience. The resource was based on evidence provided by learners in a range of education settings and found that children and young people had some very straight forward expectations of education. They wanted to be listened to, to feel safe and supported, to be encouraged and to enjoy a positive relationship with their teachers.

In this final year of my tenure as Children's Commissioner for Wales I am struck by the fact that the evidence I have gathered from learners in pupil referral units tells the same story six years on. Children and young people who are educated in pupil referral units are among our most vulnerable learners. They have often had a poor experience of mainstream education and may be struggling with complex personal circumstances. Those children and young people who enjoy learning in pupil referral units have told me it is because they feel listened to, safe and supported and that they value the relationship they have with their teachers. I have also met some learners from pupil referral units who have described to me a situation in which incidents happen in the class room on a daily basis and where their opportunities to engage in meaningful activities are restricted. It is clear to me that for some learners attending a pupil referral unit actually has a negative impact on their well-being.

Welsh Government introduced new guidance to drive school improvement earlier this year which came into force in April. The 'National Model for Regional Working' guidance has been presented as the blueprint for driving up standards and performance in schools in Wales. Despite the fact that a pupil referral unit is legally both a type of school and education other than at school (EOTAS), there is no reference to PRUs within the guidance.

Welsh Government must ensure that their framework for improvements in education settings through regional arrangements can support improvements in pupil referral units.

It is also essential that the positive leadership and good practice that takes place in our best pupil referral units informs a clear programme of improvement across those pupil referral units that are not currently providing learners with the education that they deserve.

Pupil referral units have been described to me as the 'Cinderella education service', this issue must be urgently addressed so that every child can enjoy the right to an education that allows them to reach their fullest potential.

Keith Towler
Children's Commissioner
for Wales, 2014

Pupil Referral Units (PRUs)

The Education Act 1996 provides the primary legislation relating to the duty on Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to arrange 'suitable' education for young people outside mainstream school. Suitable education is defined as 'efficient' education suitable to the age, ability, and to any special educational needs the child or young person may have.

In January 2013, there were 41 pupil referral units (PRUs) in Wales.

574 pupils were enrolled in PRUs in Wales in 2012/13.

The latest Welsh Government statistics indicate that 43% of all pupils educated other than at school were enrolled in PRUs in 2012-13.

70% of pupils singly registered at a pupil referral unit are boys.

Pupil referral units are maintained by Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and are organised to provide education outside a school setting for pupils who might not otherwise receive an education. Guidance on the provision of PRUs is included as an eight page annex to Welsh Government Guidance on Inclusion and Pupil Support issues in 2006². Authorities are also referred to more general guidance on 'education otherwise than at school' in Section 5 of the same Guidance.

The Guidance states that 'due to their size, their rapidly changing role and the type of pupils they receive, it is impracticable to apply to PRUs the full range of legislative requirements that apply to mainstream and special schools. There are some expectations set out in the Guidance, pupil referral units:

- **Must have an SEN policy and child protection procedures;**
- **An LEA should set up a management committee;**
- **PRUs must be registered with Welsh Government;**
- **LEAs must inform Welsh Government whenever a new PRU is set up or an existing one closes – but there are no formal arrangements for opening or closing a PRU;**
- **The management committee of a PRU must ensure that admissions and attendance registers are kept and monitor the attendance of pupils in the same way as for other schools;**
- **Pupils should be reviewed on a regular basis, through pastoral care programmes to assess whether their provision remains appropriate and whether they are able to be reintegrated into mainstream school;**
- **The LEA must have a statement of curriculum policy for PRUs;**
- **PRUs should have a clear policy on behaviour.**

Project approach

On the basis of concerns related to evidence from Estyn about the well-being of learners in PRUs and the case of safeguarding failures in a PRU in Pembrokeshire, the Children's Commissioner for Wales decided to examine the provision of education in PRUs in more depth through a project which focused on the views of learners, their well-being and their right to education. The Children's Commissioner set out to identify good practice and find out more about the learning experiences of children and young people attending pupil referral units.

124 pupils completed the online survey.

This means that the survey was completed by approximately 20% of pupils enrolled in PRUs in Wales.

Surveys were completed by pupils in 18 of the 22 local authorities in Wales.

Children and young people

A key part of the project involved asking learners in pupil referral units to complete an interactive on-line survey that was developed by Viewpoint⁹ and completed by pupils in October 2013. The survey asked questions about their experience of learning at a PRU, about their family circumstances and the place where they live. The survey included closed questions, sliding scale questions and some open response questions where pupils could type in their comments.

The Children's Commissioner also met pupils from three PRUs in Wales, one in North Wales, one in South Wales and one in Mid Wales. Two of these PRUs have been used as good practice examples in this report. Pupils from one of the PRUs told the Children's Commissioner about problems in the unit they attend that are a cause for concern. Evidence from the pupils is included but the PRU is not identified in this report. The Children's Commissioner has shared his concerns about provision in this PRU with the Teacher in Charge, the Director of Education for the local authority and with Estyn.

Teacher in Charge

All PRUs have a teacher in charge, similar to a mainstream school's headteacher.

Professionals

In September 2013 the Children's Commissioner invited Directors of Education from across Wales to nominate a representative to attend an evidence exchange session on the well-being of disadvantaged learners. The session considered the wider issue of disadvantaged learners with local authority pupil inclusion and well-being lead officers. The PRU project was introduced to local authority officers as part of the session and participants provided evidence on the provision of education at PRUs.

In October 2014 the Children's Commissioner held a Webinar for local authority officers and Teachers in Charge to explain the background to the project and to seek assistance and answer questions about the on-line survey for children and young people.

A questionnaire survey was sent to Teachers in Charge of PRUs across Wales. The survey was completed by Teachers in Charge in relation to 16 PRU sites in 8 of the 22 local authorities in Wales. This generated data on 253 PRU learners in Wales. The questionnaire asked questions about the profile of learners attending the PRU, partnership working, access to education support services, behaviour management policies and training and about the benefits and challenges of delivering education in a PRU.

