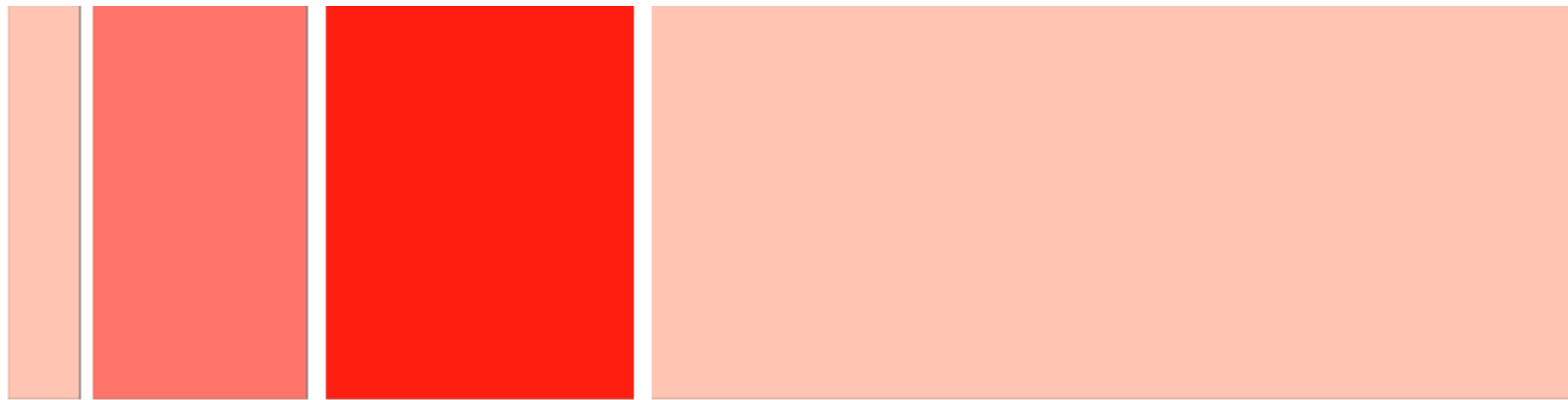




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# A Think Piece on the Possible Options for Improving the Performance and Efficiency of Sixth Forms in Wales



Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

This document is also available in Welsh.

# A Think Piece on the Possible Options for Improving the Performance and Efficiency of sixth forms in Wales

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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## **1. Introduction/Background**

- 1.1 The Welsh Government commissioned Professor Sue Maguire of Maguire Policy Research to produce a think piece paper on the options for improving the performance and efficiency of sixth forms in Wales.

### **Aims of the study**

- 1.2 The stated aim of the research was to produce a paper which sets out the possible options available to the Welsh Government (WG) for improving the performance and efficiency of sixth forms in Wales, based on a review of the latest robust evidence. Within this aim, the following key factors were to be addressed:

1. The context of Welsh Government education policy.
2. The role of the Welsh language in that policy.
3. The needs and priorities of different stakeholders.
4. How 'efficiency' and 'performance' are defined and used by different stakeholders.
5. The importance of learner choice, notably in relation to medium of provision and faith-based provision.
6. Mechanisms for enhancing the quality of provision.
7. Parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes.
8. The influence of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure.
9. The impact of urban and rural dimensions on provision and learners.

- 1.3 In order to fulfil the aims, pertinent questions to be addressed in the course of the study included:

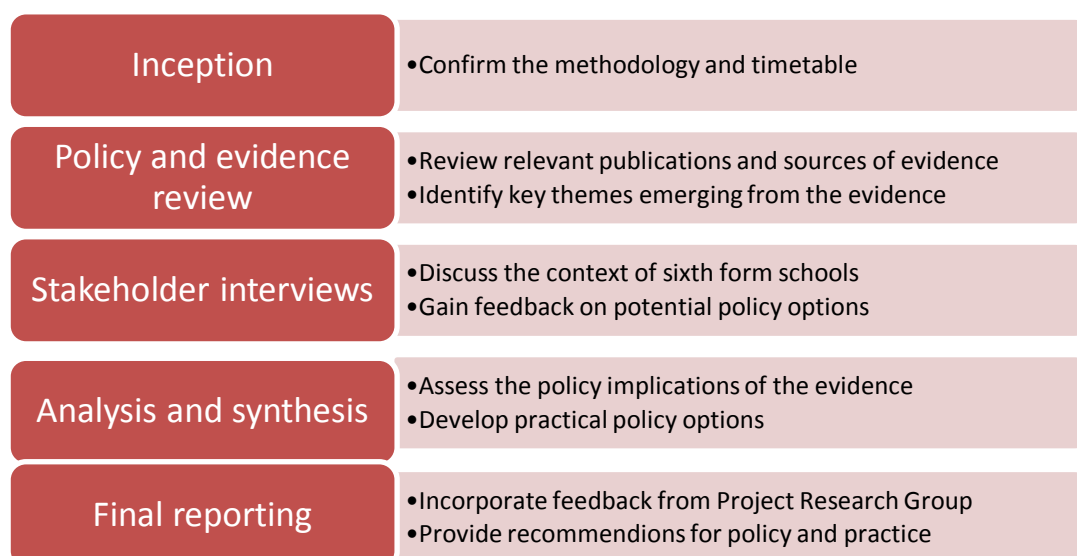
1. What is the optimum size of a sixth form?
2. What set of options is required to meet a diversity of needs?
3. What factors need to be taken into account in relation to the aim of delivering provision through the mediums of Welsh, English and bilingually?
4. What factors need to be taken into account to accommodate faith-based delivery options?

5. Does the Welsh Government need to do something about sixth forms in order to maximise efficiency and learner choice?
6. Are there too many sixth forms?
7. Does the Welsh Government need a menu of choices to consider different ways in which to move forward?

## **Methodology**

- 1.4 The methodology adopted for this study had two main strands. Firstly, it sought to identify the most relevant literature, policy documents and evaluation evidence to support the development of options open to the Welsh Government for improving the performance and efficiency of sixth forms in Wales. This was followed by a process of obtaining feedback from key stakeholders about the issues impacting on Welsh sixth form provision and the efficacy of the options emanating from the policy and evidence review, and an analysis and synthesis of all the evidence collected. A letter of invitation to participate in the research was issued by the Welsh Government to a range of key stakeholders. Every respondent who expressed a willingness to be involved was subsequently interviewed. In addition, a 'snowball' approach identified other interviewees who were nominated by key stakeholders in the initial sample. The overall approach to meeting the aims and objectives of the study is summarised in the diagram below:

**Figure 1: Summary of approach**



1.5 In addition to agreeing the methodology, the inception meeting enabled the timescales and deliverables relating to the progress of the research to be clarified, and the contact details for key stakeholders to be confirmed.