Local authority lead officers on pupil inclusion and well-being from 18 of the 22 local authorities provided evidence at an evidence exchange session.

Surveys were completed by Teachers in Charge at 16 PRU sites located across 8 of the 22 local authorities in Wales. This generated data on 253 learners in PRUs in Wales.

Findings: Children and young people

Overall the profile of the children and young people who completed the on-line survey was similar to that for the wider 'education other than at school' pupil population in Wales (EOTAS). Over twice the number of boys and young men completed the survey compared to girls and young women, they were most likely to be aged between 12 and 15 years old and the majority identified themselves as White-British. Nine percent of the learners identified themselves as disabled.

About learners completing the survey:

70% were male and 30% were female.
This is the same gender difference as reported for pupils singly registered at PRUs in Wales.

88% were aged from 12 to 15 years old.
This is a similar pattern to the age profile of the pupil population in PRUs in Wales.

96% identified themselves as White – British.
For the EOTAS pupil population 89% are identified as White-British.

9% identified themselves as disabled.

4% were living with a foster carer.

5% had a parent in prison.

Life outside the PRU

The most common living arrangement reported by children and young people was to be living with their mother (35%) or with their mother and father (27%). Four percent of the children and young people were living with a foster carer and 11% were living with a member of their family who wasn't their parent. Five percent had a parent in prison.

Most children and young people said that they got on quite well or very well with their families but 20% said that they didn't get on very well with their families. Just over half of the children and young people said that they worry about their families having enough money for things like food and heating. Most of the children and young people said that they feel safe where they live all or most of the time.

Coping with mainstream school

The survey included a question asking children and young people if they knew why they were attending the PRU. The majority of learners said that they did understand why they were attending but 13% weren't sure or didn't know why they were receiving their education in a PRU.

Children and young people were also asked why they had problems at school before coming to the PRU. Three main reasons were provided in their open answer responses.

Behaviour and relationship with teachers: Children and young people identified their own behaviour and poor relationships with teachers in mainstream school as the reason why they were receiving their education at a PRU. A few learners specifically identified ADHD as the reason why they were attending a PRU.

'I had problems because I didn't get along with teachers and I was disruptive and naughty and hit people and lashed out when people made me angry'.

'I just didn't get on with staff so I kicked off and I weren't wearing my blazer'.

'I didn't get to say how I felt it always had to be the teacher way or no way, I didn't agree with that so I never obeyed the rules I think pupils should have a voice'.

'My anger issue, my language and things I've done'.

'All the teachers at my old school used to pick on me because I wasn't able and I got annoyed with teachers in the end so I would have done anything to get out of that school'.

Bullying: Children and young people also wrote about being the victims of bullying and that this meant that they weren't able to cope with being in mainstream school. Most of the learners identifying bullying talked about peer bullying but a small number felt that they had been bullied by teachers.

'I got bullied at all the other schools so I didn't want to go to school'.

'I got bullied all throughout Year 7, 8, 9 and I just couldn't cope anymore so I stopped going to mainstream and then I came here'.

'I was getting bullied, teachers mistreated me, I get picked on and no one in mainstream school cared'.

'I was bullied a lot and scared of everything and everyone'.

'Teachers were bullying me and would chuck my work in the bin. I would truant all day'.

Anxiety: Another cohort of children and young people specifically identified anxiety as the reason they had left mainstream school, a smaller number mentioned mental health difficulties and problems coping because of the size of a mainstream school and feeling afraid were also recorded.

'I did not attend school because it was too mentally difficult'.

'Too many pupils in a mainstream school'.

'Anxiety with crowds/lots of people and noisiness'.

'The school was crowded with hundreds of people and I am not good with crowds because of my anxiety. I would always isolate myself in this one tiny room and cry until I would be in hospital or be sick. I was always scared to enter a classroom because I knew they would hurt me as soon as I stepped in. Studying was very hard to do because of the stress I felt every day at that school'.

Attending a pupil referral unit

Most of the children and young people completing the survey said that they enjoy attending a PRU all or most of the time. The majority also rated the help they get at the PRU that they attend positively.

Do you enjoy coming to the PRU?

ALL OF THE TIMER – 21%
MOST OF THE TIMER – 44%
SOME OF THE TIMER – 29%
NEVER – 6%

Overall, how do you rate the help you have had at the PRU?

EXCELLENT – 53%
GOOD – 39%
NOT VERY GOOD – 3%
VERY POOR – 5%

When asked what they liked most about the PRU that they attend children and young people talked about the fact that PRUs are smaller, about the atmosphere being calm and about activities on site and off. These included things like a pool table, going out go-karting as a reward and also outdoor pursuits such as forest school or army courses.

They were most likely however to talk about the quality of their relationship with staff and the way in which teachers at the PRU responded to them or about friendships with other pupils.

How well do students and staff get on with each other at the PRU generally?

VERY WELL – 35%
QUITE WELL – 50%
NOT VERY WELL – 9%
BADLY – 7%

'The teachers are nice and they always help you with work and any other problems you have'.

'They treat you different than when you are in a school, and give you more trust'.

'The staff are supportive'.

'The teachers and staff are helpful, caring and very nice, you get help when you need it in class'.

'The teachers compromise'.

Most of the children and young people (92%) completing the survey felt that PRU staff treat them fairly. The other 8% felt that staff hardly ever or never treated them fairly.

Most learners said that they were getting enough help with their school work (94%) and most (83%) said that staff at the PRU talked to them about what they want to do when they leave education.

Children and young people were also asked the reasons why they didn't enjoy attending a PRU. Some learners said that they didn't like attending a PRU because it is 'just like school' and that they don't like school. A few children and young people talked about being tired and about not wanting to get up in the mornings.