### **Policy and evidence review**

1.6 The main task of the policy and evidence review was to undertake an examination of literature relating to the key factors to be addressed, as outlined in the research specification and identified in the aims of the study above. The initial sources of this search for relevant documents were two literature searches, both of which were instigated by the Welsh Government's Knowledge and Analytical Services team, with one being carried out by the Library and Archive Services department. The review concentrated on the background and development of Welsh Government education policy, especially within the post-16 arena. As well as the Welsh-orientated publications, material from other UK and EU governments and international agencies, such as the OECD, as well as any research undertaken by the post-16 sector itself, was explored. Thereafter, the academic literature was examined using key search engines, such as the British Education Index, ERIC, Ingenta and Emerald. The search

terms used to derive relevant literature included: 'post-16 education', 'sixth form schools', 'school sixth forms', 'further education colleges', 'school sixth form size', 'class size', 'Welsh language education', 'efficiency and performance in education' and 'learner choice'.

- 1.7 Given the importance attached to the changing post-16 policy environment, the search concentrated on published material which has been produced in recent years. The focus was predominantly on data and reports from the UK (and especially any which specifically or partially targeted Wales). As well as research reports, evidence and policy documents from, for example, individual post-16 inspection reports produced by Estyn and Ofsted were also included.
- 1.8 On the basis of the evidence derived from the literature, a set of potential options for change to improve the performance and efficiency of sixth forms in Wales was drawn up. This set of options was derived from pertinent issues which emanated from the literature review and, more substantially, from the review of policy development and implementation in Wales in recent years and subsequent lessons learnt.

### **Key stakeholder interviews**

- 1.9 Face-to-face or telephone consultations were conducted with a total of 18 individuals from 14 key post-16 delivery organisations and interest groups in Wales. The main criteria for deciding who should be included in the list were that they represented one of the key organisations at a senior level, and that they could offer informed perspectives on issues relating to how the potential different needs and priorities can be addressed. The organisations from which stakeholders were interviewed were:
  8. Bridgend County Borough Council
  9. Careers Wales
  10. Carmarthenshire County Council
  11. Coleg Y Cymoedd

12. CollegesWales/ColegauCymru
13. Conwy County Borough Council
14. Denbighshire County Council
15. Estyn
16. Gwynedd and Anglesey Post-16 Education Consortium
17. Newport City Council
18. Pembrokeshire County Council
19. Torfaen District Council
20. Wales 14-19 Network
21. Welsh in Education Unit (Welsh Government)

1.10 The purpose of the interviews was to:

1. Build up a picture of views about post-16 provision in Wales (with a specific focus on sixth form performance and efficiency).
2. Understand what are perceived to be the core issues that need to be addressed to inform any proposed changes.
3. Outline and discuss possible options for change and how these are meant to work in practice for different groups of young people in different local circumstances and the benefits that respondents, recipients and the Welsh Government may derive from it.
4. Where it was requested, the discussion guide used for the interviews (see Annex A) was sent to the stakeholder interviewees in advance, in order to enable them to provide an informed and considered response.

### **Policy context**

1.11 14-19 learning provision in schools and colleges in Wales is determined by the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009, which places a duty on local authorities, 14-19 networks, schools and colleges to work with Welsh Ministers to provide local curricula that comprise a wide range of courses and opportunities for learners. The local curricula for students aged 16 to 18 contain a minimum of 30 courses of study at Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and National Qualification Framework (NQF) level 3, which will include a



minimum of five general courses and five vocational courses (Welsh Government, 2014). This offer is usually achieved through collaborative links between schools and colleges. One of the strategic aims of The Welsh-medium Education Strategy (published in April 2010) is “to improve the planning of Welsh-medium provision in the post-14 phases of education and training, to take account of linguistic progression and continued development of skills”. Collaborating on the delivery of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 involved prioritising resources to ensure that a range of Welsh-medium opportunities were made available ensuring parity of esteem for all learners. For Welsh-medium and bilingual schools this meant that they were required to ensure that pupils were given access to new and continuing post-14 courses through the medium of Welsh or bilingually.

- 1.12 Post-16 education provision in schools is essentially a ‘mixed economy’, comprising tertiary, sixth form centres and 11-18 schools. Differences exist both within and between local authorities, which have grown to reflect the contrasting needs of local communities in urban and rural localities. The variations within and between local authorities, in terms of the size, scale and composition of sixth forms across Wales have been an issue for many years. In some local authority areas, such as Pembrokeshire, this has led to a review of post-16 provision, with sixth form numbers in the area being projected to fall by 23 per cent between 2012 and 2018 (Pembrokeshire County Council, 2012:55).
- 1.13 The Welsh Government’s policy to transform education and training provision in Wales was published in early Autumn 2008 (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). It signalled its intention to secure outline plans to improve learning opportunities for all communities in Wales. In the first instance, the focus was on post-16 delivery, including FE colleges and sixth forms, to improve learner choice, and reduce duplication of provision. The Welsh Government’s decision was not to impose a single post-16 transformational model or rigid

framework. Instead, a flexible approach was adopted, allowing stakeholders, who have the very best of local knowledge, to steer change in a way that served each geographic area of Wales; one based on local needs and aspirations.

- 1.14 *The Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009* (National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People Committee, 2012) highlighted that funding mechanisms to support schools and college often undermine the ethos of partnership working. Competition between providers to retain learners, in order to sustain funding for courses and sixth form provision, can result in students being denied impartial guidance to make informed choices. Moreover, the quest to retain funding may also result in duplication of local provision and the maintenance of small class sizes and sixth forms. A recent study of Welsh schools in Wales (OECD, 2014) recommended that there is a need to progress towards 'simple, financially stable and efficient funding arrangements for Welsh schools' (P.57).

## **2. School Sixth Forms in Wales: Issues and challenges**

2.1 The desk research and key stakeholder interviews were conducted with the purpose of eliciting data and evidence relating to six key themes. The approach to this research was to identify the most relevant literature, policy development and evaluation of evidence to support the development of a possible range of options open to the Welsh Government for improving the performance and efficiency of school sixth forms. The six key themes were.

5. What do we mean by 'efficiency' and 'performance'?
6. optimum school size/class size debate
7. learner choice and the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure influences
8. bridging the academic and vocational divide
9. Welsh-medium provision
10. locality - urban and rural factors.

### **What do we mean by 'efficiency' and 'performance'?**

2.2 Debates about achieving a greater degree of efficiency and performance in the context of post-16 learning have recently grown in prominence, with reductions in funding capacity and declining student cohorts in the coming years. Applying economics terms to education can simply mean achieving greater *efficiency* by reducing the average cost of provision (per student). Conlon and Halterback (2014) argue that greater efficiency can be secured through concentrating provision within a smaller number of larger providers (i.e. larger educational institutions, such as sixth form colleges). However, improving efficiency within an education context tends to ignore issues relating to the quality of, and access to, provision. Conlon and Halterback assert that achieving increased *cost-effectiveness*, rather than *efficiency*, should be at the heart of the debate, as the former incorporates the quality of provision into the analysis. Improving cost-

effectiveness relates to reducing the overall costs associated with achieving specific (educational) outcomes.

- 2.3 The terms 'efficiency' and 'performance' are often associated with the operation of a market, as illustrated by the seminal report '*Trading Places*', which was published in 1996, and recognised the existence of a quasi-market existing in education (Audit Commission, 1996). It stated that there was a need for effective local intervention and coordination to 'manage the market' (p.52). Many key stakeholders who were interviewed as part of this study expressed concern that, in the current climate of increased competition between providers for post-16 learners and diminishing budgets, there is all too often a mismatch between policies and responsibilities, in terms of incentives for LAs, schools and FE providers to work together to secure economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

*'Breaking down the 'us and them' – every stakeholder must be involved'*

Key Stakeholder 2

*'There is a compelling and urgent case due to the financial climate we are facing in the next five years and potentially next 10 years. We are spending less on post -16 and demographics are changing - now is the opportune time for the Welsh Government to have an explicit policy on general education and move it into FE through tertiary or alliances between schools and colleges. Sixth forms will be retained but a policy is needed that determines that local authorities must prove that a sixth form with fewer than 200 is providing the breadth/depth of provision, is working effectively with the FE provider and is getting good results. The onus is on the local authorities and schools (to demonstrate) that the schools should remain open rather than the current position that everything should carry on regardless.'*

Key Stakeholder 8

- 2.4 The Audit Commission (2011) argued that it is very difficult to apply traditional approaches to value for money (VfM) to schools' spending.

Within schools, VfM is defined as the 3 'e's – economy, efficiency and effectiveness, which, in effect, was translated as making the best use of available resources (Audit Commission, 2009). A wide range of variables, many of which are hard to measure, often affect how schools are organised to achieve their objectives. These include teacher quality, teaching methods and the quality of school leadership. Within the Audit Commission (2011) report, *efficiency* is defined as the relationship between outputs and the resources used to produce them. A number of commentators (Department for Education and Science, 1985; Audit Commission, 1996; Foreman-Peck and Foreman-Peck, 2006; Conlon and Halterback, 2014) highlight the increased risk of cross-subsidisation from the rest of the school budget in small school sixth forms (fewer than 150 students). This warrants further investigation into their cost-effectiveness, long-term viability and the impact of reductions in resources allocated to younger school pupils.

- 2.5 The definition and evaluation of outputs and performance are also fraught with difficulties. Estyn (2010) reported, in its review of progress in implementing a wider choice and the learning core for 14-19 learners, that there had been too little evaluation of the quality, outcomes, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of provision. A widespread criticism aired by many key informants was the lack of comparability between schools and FE colleges, in terms of their performance data. While school performance measures relating to qualification outcomes are based on the proportions of students entered for examinations, colleges are measured in terms of the number of students entering learning programmes (i.e. retention rates), as well as the number of students being entered and successfully completing programmes of learning. Moreover, given the significant variation in their Year 11 academic achievements between groups of post-16 learners, it was recommended that performance measures should also capture the distance travelled, as well as 'hard' qualification outcomes. The need for comparable qualification

performance data between post-16 providers to underpin any decision-making about future post-16 provision in Wales was a widely held view. Hill (2013) recommended that common measures for assessing and reporting performance across all post -16 providers should be introduced throughout Wales. A report by the National Audit Office (2011) in England found that, unlike in colleges, there was no consistent approach to dealing with poor performance in school sixth forms. This view was supported in Wales from feedback received from some key stakeholders, which included representatives from the post-16 sector.

- 2.6 While efficiency and performance measures tend to focus on the benefits of reducing costs by concentrating provision in a smaller number of sixth form centres with larger class sizes, various studies of the Learning and Skills Wales (2009) Measure have exposed challenges, with regard to their delivery, especially in rural areas. These relate to high transport costs, the impact on learners of being moved between providers to access provision and, crucially, a lack of available evidence on how increased student dispersal between localities affects post-16 retention and achievement rates.

### **School size/class size**

- 2.7 Debates about efficiency and performance in education inevitably involve some discussion about optimum school and class size and, in the context of school sixth forms, the minimum school size required to secure cost-effectiveness. Several reviews conclude that the effect of school size matters mostly for disadvantaged students, in that they perform better in smaller schools. However, while no consistent relationship between school size and attainment levels is evidenced in the academic literature, most studies concentrate on either the primary or the secondary level, rather than on post-16 education (Newman et al, 2006; Garrett et al, 2004; De Maeyer et al, 2010). Moreover, much of the debate about school size is derived from research evidence from America, and therefore may not be

representative of the position in other countries. Also, there is a lack of an evidence base about the impact of changes in school size on cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes (Luyten et al, 2014). Estyn (2010) reported that, in Wales, examination results for large secondary schools are better than those for small and medium-sized secondary schools for nearly all measures. This was attributed, in part, to figures which suggested that lower levels of deprivation exist in large secondary schools. Thus, small and medium-sized secondary schools tend to have higher proportions of disadvantaged students.

2.8 For a school sixth form to be viable, it was widely reported in the literature that it should comprise a minimum of 150 students (across Years 12 and 13). This figure emanated from The Audit Commission's *Trading Places* (1996) and the much earlier Department for Education and Science and Welsh Office report *Better Schools* (1985), which asserted that small sixth forms are more likely to experience financial or educational difficulties once they drop below a certain threshold (circa. 150 students). However, both reports went on to state that viability can be achieved in terms of cost-effectiveness if schools work in collaboration with each other to offer a full range of options. A report by Ofsted (1996) indicated that a school sixth form may be viable with fewer than 150 students if it focuses on a narrow range of provision. An appropriate size of sixth form will therefore vary, depending on the range of courses offered, language provision, faith-based choice and the locality it serves. Estyn (2005) argued that more research was needed to establish whether the 150 threshold figure was still valid as an indicator of a sixth form's viability.

2.9 The findings of Owen et al (2006) about the efficacy of the size of sixth forms were that:

- 1 those with significantly fewer than 200 'A' Level students require substantial subsidy from the rest of the school budget, even where they offer a restricted choice of subjects;

- 2 those with between 200-500 students can offer efficient provision but only by restricting choice;
  - 3 those with 500+ students can offer wide subject choice and lower unit costs, though modest economies of scale persist up to 1000 students and perhaps beyond this point.
- 2.10 Criticism was made of *Trading Places* (which advocated a 150 student minimum sixth form size) that it 'understates the size of sixth form now required for viability, nor did it quantify the costs of provision below the size that it identified as the minimum required for viability' (Owen et al, 2006, p 38). Most recently, the Association of Colleges in England recommended that schools and colleges should be asked to consider merging their sixth forms with a view to no sixth form having fewer than 250 students (AoC, 2015, p.2).
- 2.11 As is the case with school size, research relating to class size is dominated by evidence from primary and secondary level rather than post-16 learning. Within this data, there is considerable controversy about the interpretation of the evidence and the weight that should be attached to it. Gibbons and McNally (2013) report that there are few robust studies that look at the impact of class size in the UK and that, overall, there are more studies that show positive resource impacts in primary schools and in early years than in secondary education. Moreover, they argue that the OECD has demonstrated that, across countries, there is no evidence in general that resources spent on class size reductions are productive. This finding is supported by a report by the Department for Education (2011), although it does make the point that comparability between countries is difficult to assess, given the variance between different educational systems. Altinok and Kingdon (2009) found that class size effects, where they exist, are smaller in regions with high teacher quality. The Department for Education (2011) asserted that class size reduction policies did not represent value for money, in terms of raising pupil attainment, and that resources generated more efficient returns in areas such as increasing teacher effectiveness.