Fourteen learners made comments indicating they were unhappy or uncomfortable attending a PRU and two of these identified bullying as an issue. A few of these 14 children and young people also said that they didn't like the teachers at the PRU they attend.

'I don't enjoy coming to the PRU because no-one understands and certain teachers at the PRU say hurtful stuff and some teachers you ask for help and you don't get help'.

'I don't enjoy coming to the PRU because the teachers get on your back for the smallest thing and causes me to get frustrated'.

'There is nothing for me to do on most days'.

'Because I'm here for no reason and I get bored'.

Boredom was identified as a specific problem in comments left by a number of learners as the reason they don't enjoy attending a PRU. They said that attending the PRU was 'boring' and that there was nothing to do most of the time.

Do you get bored at the PRU?

All the time – 13%

Most of the time – 21%

Some of the time – 50%

Never – 16%

Attendance and behaviour

Many children and young people attend a PRU because of problems in managing their behaviour in mainstream school. Learners completing the survey were asked questions about the ways in which behaviour is managed at the PRU they attend.

The children and young people completing the survey were asked what the classroom rules were. The most common responses were about swearing, no phones in class, don't mess around, listen to the teacher, no running and showing respect to others. A few learners said that there were posters up at the PRU with the rules on them. However 20% of children and young people said that they did not know what the classroom rules were.

Children and young people were asked to identify the rewards and sanctions that are used in the PRU they attend. The most common rewards given were merit points, teachers telling them they had done well or letters home about their good behaviour. In relation to sanctions children and young people were most likely to identify fixed term exclusions, losing playtime/free time/activities, a letter home, and a talk with the teacher/head teacher or time in a quiet room.

Pupil Behaviour

Do adults notice the pupils who behave well in the PRU?

All the time – 55%
Most of the time – 31%
Some of the time – 11%
Never – 3%

Do adults at the PRU deal well with the pupils who misbehave?

Yes, completely – 55%
Most of the time – 33%
Hardly ever – 7%
Never – 5%

Do you think the consequences of misbehaving are fair generally?

All the time – 37%
Most of the time – 47%
Some of the time – 13%
Never – 4%

Do you get into trouble for being difficult or disruptive at the PRU?

All the time – 5%
Most of the time – 19%
Some of the time – 50%
Never – 26%

Emotional well-being and feeling safe

Children and young people talked about emotional difficulties such as anxiety and feeling stressed as reasons why they found it difficult to cope in mainstream education. The survey asked them questions about how safe and secure they felt at the PRU they attend.

'Have to go for a chat to calm down and have a hot chocolate and toast'.

'The teacher will try to speak to you to see why you're acting like it, sometimes you lose groups, you will lose points, you might get excluded'

'You get warnings and then you will get excluded and miss out on fun activities'.

'Calm zone or exclusion'.

'Going to the sofa room to calm down, then tell them why it's wrong and then tell their parents'.

'Supervision, sent home, exclusion, talked to, part-time timetable'.

'2 x reminders, 2 x warnings and on 3 you get excluded for at least half a day'.

Children and young people were asked who they could turn to at the PRU if they were feeling scared, unsafe or needed help. Children and young people were most likely to identify teachers as the person they would turn to. Some learners identified named teachers, key workers or support staff as the person they would turn to.

Children and young people were also asked about attendance and truancy. A third of learners completing the survey said that they skip attending the PRU some of the time but only 3% said that they regularly skip attending the PRU. Most of the children and young people (62%) said that they never skip attending the PRU.

Bullying was one of the issues that children and young people identified as the reason they had had problems in mainstream education. The majority of learners completing the survey said that they were never bullied at the PRU they attend, but 21% had experienced bullying at the PRU. The majority said that nothing had happened to make them feel unsafe or scared when they were at the PRU.

How Pupils Feel

Do you feel settled at the PRU?

All the time – 38%
Most of the time – 38%
Some of the time – 22%
Never – 2%

Do you feel lonely when you're at the PRU?

All the time – 6%
Most of the time – 4%
Some of the time – 23%
Never – 67%

Do you feel safe at the PRU?

All the time – 56%
Most of the time – 28%
Some of the time – 11%
Never – 5%

Has anything happened to make you feel unsafe or scared when you're at the PRU?

Yes – 10%
No – 90%

If you are worried about something, do you tell an adult in the PRU?

Never – 18%
Not really – 28%
Most of the time – 37%
Always – 16%

'If I was feeling scared then I would speak to the headmaster, the teaching assistants and my science teacher. They are very supportive and have experience with people who have the same problems as me. They would sit down and do the best they can to help you get through whatever problem you're having any difficulty with'.

25% of learners said that there was no-one they could turn to at the PRU if they were feeling scared, unsafe or needed help.

Does anyone bully or pick on you at the PRU?

**All the time – 1%
Most of the time – 6%
Some of the time – 14%
Never – 79%**

Pupil Voice – being heard

Children and young people were asked a number of questions about the information that is provided to them, about complaints and about being involved in decisions that are made about them. Two thirds of learners felt that they were involved in decisions that are made about them all or most of the time, but a third said this was only true some of the time or was never the case. Similarly two thirds of learners said that they did have information about how to complain but a third said they didn't have this information.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SURVEY

Article 29: the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

Children and young people said that they had difficulties in coping with mainstream education because of their behaviour and poor relationships with teachers, because of bullying and because of anxiety. The experiences they described suggest that mainstream schools were not able to accommodate their additional learning needs or provide the level of support learners needed to engage in education.

Most children and young people were positive about their experience of receiving their education at a PRU and in particular about the quality of their relationship with teaching staff. However a minority of learners do not enjoy attending a PRU.

The most common problem associated with receiving education at a PRU that was identified by learners was a lack of things to do and being bored.

Over two thirds of children and young people said that they get into trouble for being difficult or disruptive at the PRU they attend. Most felt that the consequences of misbehaving are generally fair. However 20% of learners said that they don't know what the classroom rules are. Learners were most likely to identify fixed-term exclusions as the main sanction for misbehaving. Merit points, positive feedback from teachers and letters home were the most common rewards identified.

Article 24: The right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standards of health.

Emotional difficulties such as anxiety and feeling stressed were identified as reasons why many children and young people found it difficult to cope with mainstream education. Most learners had someone they could talk to at the PRU if they worried about something and many identified named members of staff as the person who they trusted or who understood their needs. However 25% of children and young people said that there was no-one they could turn to at the PRU if they were feeling scared, unsafe or needed help.

Most learners said that they feel settled at the PRU and that they never feel lonely. However about a quarter of children and young people said that they only feel settled some of the time or never and 10% feel lonely all or most of the time.

Bullying was another issues commonly identified by learners and can have a significant impact on the emotional well-being of children and young people. The majority of children and young people said that they are never bullied or picked on at the PRU. Bullying was a persistent problem for 7% of learners though, with a further 14% saying they are bullied some of the time.

Being Heard

If you were unhappy about something would you know what to do?

All the time – 46%
Most of the time – 29%
Some of the time – 20%
Never – 5%

Do you have information about how to complain?

Yes – 66%
No – 34%

Can someone be with you and speak for you at meetings?

Yes, completely – 42%
Most of the time – 35%
Hardly ever – 11%
No, never – 11%

Do you think your opinion counts when decisions are made about you?

All the time – 36%
Most of the time – 31%
Some of the time – 14%
Never – 18%

Article 12: The child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.

Article 13: The right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.

Only a third of children and young people felt that their opinion always counts when decisions are being made about them. Just under a fifth of children and young people said that their opinion never counts when decisions are being made about them.

The majority of children and young people had information on how to complain and had someone to speak for them in meetings. However one third of learners didn't have information on how to complain and a fifth said that they hardly ever or never have someone to be with them and speak for them at meetings.

Findings: Teachers in Charge survey

Surveys were completed in relation to 16 PRU sites operating in 8 local authorities in Wales and this generated data relating to 253 learners. None of the 16 PRU sites reported on were attached to a mainstream school. Of the 253 learners that were reported on 178 or 70% were registered with a mainstream school.

Pupils' additional needs

Professionals were asked to identify how many of the learners attending PRU sites on which they were reporting had specific additional needs or were in receipt of specific services indicative of need.

Social Services

- Pupils who are looked after children 9%
- Pupils who are on the Child Protection Register 7%
- Pupils who are Children in Need 7%
- Pupils who are young carers 4%

Health

- Pupils in receipt of a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) 23%
- Pupils referred to CAMHS but not in receipt of a CAMHS service 11%
- Pupils with a behaviour or conduct disorder 19%
- Pupils receiving support for a substance misuse issue 6%

Education

- Pupils who have a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) 25%

Youth Offending

- Pupils who are in touch with the Youth Offending Service 25%

Child Poverty

- Pupils in receipt of free school meals 42%

Professionals were also asked if there were any other issues affecting their pupils that were not included in the options set out in the survey. A number of issues were identified: parental substance misuse, kinship care arrangements, speech and language difficulties, attachment disorder, levels of functional literacy and numeracy and risk of child sexual exploitation.

Partnership working

Professionals were asked to rate the quality of their working relationship with a number of different services. Nine professionals representing 16 PRUs responded.

Professionals were also asked to identify any other agencies they were working with that were not included in the survey options. Community Police Officers, the school counselling service, Health (paediatrics), 14-19 Pathway providers and a specialist third sector project were identified.

All of the respondents said that the PRU sites they were reporting on had access to a school nurse and to a school counselling service.

	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor	Not working with this service
Social Services	-	5	2	2	-
CAMHS	-	3	4	2	-
Education Welfare/Inclusion	5	3	1	-	-
Team Around the Family	1	-	6	1	1
Substance Misuse services	1	3	3	1	1
Sexual Health services	2	3	2	1	1
Youth Offending service	-	3	3	-	2
Youth Service	2	3	2	-	2

Behaviour Management

All of the PRU sites had a behaviour management policy in place.

Staff in all of the PRU sites had received behaviour management training - either British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD) training or Crisis Prevention Training (CPI).

One site does not use a programme for behaviour management of emotional well-being. Eleven of the 16 sites use an in-house behaviour management/emotional well-being programme. These programmes include approaches such as social skills group work, anger management, mindfulness and a multi-sensory approach to behaviour management. Some sites do use externally developed programmes: PASS was identified in 3 sites, SEAL was identified in 4 sites, TalkAbout in 2 sites, Restorative Justice in 3 sites and DINO in 1 site.

Main challenges of delivering education in PRUs

Professionals were asked through an open-ended question to identify the main challenges they face in delivering education in PRU. A number of themes emerged in the responses provided.

Capacity to deliver the curriculum

There were a number of elements identified that together mean that curriculum coverage can be challenging to deliver within a PRU setting. The first of these was related to difficulties in recruiting highly motivated and well qualified staff who can deliver the curriculum across a wide range of subjects to a teaching environment that is challenging because of the range and depth of additional learning needs of pupils. Another staffing factor relates to the small number of staff actually in post in PRUs as a result of relatively small pupil numbers. Securing quality alternative and vocational provision to deliver on the 14 to 19 Pathway was also identified as problematic by some respondents.

Finally, issues related to the fact that it is challenging for PRUs to keep pace with curriculum developments, especially as information about developments may not be cascaded to them at the same time as it reaches mainstream providers. At the same time professionals talked about the pressures of having to fulfil LEA paperwork commitments, procedures etc in the context of limited capacity.

I would expect the recently announced independent review of curriculum to take account of the particular needs of children and young people in pupil referral units.

Challenges: 'Recruitment of high quality teachers, shortage of experienced staff who are comfortable in this setting'.

'PRUs are often an afterthought both within local and national priorities, e.g. only in September 2013 were PRUs given any documentation on national networking response to the National Literacy/Numeracy Framework'.