2.12 As far as school sixth forms are concerned, the NUT (2012) stated that class sizes in sixth forms should be a maximum of ten students. However, this is a recommended figure and is not based on a statutory requirement. The 1918 Education Act guidelines, which specified class sizes, are no longer operational in England and Wales. It is necessary to determine class sizes on a risk assessment basis, taking account of the provisions of a number of relevant guidance documents, such as the Health and Safety Act (1974), British Standard 4163:2007 on safety in design and technology in schools and related government and NUT Cymru guidance. The introduction of wider choice emanating from the introduction of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 has raised concerns both within the literature (e.g. Estyn, 2010) and from stakeholder feedback about the viability of class sizes in some school sixth forms. At the same time, examples of good practice do exist in some local authority areas, where 14-19 partnership networks undertake audits, review the viability of existing and proposed courses and both monitor and, in some cases, rationalise low class sizes.

*‘The principles on which post-16 provision is based – quality, outcomes and learner experience have to be positive and this must be monitored. We produce a report every year which provides data using ALPS<sup>1</sup> and the Learner Voice Survey. We look at funding arrangements. We have a meeting with head teachers and principals and ask probing questions about course performance. We have started a process whereby if a school or college wishes to put on a partnership course, they have to fill out a form and have an assessment of need and make a business case. We look at completion rates/ALPS data/destinations data. We also look at unviable courses – look at 8-10 students as being a viable number. Because of the rural nature of our area – we have quite a number of*

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<sup>1</sup> ALPS is a commercially available system for measuring value added (learner outcomes taking account of prior attainment and other factors).

*courses with 6-8. Any course with 6 students we have traffic lighted as red.'*

Key Stakeholder 1

- 2.13 Overall, while there is considerable evidence about the optimum sizes for efficiency and performance for both schools and classes, it has largely proved inconclusive.

### **Learner choice and the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009**

- 2.14 The introduction of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 established a right for learners aged 14-19 in Wales to elect to follow a course of study from a local curriculum. Together with a post-16 Transformation model, which places an emphasis on cooperation and collaboration between providers to establish learning provider networks across Wales, the policy focus rests on operating in the interests of learners. It is expected that the local curriculum for students aged 16 to 18 will contain a minimum of 30 courses of study, of which five must be eligible vocational courses (Welsh Government, 2014).
- 2.15 Evidence elicited from a number of key stakeholder interviews highlighted examples of innovative practice within local 14-19 partnerships which have embraced both the Learning and Skills Measure and the Transformation agenda to offer students a broad curriculum. This includes establishing partnership boards comprised of representatives from the local authority, as well as from local schools and colleges, common timetabling and extensive transport facilities to ensure that students can access provision. McGee (2010) found that the introduction of learning coaches was a positive development. Evidence given by Estyn to The National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee's Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 (2012) stated that greater benefits had been derived from increased

partnership working between schools and colleges. These benefits included VfM, increased learner choice, and sustained engagement in learning for some young people who may have become disengaged (para. 101).

2.16 In 2010, Estyn (2010a) stated that only a limited number of schools were able to meet the post-16 requirements of the Measure. These were reported to be large schools with large sixth forms, whereas most schools could not provide vocational courses that required specialist facilities. This points to a need for collaborative working, which, given resource constraints, calls into question the Measure's long-term viability. Sustaining large transport costs to enable a broad curriculum offer to be delivered, together with meeting staff costs to retain specialist subject teaching and small class sizes within individual institutions, were identified as major future challenges in a climate of reduced funding. While the Measure has undoubtedly enhanced learner choice and achieved greater collaboration between providers, the policy implementation has also attracted criticism. It was also stated that:

- There was too wide a variation in the range and number of courses available.
- Too many courses were untenable, due to small numbers and duplication in the same locality.
- There was a lack of impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG), which has led to some young people remaining at their local school, without fully exploring and being made aware of alternative options.
- Some schools were wary about collaboration, due to concerns about loss of student numbers, funding and teacher retention.
- Insufficient evaluation of the quality and viability of provision was taking place.

2.17 These findings were endorsed by feedback from the majority of key stakeholders.

*'We have duplication of provision with schools and colleges offering very similar programmes. A seamless programme should exist. At the moment, some young people choose what is available to them, rather than what is best for them. The quality of provision should be there. Young people need impartial IAG, as many schools do not appear to be promoting the apprenticeship route. IAG is also needed at a younger age, when they have the time to consider and plan their options.'*

Key Stakeholder 6

- 2.18 McGee (2010) stated that the efficiency gains that had been achieved by increased collaborative working were outweighed by the additional transport and associated costs incurred in most locations. This appeared to be confirmed by the findings of a study by BMG Research (2013), which found that 20 per cent of learners are required to travel to other institutions, in order to access provision. At the same time, however, it was reported that the management information on learners' travelling was weak. This adds weight to the National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee's (2012) recommendation that the Welsh Government should review the extent and impact of travel and transport which has occurred as a direct result of the implementation of the Measure.
- 2.19 While an area inspection of provision for 14-19-year olds in Flintshire found evidence of strong consortia working, which included the existence of comprehensive service level agreements for assuring quality, in around a quarter of schools, as many as one in four post-16 classes had fewer than five learners. There was also unnecessary duplication of courses on offer in a few schools (Estyn, 2011).
- 2.20 The use of alternatives such as e-learning and peripatetic teachers was widely reported to have been less prevalent than learner travel. Thus, the exploitation of these methods, which offer huge potential in a climate of reducing financial resources, remains largely under-

developed. Examples of innovative practice were found to exist in some Welsh-medium schools (see para 2.31).

*'The capacity for e-learning should be exploited..... The challenge is that the technology needs to work from Day 1, in order to deliver on the pupils' experience and to prevent come back to the local authority. It must be a potential solution .... technology is developing, as is young people's capacity to take this forward.'*

Key Stakeholder 3

- 2.21 Crucially, there is a lack of robust evidence about the impact of offering wider choice to learners through collaborative provision across Wales, in terms of its contribution to improving retention and attainment rates and reducing the propensity of absenteeism and exclusions. Moreover, it was asserted by some key stakeholders that sustaining collaborative links between post-16 providers was becoming more challenging in a climate of reduced resources and declining student numbers. Furthermore, evidence given by Estyn to The National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee's Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 (2012) raises concerns about the continued viability of current collaborative links 'as the grant shrinks over the years to come' (para. 4.2).

*'Increased choice – what effect has this had on the labour market? We have no real data.'*

Key Stakeholder 5

### **Bridging the academic and vocational divide**

- 2.22 There is undisputed evidence that the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 has introduced and broadened access to vocational learning to sixth form students. This has been achieved through an increase in the number of schools offering their own range of

vocational options, and through partnership working between schools and FE colleges.

- 2.23 Evidence given to the Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 reported that some schools limit their vocational offer in higher cost areas, while, at the same time, some school based vocational provision is being expanded. For example, there is a reduction in engineering and construction provision and increased levels of provision in IT, administration and sport (National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee, 2012).
- 2.24 Estyn (2005) reported that transition arrangements between schools and FE colleges were weak. This finding was endorsed by some key informants, who commented on the lack of formal arrangements that exist between many schools and colleges to support students' transitions, specifically with regard to sharing information about issues which may place a student at risk of dropping out of learning. One respondent described how, over a six week period during the summer vacation, Year 11 leavers are expected to 'stand on their own two feet' and are especially vulnerable if they leave their school environment. An example of good practice was reported in one local authority area, where robust systems are in place to support Year 11 transitions between post-16 providers, including sustained follow-up arrangements to reduce the likelihood of drop-out. Support arrangements provided to 'at risk' or disadvantaged students have also been strengthened, as a result of the introduction of the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework in Wales.
- 2.25 14-19 local and regional networks have made an important contribution to strengthening the links between academic and vocational learning, although the majority lack strategic or governance responsibility for commissioning or rationalising provision. There remains a widespread perception among many young people and their parents that academic learning delivered in a traditional sixth form environment offers a higher standard and quality of provision

and opportunity in comparison to vocational learning offered in an FE setting. Moreover, academic learning delivered in an FE environment was also reported to suffer from the same 'image' issue.

*'In (name of area), I do not think that we give young people enough choice. We say that you can either go to your 6<sup>th</sup> form or FE –this has created a culture that if you are clever then you stay on at your sixth form and if you are not then you go to college. That is a problem..'*

Key stakeholder 16

2.26 Evidence given to the National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee's Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 suggested that there were mixed and conflicting views about whether parity of esteem between academic and vocational courses has been enhanced as a result of the introduction of the Measure. There was an overall consensus that parity of esteem per se has yet to be achieved (National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee, 2012).

2.27 In the view of a number of key informants, this points to a need for improved information, advice and guidance (IAG) to young people and their parents, in order to dispel negative and misinformed perceptions about the range and quality of the post-16 offer available within and between localities. Also, with the reduction in funding to support individual guidance provision in schools by Careers Wales, there remains an increased risk of student drop-out, which may be partly attributable to most groups being unable to access impartial IAG.

*'The schools and colleges that are obtaining excellent post-16 results are those that have dedicated support for their post-16 learners - learning coaches or good A level teachers who monitor targets. It is down to this tracking.....However, we are going back to the bad old days. Teachers are being asked to be careers advisers and they do not have the skills. Young people cannot do it on-line. They need*

*hand-holding even to take them on these websites. Schools do not have the staff to do that or have the skills.'*

Key Stakeholder 2

### **Welsh-medium provision**

- 2.28 Estyn (2005) reported that schools have a good record of providing Welsh-medium and bilingual courses, although very few offered Welsh-medium vocational or applied courses. Estyn (2008) stated that there was an absence of an overview about the range and take-up of Welsh-medium or bilingual courses available to 14-19 learners, which makes it difficult to identify baselines and to set local and national targets. The Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 stipulated that the offer data and take-up data should be collected. Therefore since 2010/11 the offer data for KS4 and post 16 has been collected and continues to this day. The take-up data for KS4 has been collected since 2010/11 and continued for English medium until 2013/14, it continues for Welsh-medium to this day. Careers Wales Online (CWOL) collate the data on behalf of Welsh Government. In addition, there was a shortage of teaching materials and resources in Welsh. Opportunities to continue to study vocational courses through the medium of Welsh often diminish during Key Stage 4 and still further in sixth forms. This was attributed to a lack of teachers with the requisite skills to deliver vocational courses and unviable class sizes.
- 2.29 The absence of skilled teachers to deliver higher level vocational courses through the medium of Welsh within the FE sector remains a persistent problem, accompanied by a lack of qualifications and shortage of verifiers and resources available in Welsh (Estyn, 2010). This remains a barrier to extending the number of and Welsh-medium post-16 learners.
- 2.30 Evidence given to the Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 in 2012 reported that the choice of courses delivered through the medium of Welsh in FE has not



expanded to the same extent as English-medium provision. It was recommended that the Welsh Government and CollegesWales should accurately assess the levels of Welsh-medium provision in FE colleges and those delivered by training providers. It was asserted that 'FE institutions are dragging their feet with regard to promoting Welsh-medium courses' (National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee, 2012 para. 109). The Welsh-medium Education Strategy: Annual Report 2014-15, reports that FE and work based providers had met their 2015 targets in terms of the learning activities delivered through the medium of Welsh (Welsh Government, 2015 (p. 26). However, the target is still very low in comparison to the volume of activity delivered by Welsh-medium and bilingual schools.

- 2.31 Key stakeholder feedback suggested that the existing post-16 funding arrangements allow for Welsh-medium sixth form provision to flourish in some areas. Examples of innovative collaborative working between Welsh-medium schools, in order to ensure that young people receive curriculum breadth, were cited. This included more use of peripatetic teachers, cross-boundary collaboration between Welsh-medium schools and information sharing and good practice (Estyn, 2010; McGee, 2010), with the majority of this funded through the 14-19 development funding. Evidence given to the National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee's Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 suggested that Welsh-medium providers were more creative in meeting the 30 course requirement, partly because of the distance between potential partners (National Assembly for Wales Children and Young People's Committee, 2012).

*'The sixth forms are the guardians of the Welsh language post-16.'*

Key Stakeholder 7

- 2.32 A Welsh Government report (2014) recommended that promoting access and availability of Welsh-medium courses should be

undertaken by local curriculum planners through continuing to build upon the development that has been achieved by local authorities in forming local curricula at Key Stage 4.

### **Locality - urban and rural factors**

- 2.33 The geography of Wales, current local government arrangements (which comprise 22 local authorities with a proposal to reduce their number in the future) and the political will to tackle change lie at the heart of the debate about how post-16 provision (including school sixth forms) is currently organised. At present, a 'mixed economy' exists within and between local authorities, with school sixth forms, federations and tertiary delivery co-existing. FE provision now largely operates on a regional model, with the number of colleges being rationalised in recent years from 24 to 12 institutions. The separation in governance and management arrangements between school sixth forms and FE colleges creates competition and, too often, works against the interests of achieving improved efficiency and performance in post-16 education and training. Moreover, institutional funding incentives and arrangements often mitigate against supporting the interests of individual learners. Estyn (2006) pointed to there being, across Wales, no single model of post-16 provision that can apply in all circumstances. Therefore, cooperation, reorganisation and rationalisation may be required to achieve the most effective and efficient arrangement. The majority of key stakeholders suggested that more direction was needed from the Welsh Government in terms of determining the future structure of post-16 education and training provision and, crucially, assuming a strategic role in implementing future change.
- 2.34 There was a consensus in the literature, and among key stakeholders, that a 'one size fits all' model, such as tertiary arrangements, could not be operationalised uniformly across Wales. Although some respondents cited examples, such as in Merthyr Tydfil

and Blaenau Gwent, where a tertiary model had successfully been introduced. There was some appetite for collating relevant data to demonstrate the performance of these local tertiary delivery models. It was argued that introducing a tertiary model in an urban area was more cost-effective, as students' travel arrangements were often less complex and there was access to cheaper public transport arrangements. It was also highlighted that, in areas where sixth form provision had shifted to a tertiary delivery model in Wales, this had usually been accompanied with new buildings and facilities to support the transition, thereby reducing the negative impact of sixth forms closing within pre-existing schools.