'Staff are not kept in the loop regarding movements in education or new developments, we only find things out after mainstream'.

Level of pupil need

Meeting the diverse range of needs among learners in PRUs was identified as a major challenge by professionals. Autistic Spectrum Disorders, extreme Emotional and Behavioural Disorders, Speech and Language difficulties and mental health conditions including clinical depression, and Obsessional Compulsion Disorder were all identified as conditions affecting learners that require specialist approaches. Substance misuse was also identified as a problem by two respondents. There were two main issues associated with this. Securing relevant and appropriate training for staff to equip them to deal with the range and depth of additional needs of learners was identified as problematic. The second related to the wider issue of delivering education with limited capacity to a range of attainment levels, needs and ages of learners. This issue is compounded by the past educational experiences of learners with the result that many have low self-esteem and find it difficult to engage in education. Some respondents felt that children and young people had been left too long without appropriate therapeutic intervention which means that when they get to the PRU their issues have escalated to a point where engaging them in education is particularly difficult.

'Meeting the diverse needs of pupils and ensuring that all staff are trained to meet these needs e.g. ASD, Autism, ADHD, EBD, Speech and Language difficulties, phobic tendencies, clinical depression, ODD, OCD'.

'Young people who need a therapeutic input before they can access education in a meaningful way'.

'Meeting individual needs- having flexibility from a staffing perspective to be able to provide individualised packages/timetables for pupils to engage and motivate hard to reach pupils'.

Lack of external support

Some professionals identified problems with parental engagement as a barrier and this was associated with issues like poor attendance. Others identified problems getting support from other agencies such as social services and health and spoke about the time it takes to get support for children and young people. Difficulties in getting engagement in delivering education were also identified with colleges and work experience providers reluctant to take on learners with high levels of need. Mainstream schools were also identified by some professionals as being reluctant to work with PRUs on the reintegration of learners into mainstream education. The fact that PRUs are isolated from initiatives related to the local implementation of national developments in education policy and practice was also identified as an issue.

Poor resourcing

Respondents identified poor resourcing as a challenge and in particular the fact that PRUs do not receive the Pupil Deprivation Grant or Looked After Children Pupil Deprivation Grant. Resourcing was compared with levels in mainstream education and restricted resourcing was associated with challenges in delivering the curriculum. The building in which the PRU is placed was also identified as a challenge in terms of the small size of the space available and/or the poor fabric of the building.

Main benefits of delivering education in PRUs

Professionals were also asked an open-ended question about the main benefits of delivering education in a PRU. Three main themes were identified in their responses.

Small class sizes supporting quality relationships

The fact that pupil numbers and class sizes are small was identified as a benefit to delivering education in a PRU. This supported the development of good quality relationships between staff and learners.

'Small cohort numbers enable positive relationships to be built between pupils and staff'.

Ability to meet individual learning needs

The fact that opportunities to be flexible and adaptable enable staff in PRUs to identify and plan for individual learning needs within an approach which focuses on the holistic needs of the child and support for pupil well-being was identified as a major benefit of providing education in a PRU.

'The ability to build a pupil's education around them rather than the pupil having to fit into an immovable system'.

'Young people can start believing that they can achieve through courses especially designed for them'.

'Focus on well-being and the whole child'.

'Pupils are happy and feel safe'.

Seeing the impact of the approach to pupil well-being

Respondents identified the importance of being able to see and understand the impact their work has on the learning experiences of children and young people. Specific issues such as improved attendance, improved well-being and mental health, improved life chances for pupils and a reduction in the number of pupils who would be not in education, employment or training (NEET). Associated with this was the identification of the way in which staff are prepared to adapt and try new strategies in order to secure better engagement and outcomes for individual learners. This was also related to job satisfaction for staff.

'The sense of pride in pupil achievement (no matter how small), you (staff) really feel that you are helping the most needy and vulnerable of young people, you are making a difference'.

Additional issues

Professionals were invited to provide any additional information on issues not covered by the survey questionnaire. The responses generated relate to the ways in which the attitude towards PRUs needs to change so that the role of PRUs as one of a number of education settings is established rather than as provision very clearly separated from mainstream provision with the associated stigma of attendance for children and young people.

'Lack of clear guidance from Welsh Government of the purpose, what policies we should have, how PRUs are financed and managed'.

'Need to plot a network of PRUs that may be able to work together to share good practice'.

'We must work harder at removing the stigma towards PRUs and our pupils. Too often young people are labelled as the worst of the education establishment. Truth is that most pupils who end up in a PRU are there because they are not suited to mainstream school settings. Work needs to be done to ensure that PRUs are seen as just another provision for some pupils, i.e. addressing pupil needs and not there as a dumping group for some schools/LEA just to reduce exclusion figures'.

Findings: site visits and meeting with learners

As part of the project the Children's Commissioner visited pupils in PRUs in North Wales and Mid Wales and learners from one PRU in South Wales came to meet him at his offices. The children, young people and staff he met in Wrexham and Ceredigion talked about the nurturing environment that the PRU provides for learners who often have poor experiences of mainstream schooling. The learners from a South Wales PRU who came to visit the Children's Commissioner at his offices shared information about their day to day experiences at the PRU that was a cause for concern. These concerns have been shared with the Teacher in Charge, Director of Education and Estyn. The young people also shared some ideas about how things could be improved and these are shared within this report.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: TEACHER IN CHARGE SURVEY

Information provided in relation to 253 learners attending PRUs highlights the range and depth of additional needs associated with children and young people receiving their education at a PRU. Meeting these needs is challenging in the context of staff capacity and access to appropriate training.

With the exception of Education Welfare/Inclusions services the quality of partnership working relationships with other agencies is inconsistent across areas. Partnership working with Team Around the Family/Families First services is particularly weak with only one respondent identifying the quality of the working relationship as above Fair.

All of the 16 sites reported on have a Behaviour Management Policy in place and staff in all sites have received behaviour management training. In-house behaviour management/emotional well-being programmes are used in 11 of the 16 sites. Externally developed programmes such as pass and seal are delivered across 5 sites.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: TEACHER IN CHARGE SURVEY

The main challenges of delivering education in a PRU were identified as:

Capacity to deliver the curriculum because of small staff numbers, difficulties in recruiting teaching staff, poor dissemination of information about curriculum developments to PRUs and difficulties in securing quality alternative and vocational provision to deliver on the 14 to 19 Pathway.

The diversity and depth of additional learning needs among the pupil cohort. Securing appropriate training for staff to equip them to deal with the range and level of pupil need can be problematic.

A lack of external support including parental engagement was identified, as well as difficulties in getting timely support for children and young people from other agencies and difficulties in getting engagement from other education providers.

Poor resourcing including buildings that are not fit for purpose and lack of access to the Pupil Deprivation

Grant was also identified as a challenge.

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The main benefits of delivering education in a PRU were identified as:

The benefits of small class sizes, supporting good quality relationships between staff and pupils was identified.

The ability to build individual learning packages around pupils' specific needs was identified.

The fact that the approach to personalised education planning for pupils means that they can achieve and secure outcomes that may have been denied to them had they stayed in mainstream education was identified as a benefit that was important for staff in being able to see the impact of their approach.

Teachers in Charge also identified the need for clear guidance from Welsh Government on the delivery of education through PRU settings, the need for practice sharing opportunities between PRUs to be established and the need to position PRUs as one form of a suite of education options rather than as the 'end of the line' for learners.

CEREDIGION PUPIL REFERRAL UNIT

The current PRU has been in operation since September 2010. An audit of PRU provision undertaken by an independent consultant by the authority in Spring 2010 found that the old arrangements were not fit for purpose and did not meet learners needs. There is a strong officer and elected member commitment to inclusive education with a strong well-being element. The PRU approach sits within a wider approach to education in the authority which puts support for pupil well-being and behavioural support at the centre of an integrated approach. Managed moves are difficult because of the rural nature of the authority and a graduated model of behaviour management has been introduced, which has resulted in a reduction in fixed term and permanent exclusions.

Estyn carried out an inspection in 2012 which resulted in an Excellent rating for well-being. The PRU is the subject of an Estyn Best Practice publication.

The PRU is delivered across 3 sites and the Children's Commissioner visited one of the sites which is attached to a mainstream school. Education is delivered to children aged 7 to 16 years old. There is a high level of additional learning needs among the pupils and many pupils receive support from social services because they are looked after, on the child protection register or are Child in Need. There is a high rate of free school meal entitlement. The Teacher in Charge described strong partnership working relationships in particular with Team Around the Family and the Youth Service, with a Youth Worker seconded to work with pupils reaching college age at the PRU. There are issues for children and young people who need CAMHS support which they receive in border authorities. This means that they have to travel a long distance, missing time out of education for relatively short appointments. There are difficulties getting therapeutic support for children and young people at the lower thresholds of need who do not necessarily have a diagnosed mental health condition but who need help with their emotional and mental well-being.

The PRU provides flexible, individualised planning for every pupil. Placement can be for 'respite' for a week (to de-escalate), others for a few months, part-time school (core subjects) and part-time PRU, others longer term. All remain registered with their 'home' school and every child receives 25 hours per week education. Attendance rates run at over 90% and there has been a sharp decrease in exclusions.

During my visit to Ceredigion I was really struck by the calm and nurturing atmosphere in the PRU. The Teacher in Charge and the Headmaster of the school which the PRU is attached to have a strong commitment to supporting pupil well-being and it was clear to me that they know and understand the needs of each individual child and young person.

There are clear reward and sanction arrangements associated with access to free time and activities in place which the children and young people were able to explain to me themselves. When a pupil does have a difficult day or an incident happens there are measures in place to work through what has happened with the individual child or young person, talk about what has happened and reflect on why it is happening again.

The unit is small but there was a hive of different activities taking place. The younger pupils were busy with their Greek mythology work, some older pupils were engaged in producing some artwork, one pupil was getting one-to-one support with maths, one pupil was helping out in the kitchen and another was busy with their GCSE biology course work. During the time I was visiting some pupils returned from receiving core subjects in mainstream school and others left to do the same, each supported by a teaching assistant. Another pupil was getting ready to go swimming with the Youth Worker.

I have visited hundreds of education settings in my time as Children's Commissioner and what was very clear to me is that the staff in Ceredigion PRU are committed to supporting their pupils to achieve and that the pupils I spoke to feel happy and safe and know that their education matters.

Ceredigion responded to a situation in which their PRU provision was not fit for purpose with a clean slate and a new approach to pupil inclusion and well-being. The results of this approach speak for themselves. I believe that it is imperative the lessons learnt in Ceredigion support change and improvement across PRU provision in Wales. Some local authorities have already visited Ceredigion to find out how things have been turned around and Estyn have disseminated information about their best practice. However Welsh Government must support a more systematic approach to the sharing of best practice and learning exchange on PRUs between authorities as part of the school improvement agenda.

Keith Towler, Children's Commissioner for Wales

VISIT OF PUPILS FROM A SOUTH WALES PRU

Pupils from the School Council of a PRU in South Wales submitted questions to the Children's Commissioner as part of the webinar he held to provide information about the PRU project. The pupils were asked if they would like the Commissioner to visit their PRU or if they would like to visit his office so that he could discuss their questions with them in more detail. The pupils decided that they would like to visit the Commissioner's office and three pupils and two members of teaching support staff came to meet with the Children's Commissioner.

The pupils explained to the Commissioner the difficulties they had experienced in mainstream education that led to them attending a PRU including bullying and behavioural issues.

They also spoke about their experiences of attending the PRU. Although they described very good relationships with the majority of staff at the PRU they also set out their day-to-day experiences at the PRU and the way this impacts negatively on their ability to engage in learning.