*'The funding model sits at the heart of all of this. There will be strong resistance to change from schools. There are strong lessons to be learnt from Merthyr and Pembrokeshire.'*

Key Stakeholder 5

- 2.35 Transport continues to be regarded as a significant problem. Tribal (2014) put forward a tertiary option within its review of post-16 learning in Pembrokeshire. This would have entailed investing all post-16 provision with the local college, with schools being re-designated as 11-16 age range education providers. This option was disregarded due to its negative impact on travel and community arrangements.
- 2.36 The cost, time-commitment and complexity of transporting learners to other providers, in particular in rural areas, are practical barriers to collaborative working and the rationalisation of provision. Distance learning, video conferencing and tutors travelling between sites are at early stages of development and implementation. Also, there is little evaluation of their effectiveness or how they can improve value for money. Common data sets on attainment, achievement, exclusion rates and retention rates for collaborative provision are limited. Few

providers were found to be working across more than one 14-19 network (Estyn, 2010).

- 2.37 It was asserted by a minority of key stakeholders that the rural issue in Wales should not be used as an excuse to disregard, for example, a tertiary model. Outreach provision could be developed to ensure coverage across localities. In addition, the mapping and tracking of post-16 students would be easier if they were located with one provider. Some local authorities have been reported as being reluctant to tackle school rationalisation, due to strong local opposition from communities and their local political representatives. Even where local authorities have closed or reorganised schools, a report by Estyn indicates that reorganisation has generally failed to keep pace with falling school numbers. It was asserted that without decisive action, the issue of surplus places will get even worse over the next five years, with the cost of a surplus place being dependent on the size of the school. While some local authorities have increasingly used federations of schools to improve efficiency and reduce salary costs, these will neither remove surplus capacity nor reduce the need to maintain inefficient buildings (Estyn, 2012b).
- 2.38 Hill (2013) argued that some local authorities in Wales are inhibiting the development of regional consortia (for school improvement) and duplicating their functions. It was reported that there is a lack of clarity about which body is responsible for what. Furthermore, there is a 'fudginess' in the governance and accountability arrangements between local authorities and regional consortia. The difficulties encountered by the progress arrangements to achieve school improvement through regional education consortia are highlighted by the perceptions presented by the Wales Audit Office (2015): '*While governance of regional consortia is developing, they are hindered by incomplete management structures, weakness in financial and performance management and insufficient openness and transparency.*' (para: 11).

### **3. Options for moving forward**

- 3.1 This section sets out a range of possible options for change to improve the performance and efficiency of sixth forms in Wales. These options, which were derived from an initial examination of the literature, are:
1. Retain the status quo
  2. Implement regional boundary proposals, in order to operationalise a 'harmonised' post-16 offer between localities
  3. Implement an adaptable tertiary model across Wales
  4. Adopt a tailored approach to meet the differing needs of local authorities
- 3.2 They capture a range of possibilities for future planning, ranging from: retaining the status quo; adopting a regional model, which mirrors policy development in other key areas, most notably school improvement; extending roles and responsibilities within local area partnerships, as well as the most radical option of all, which would be to introduce a tertiary model across Wales. They reflect pockets of activity which already exist in Wales, as well as delivery systems for post-compulsory education and training, which are public sector-led within other EU states. The options of a public/private partnership delivery model or a cooperative school trust approach (the latter being put forward by Hill (2013)) were not included, due to a lack of reliable evidence about their existing long-term performance in other contexts and, crucially, their applicability. In order to adopt either of these options (public/private partnerships or school trusts) with full confidence, there would need to be a major review of the role of the public sector in education provision throughout Wales, as well as a full appraisal of the wider benefits of including other partners. .
- 3.3 Moving forward, whichever model is adopted needs to be underpinned by core guiding principles. On the evidence of this study, these principles should include:

1. The recognition that sixth form provision across Wales cannot be managed in isolation. Rather, it should be a key element of an **integrated post-16 learning system**, which embraces and recognises vocational and academic provision in equal measure.
  2. The **needs of the learner** must remain at the heart of the system. Every young person in Wales should have the opportunity and capacity to maximise their potential.
  3. The establishment of **post-16 funding mechanisms** which eliminate the potential for: creating and maintaining competition between providers; course duplication; learner 'stagnation', i.e. allowing young people to replicate courses at the same level; and cross-subsidisation between pre- and post-16 funding. All of these issues can mitigate against the interests of individual learners and hinder their progression.
  4. The implementation of **standardised performance measures** across all post-16 providers.
  5. Vocational and academic options at all levels being available and accessible to young people within **Welsh-medium provision**.
  6. Young people having an entitlement to access **impartial information, advice and guidance** to support their post-16 decision-making.
  7. **Achievement outcomes** across post-16 learning which recognise the relevance and applicability of qualifications to the world of work, as well as promoting and expanding access to further and higher education.
- 3.4 Measurement and outcomes, in terms of the extent to which the prescribed set of guiding principles are being delivered, will be evidenced through:
8. Efficiency and performance of individual sixth forms being recognised more broadly, as part of an integrated system of post-16 learning provision in a given area or locality.
  9. Increased collaborative and partnership working between post-16 providers, including the shared use of e-learning and peripatetic teaching resources.

10. Reduced drop-out and improved progression rates, which will reflect that learners are making informed and appropriate choices.
  11. Reduced NEET rates.
  12. Enhanced engagement with the local labour market and the world of work, which will demonstrate a commitment to achieving parity of esteem between academic and vocational learning routes.
- 3.5 The following boxes set out the key components of each of the four options, along with lists of factors and perceptions which provide support for their adoption, as well as those which point to a need for a more cautious approach. These perceptions have been derived from the literature review and feedback from stakeholders. Where they were solely in the literature, they are highlighted in light grey, and where they were only mentioned by stakeholders, they are highlighted in dark grey.

## Option 1: Status Quo

### Key Components

Retain the current number of sixth form schools and FE providers

Continue the delivery of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure

Manage the reducing post-16 population within existing arrangements

Raise post-16 retention and achievement rates within existing arrangements, while establishing a more consistent approach to measuring performance

Retain existing partnership and collaborative links

Ensure the use of existing resources within sixth forms, while allowing for new development in terms of e.g. IT facilities and peripatetic capacity.

### Supporting evidence

1. The networks emanating from the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure work in the interests of learners.
2. The current system provides choice and support for learners.
3. Current provision offers a sustained learning environment which allows young people to develop and mature.
4. Closure of sixth forms has led to fewer vulnerable learners remaining in post-16 education, and increased drop-out rates.
5. Rationalisation of sixth forms would be expensive due to the logistics of school transport.
6. The existing arrangements allow for Welsh-medium sixth forms to flourish, assisted by cross-boundary collaboration in most areas.
7. Sixth form closures would result (in most cases) in local opposition
8. Contributory factors to improving retention and achievement among 16-19 year olds are:
  1. An emphasis on student support.
  2. Extended mentoring arrangements.
  3. A core teaching staff dedicated to 16-19 year olds.
  4. Emphasis given to careful and thorough pre-entry advice and guidance.
5. Schools working in collaboration can be viable and cost-effective.
6. Small sixth forms can specialise in a narrow range of provision.
7. School sixth forms cater for half of all 16-19 year olds in Wales.
8. Schools with sixth forms have higher quality and standards in Key Stages 3 and 4, offering continuity and progression, and perceived high status.
9. Both parents and young people would resist, and feel threatened by, provision being concentrated in large 'FE style' institutions.

### Challenging issues

10. Compared to FE providers, schools have weaker incentives to be economical.
11. Schools can make significant savings through greater collaboration.
12. More efficiency can be gained by re-organising the learning provision in an area.
13. There remains too wide a variation in the range and number of courses available within and between localities.
14. Greater choice does not necessarily lead to improvements in standards of achievement.
15. Some schools limit their vocational offer in higher cost areas, while other provision is being expanded.



16. The choice of courses through the medium of Welsh has not expanded to the same extent as English-medium provision.
17. There is a lack of impartial information, advice and guidance.
18. There can be an unnecessary duplication of courses.
19. Budget cuts and demographic trends necessitate a rationalisation of schools.
20. More recent evidence is needed about the minimum size for a viable sixth form.
21. Small sixth forms tend to have higher pupil costs than larger counterparts.

## **Option 2: Adopt a tailored approach to meet the differing needs of local authority areas**

### **Key Components**

Review and evaluate existing arrangements within and between local authorities, to identify ways in which economies of scale and greater value for money can be achieved.

Ensure new provision maximises the use of existing resources within sixth forms, while allowing for new development in terms of e.g. IT facilities and peripatetic capacity.

Move towards single 'regional area' post-16 prospectus and common application procedure to ensure young people access information about all available provision.

Develop, within new boundary areas, 'centres of excellence' of post-16 learning (both schools and FE), in order to harmonise and synchronise provision and increase attainment.

Review post-16 funding and structural arrangements, in order to identify ways in which competition between post-16 providers can be reduced

Provide an economic or social case for retaining small sixth forms, based on geographical needs assessment which takes into account language medium and faith.

Manage and engage with local community needs and requirements through consultation and governance arrangements.

Further extend partnership and collaborative links.

### ***Supporting evidence***

22. A tailored approach would counter variation in performance and requirements.
23. Reduced funding and a diminishing post-16 cohort of young people determines that due consideration needs to be given to rationalising sixth form provision.
24. Consolidating post-16 delivery into a smaller number of centres of excellence would offer 'equality of output'.
25. Effective local intervention and coordination would 'manage the market'.
26. Reorganising the learning provision in an area would improve efficiency.
27. Local planning bodies would ensure greater compatibility between funding for pre- and post-16 provision.
28. Further support and incentives should exist to encourage schools and colleges to work closer together in order to widen choice.
29. Any change should reflect the needs of local communities and geography.
30. Successful change has been achieved where LAs have taken a strategic role in establishing collaborative links between schools (and FE colleges) to promote a harmonised post-16 offer.
31. Contributory factors to improving retention and achievement among 16-19 year olds are:
  1. An emphasis on student support.
  2. Extended mentoring arrangements.

- 3. A core teaching staff dedicated to 16-19 year olds.
- 4. Emphasis given to careful and thorough pre-entry advice and guidance.
- 32. A federal approach had failed to improve quality outputs.
- 33. Federations and other formal school partnerships provide a strong platform for increasing autonomy and school attainment.
- 34. The creation of a number of large (regional) colleges may have made FE providers less responsive to local needs.

***Challenging issues***

- 35. Existing funding mechanisms do not help schools and colleges to collaborate.
- 36. The system of delegated budgets and authority leads to protecting corporate autonomy. Schools and colleges are also protectionist.
- 37. A lack of impartial IAG leads learners to take courses on offer in their existing school.
- 38. Some local authorities are reluctant to tackle school rationalisation, due to opposition from communities and politicians.
- 39. Some local authorities lack the political will and authority to make changes to sixth form provision.
- 40. Most local partnerships lack strategic responsibilities for governance, quality management and commissioning of provision.
- 41. The need to ensure that changes would not impact negatively on the availability of Welsh-medium provision; the number of learners choosing to continue to study through the medium of Welsh; and the ability for learners to study within a Welsh-speaking environment.
- 42. Geographical factors influence the pattern of post-16 provision, but do not necessarily determine what it must be.
- 43. Different criteria used by local authorities to allocate funding make judgements on value for money in relation to school size less secure.
- 44. 14-19 local area networks do not control core funding.
- 45. Reorganisation has generally failed to keep pace with falling school numbers.
- 46. Formal governance is needed for a partnership to be of substance and to endure.

### **Option 3: Implement regional boundary proposals, in order to operationalize a ‘harmonised’ post-16 offer between localities**

#### **Key Components**

Conduct a review of sixth form and FE provision within each local authority, to address: a) duplication of provision; b) transport and timetabling issues; c) small, group sizes; d) increased attainment and considers regional profiles of delivery.

Provide an economic or social case for retaining sixth form schools with fewer students below an agreed national specification, based on religious, language and/or geographical needs assessment.

Develop within area and outside area ‘centres of excellence’ of post-16 learning (both schools and FE), in order to harmonise and synchronise provision and to increase attainment.

Review post-16 funding and structural arrangements, in order to identify ways in which competition between post-16 providers can be reduced

Harness and exploit existing partnership and collaborative links.

Give strategic responsibility for commissioning and rationalising provision to a regional partnership, to achieve local efficiencies and greater responsiveness to meet local economic and social needs.

Ensure the use of existing resources (as far as possible), while allowing for new development in terms of e.g. IT facilities and peripatetic capacity.

#### **Supporting evidence**

47. Cross-local authorities responsibility would combat competition for learners, disincentives to collaboration school and parental opposition.
48. Greater cooperation and collaboration have been achieved through regional working.
49. The Williams report<sup>2</sup> recommended a reduction in the number of local authorities.
50. Institutions with significantly fewer than 200 ‘A’ level students need substantial subsidies.
51. Reduced funding and a diminishing post-16 cohort of young people determines that due consideration needs to be given to rationalising sixth form provision.
52. Contributory factors to improving retention and achievement among 16-19 year olds are:
  1. An emphasis on student support.
  2. Extended mentoring arrangements.
  3. A core teaching staff dedicated to 16-19 year olds.
  4. Emphasis given to careful and thorough pre-entry advice and guidance.

<sup>2</sup> Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery. (2014). *Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery. Full Report*. Cardiff: Welsh Government.

5. There will be greater consistency of provision across boundaries.

**Challenging issues**

6. Sixth formers stay at the same school because they know the staff and feel supported.
7. The cost, time-commitment and complexity of transporting learners to other providers inhibit collaborative working and the rationalisation of provision. There is also little evaluation of their effectiveness.
8. Until a national standardised method for measuring impact (e.g. examination performance) is introduced, debates about effectiveness or performance remain difficult.
9. Current models for regional working have made little impact.
10. Sixth forms have a strong identity within their local communities.
11. The need to ensure that changes would not impact negatively on the availability of Welsh-medium provision; the number of learners choosing to continue to study through the medium of Welsh; and the ability for learners to study within a Welsh-speaking environment.
12. Some LAs inhibit the development of regional consortia and duplicating their functions.
13. Regional educational consortia are 'hindered by incomplete management structures, weakness in financial and performance management and insufficient openness and transparency.' (Wales Audit Office).
14. Local authorities continue to carry out their statutory responsibilities, thereby weakening the authority of regional bodies.
15. Lack of leadership makes change in post-16 provision across a geographical area difficult.