The pupils said that incidents involving young people losing their temper and 'kicking off' happen on a daily basis. They said that they find attending the centre boring, with few activities taking place. They are constantly escorted and that there is little to do during break times, for example there are never enough pupils outside together at one time to have a game of football. One pupil said that he has been attending the centre for 3 months and has only had PE on one occasion since he started attending. They told the Commissioner that a school counsellor attends the school but that the presence of the counsellor on site is announced to the class with an invitation to see him. Pupils do not feel comfortable identifying themselves as wanting to see the counsellor in front of their peers.

The pupils also had some good ideas about how the situation at the PRU could be improved:

- Access to a punch bag or boxercise for when they get angry;
- Access to a kitchen to do cooking, breakfast when they start the day;
- Use of a rewards system such as earning time on a console or another activity/rewards room;
- More access to 'hands-on' activities, outdoor space; physical activities;
- More one-to-one support in the classroom;
- There is a school council but it does not have meetings – pupils would like the council to meet.

I am grateful that the pupils from the South Wales PRU were brave enough to come and talk to me about the problems they are experiencing in getting their education at the PRU. While it was clear to me that the pupils I met have an excellent relationship with some staff members there appears to be a lack of facilities and support structures in place to assist staff and pupils in managing emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The pupils described a situation in which they are constantly frustrated by feeling that there is no physical space or time given to them burning off energy or managing their emotions. The way in which poor behaviour is currently managed, with pupils highly supervised, accompanied by staff at all times and contained in small groups appears to leave pupils feeling untrusted and always under scrutiny. The solutions that the young people have come up with are very simple and it was clear to me that they desperately want the PRU to become an environment in which they can learn.

A system has recently been introduced through which pupils are grouped according to how close they are to being ready for reintegration into mainstream school. This system was explained to the young people for the first time by staff during their meeting with me as they were unclear why the place where they sit in the classroom has recently changed. One young man was very distressed by this information when he realised that he was not in a group of pupils getting ready to reintegrate into mainstream.

I have raised these issues with the Teacher in Charge, Director of Education and Estyn. I am meeting with the Director of Education to discuss what measures will be put in place to address the current problems.

A lack of resources to implement positive behaviour management approaches was identified by staff. However it is my position that the best practice I have witnessed in other PRUs in Wales must be used to inform positive change in PRUs that are struggling to provide children and young people with additional learning needs with the educational opportunities they deserve.

Keith Towler, Children's Commissioner for Wales

CYFLE YOUNG MOTHERS UNIT, WREXHAM

Cyfle is a small, dedicated educational unit for young women of school age who become parents. Cyfle's aim is to make sure that these young women are not disadvantaged educationally by their early pregnancies. Cyfle has pupils who attend the centre full-time but is also responsible for the co-ordination of outreach work with pupils who remain in their schools for most of their pregnancies.

Pupils transfer to Cyfle in the later stages of pregnancy and remain there, usually until they have completed their GCSEs. The centre offers a wide curriculum including a range of GCSE subjects, the Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification and key skills. Post-16 pupils are also able to return to the unit when they have had their babies and study for their GCSEs. Cyfle has a free onsite crèche so the pupils can bring their babies to school with them. Estyn inspected the PRU in 2012 and the unit was awarded an Excellent rating for outcomes and well-being.

The Children's Commissioner visited the PRU and met with four young women, the Teacher in Charge and a local County Councillor. The pupils talked about the difficulties they had such as mental health difficulties and family caring responsibilities, these had made mainstream school difficult for them before they became pregnant.

The pupils talked about the time and care that is given to them at the PRU and about how this compared with their time in mainstream education where they often didn't feel cared about. They said that the small size of the unit is important and also talked about the way in which they are pushed to achieve at the unit in a way that they weren't in mainstream school. The pupils understand that there are clear behaviour boundaries in place and when things get difficult time is taken to talk about things and sort them out. Resources are limited but there is a clear focus on providing a nurturing environment supported by good quality relationships between staff and pupils in order to assist young people in achieving to their full educational potential.

I am grateful to the young women who were prepared to be honest and open in telling me about their experiences. Nurture, care and support are at the centre of the approach to educational provision at the Cyfle unit and this approach is possible because of the obvious commitment and motivation of staff to do the very best for their pupils.

More than this the approach to pupil well-being taken at the unit is coupled with high expectations and a determination to push pupils to reach their educational potential. The stories the young women told me about their experiences in mainstream education suggest that their opportunities to achieve would have been limited if they had not come to the unit. It is of great concern to me that other children and young people with additional learning needs may never enjoy these opportunities or realise their full potential.

Keith Towler, Children's Commissioner for Wales

Conclusion

The evidence gathered for the Children's Commissioner for Wales in relation to the well-being of learners attending PRUs clearly demonstrates that the children and young people who receive their education at a PRU are among some of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged learners. The depth and diversity of need among the pupil cohort in PRUs provides for a challenging educational environment.

Many of these children and young people have a very poor experience of mainstream education with behavioural difficulties, bullying and anxiety identified as the main reasons why pupils could not cope in mainstream education. Many children and young people identified poor relationships with teaching staff in mainstream education as an issue for them, while at the same time describing the importance of good quality relationships with teaching staff in PRUs. Some Teachers in Charge reported that learners arrived at the PRU with entrenched problems because of a lack of timely support and intervention earlier in their school career.

However it is clear that in many PRUs a strong focus on pupil well-being, supported by partnership working with other agencies and the commitment of staff means that children and young people benefit from individualised packages of learning that provide them with opportunities to achieve.

This picture is not a consistent one though. The level of need among pupils would suggest that partnership working with external agencies such as Team Around the Family/Families First is essential and in some areas such working arrangements are supporting good outcomes. However in other areas PRUs report that inter-agency working in support of pupils is weak. Therapeutic support for children and young people without a higher threshold mental health condition is too difficult to secure. At the same time securing appropriate training for staff in PRU so that they can respond to the range and depth of pupil needs can be difficult.

Behaviour management policies are in place across the PRU sites that evidence has been gathered on and staff in all sites have received behaviour management training. However proven behaviour management and emotional well-being programmes do not appear to be in place in all sites. Reward and sanction systems are in place in the majority of PRUs evidence has been gathered on. Fixed-term exclusions were identified as the most common sanction by learners and the latest statistics on exclusions from schools in Wales evidence that the rate of fixed term exclusions of five days or fewer from PRUs is much higher than any other school type.

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Teachers in Charge reported the challenges of delivering the curriculum in light of staffing numbers, difficulties in staff recruitment, lack of alternative and vocational provision and weak dissemination of curriculum developments to PRUs. At the same time boredom and lack of things to do in the PRU were identified as a common issue for learners. This was a major source of frustration for pupils from the PRU in South Wales who met with the Children's Commissioner, at the same time the two PRUs that the Commissioner visited are providing a wide curriculum and a range of activities to engage pupils.

Currently specific national guidance on pupil referral units is contained in 8 pages as an annex to Inclusion and Pupil Support Guidance⁵ that was issued eight years ago. Teachers in Charge in many areas have described a situation in which PRUs are cut off from the information networks that support innovation and development in education, that opportunities for learning exchange are limited and where PRUs are viewed as the last resort for children and young people rather than as one of the settings forming the education offer in Wales.

Where PRUs form part of an integrated response to pupil inclusion and operate with a strong focus on pupil well-being and achievement they provide opportunities for disadvantaged children and young people to realise their right to an education through which they can fulfil their potential. The Welsh Government's new framework for school improvement must be used as a tool to secure consistent good practice across PRUs in Wales.

If we are to see consistent good practice in PRUs throughout Wales the status of this work needs to be lifted from one which describes it as a "Cinderella service", to one that recognises its contribution to ensuring that all children and young people achieve their full potential in education.

Recommendations for Welsh Government

- 1. Welsh Government has set out its intention to reform the legislative basis for Special Educational Needs (SEN) in Wales. This legislation should place duties on education providers and support agencies in relation to the provision of robust individualised education plans to ensure that children and young people with additional learning needs can realise their right to an education directed to the development of their personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.**
- 2. Welsh Government should review and update the Inclusion and Pupil Support Guidance issued in 2006. New guidance should provide clear direction on the importance of supporting pupil well-being and draw on evidence of what works in supporting disadvantaged learners.**
- 3. Welsh Government should issue new guidance on the provision and purpose of Pupil Referral Units as part of its framework for school improvement and national model for regional working.**
- 4. Welsh Government must give due consideration to the measures that will need to be put in place to support delivery of the new curriculum from September 2015 in pupil referral units.**
- 5. Welsh Government should assess how effectively 'Respecting Others' guidance on bullying is being implemented in education settings.**

Recommendations for regional education consortia

- 1. Regional consortia should ensure that measures taken to support school improvement include and take proper account of the needs of Pupil Referral Units as education settings of equal status to other education settings such as mainstream schools. This should include the facilitation of a practice exchange network.**
- 2. Regional consortia should consider the ways in which the development of school-to-school capacity building measures can be utilised to support the delivery of the curriculum in Pupil Referral Units.**
- 3. Regional consortia should closely monitor the use of fixed term exclusions in Pupil Referral Units.**

Footnotes

- ¹ Estyn (2012), A survey of arrangements for pupils wellbeing and behaviour in pupil referral units, Cardiff: Estyn.
- ² Welsh Assembly Government (2006) Inclusion and Pupil Support, National Assembly for Wales Circular No: 47/2006.
- ³ More information on Viewpoint work can be found here <http://www.vptorg.co.uk>
- ⁴ Statistics for Wales, (2014) Exclusions from schools in Wales, 2012-13- Revised, Cardiff: Welsh Government, SDR 30/2014.
- ⁵ Welsh Assembly Government (2006) Inclusion and Pupil Support, National Assembly for Wales Circular No: 47/2006.



0808 801 1000 / 80800*

post@complantcymru.org.uk

* Text us for free (start your message with COM)



@childcomwales

www.childcomwales.org.uk

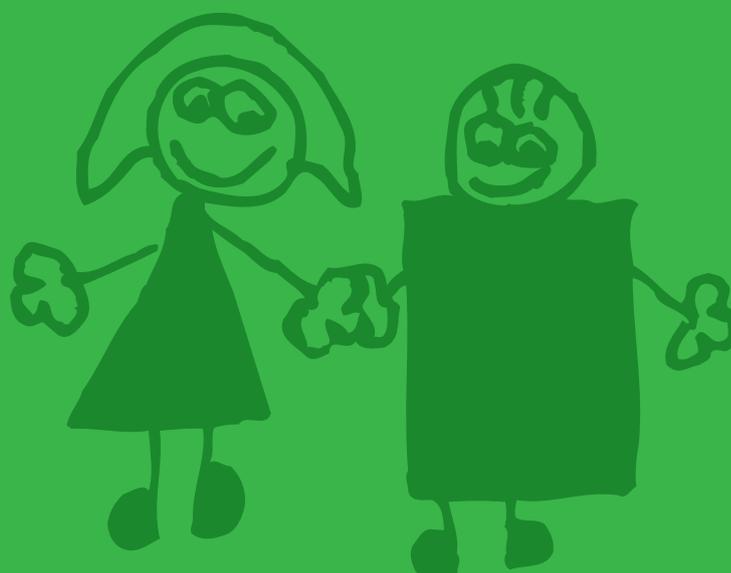
Write to us:

Children's Commissioner for Wales

Freepost RRGL XLYC BHGC

Swansea SA7 9FS

We wish to thank all those who have helped us with this report. Particular thanks to the children and young people, PRU Teachers in Charge and local education pupil inclusion and well-being leads.



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