## **Option 4: Implement an adaptable tertiary model across Wales**

### **Key Components**

Design a tertiary model that will be adapted and adopted by all local authorities to meet local needs.

Joint governance arrangements between sixth forms and FE colleges will be developed and implemented.

Arrangements may include clusters of schools merging and operating with one FE provider.

Management arrangements may be led by each local authority and comprise senior team representation from schools and colleges, as part of a post-16 Learning Board at local level.

Pool partnership and collaborative links.

Ensure new provision maximises the use of existing resources (as far as possible), while allowing for new development in terms of e.g. IT facilities and peripatetic capacity.

### **Supporting evidence**

16. Contributory factors to improving retention and achievement among 16-19 year olds are:
  1. An emphasis on student support.
  2. Extended mentoring arrangements.
  3. A core teaching staff dedicated to 16-19 year olds.
  4. Emphasis given to careful and thorough pre-entry advice and guidance.
  5. Tertiary provision can be operationalised in a locality by merging small sixth forms, and bringing in new facilities in close proximity to FE provision, thereby offering a range of vocational learning options.
  6. Reduced funding and a diminishing post-16 cohort of young people determines that due consideration needs to be given to rationalising sixth form provision.
  7. Introducing a tertiary model in an urban area was more cost-effective, as students' travel arrangements tended to be less complex and there was easier access to cheaper public transport.
  8. Examples of good practice exist where a tertiary model has successfully been introduced, such as Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent.
  9. In England, sixth form colleges are more likely to achieve higher levels of attainment than non-selective maintained school sixth forms.
  10. Large post-16 providers could deliver both academic and vocational provision.

### **Challenging issues**

11. No single model of post-16 provision that can apply in all circumstances.
12. Significant capital investment would be needed to meet infrastructure requirements.
13. School sixth forms are well regarded within their local communities.
14. Criteria would need to take Welsh-medium and faith based institutions into

account.

15. The need to ensure that changes would not impact negatively on the availability of Welsh-medium provision; the number of learners choosing to continue to study through the medium of Welsh; and the ability for learners to study within a Welsh-speaking environment.
16. Potential lack of political appetite at local and national level to introduce such radical change to post-16 education across Wales.
17. School reorganisation programmes should be primarily about school improvement rather than a resource management exercise that is separate from the interests of learners (Estyn, 2012).
18. The effect of school size matters mostly for disadvantaged students.
19. Lack robust evidence on educational performance and outcomes within tertiary delivery.
20. Lack of widespread support for this option.
21. Transport would still be a significant problem.
22. Rurality and cost would present difficulties.

## **4. Conclusions and recommendations**

- 4.1 The purpose of this research was to produce a paper which sets out the possible options available to the Welsh Government (WG) for improving the performance and efficiency of sixth forms in Wales, based on a review of the latest robust evidence. This included an appraisal of relevant literature and policy documentation, as well as capturing feedback and opinion from a range of key stakeholders.
- 4.2 A number of findings and issues have emanated from this small scale study. Most notably it has highlighted that:
1. The number, performance and efficiency of sixth forms has lacked a strategic review at national level over a number of years.
  2. There is a lack of robust evidence within the literature to support the notion that a sixth form with less than 150 students (Year 11 and Year 12 students) is unviable. This figure was derived from calculations drawn up in the 1990s and warrants reassessment.
  3. The increased risk of cross-subsidisation from the rest of the school budget is strongly linked to the sustainment of small sixth forms. The impact of reductions in resources allocated to younger school pupils in these circumstances requires further assessment, as well as the long-term viability of this approach.
  4. The extensive academic literature on optimum class and school size largely ignores the post-16 setting and a consensus appears to be that resources produced more efficient returns in areas such as increasing teacher effectiveness.
  5. The terms 'performance' and 'efficiency', together with the operation of a post-16 education market, require careful definition and monitoring, to ensure that the needs and achievements of individual learners are not displaced by institutional target-setting and competition within and between different providers.
  6. While the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure (2009) has undeniably opened up choice to post-16 learners and, in many areas, engendered increased collaborative working between



schools and colleges, there remains a lack of robust evidence to demonstrate that it has improved post-16 retention and achievement rates. Moreover, the high costs of sustaining the Measure must be questioned, in particular with regard to transport costs incurred in most localities, as well as evidence of course duplication and unsustainable class sizes.

7. Factors which need to be taken into account to accommodate faith-based options are absent in the literature.
8. There are skills and resource gaps in delivering higher level vocational courses through the medium of Welsh.
9. Examples were cited of innovative collaborative working between Welsh-medium schools, in order to ensure that young people receive curriculum breadth. The effective use of peripatetic teachers, cross-boundary collaboration between schools and information sharing and good practice should be disseminated more widely.
10. There are gaps in the evidence from the literature review about Welsh-medium provision in relation to: teacher and other resource shortages in vocational subjects and how this void may be filled, for example, through payment incentives, teacher education and on-the-job training; the expansion of work based learning and how employer engagement and apprenticeships can be sufficiently expanded and attractive to both young people and employers; improving the volume of students completing examinations (as opposed to undertaking courses) and how the currency and profile of Welsh-medium provision can be further enhanced within post-16 learning and beyond, including working more closely with parents.
11. Cuts to guidance services provided by Careers Wales have generated growing disquiet about the ability of many students to access impartial IAG to assist them with their post-16 planning, as well as concern about the capacity and capability of many teachers to deliver this requirement.

12. More direction is needed from the Welsh Government in terms of determining the future structure of post-16 education and training provision and, crucially, in assuming a strategic role in implementing future change.

4.3 A key strand of this work was to determine and test a number of possible options for change to sixth form delivery with a number of key stakeholders. Of the options which emerged as possibilities:

1. *Retain the status quo*

The feedback obtained strongly indicated that, in a climate of reducing budgets and financial constraints, sustaining existing arrangements was no longer an option. However, 'where' and 'what' change is needed and how this will be achieved is less straightforward.

2. *Implement regional boundary proposals, in order to operationalise a 'harmonised' post-16 offer between localities*

While a regional model would provide synergy with recent policy moves with regard to local government reorganisation and school improvement, their management structures, statutory powers and, crucially, their timetables for implementing effective change, have attracted notable criticism. Also, as far as 14-19 provision is concerned, previous regional delivery models have not been invested with the necessary statutory entitlements to ensure that local authorities and individual schools and colleges implement change where required. This would need to underpin any regional approach.

3. *Implement an adaptable tertiary model across Wales*

There was an overall consensus that, given the geography of Wales and the patterns of existing provision which have emerged over time to serve specific communities, most notably in rural areas, a 'one size fits all' approach would be extremely difficult to operationalise.

While a tertiary model has been implemented successfully in parts of Wales, this has tended to be in urban areas, where access and transport links are cheaper and easier. Moreover, to mitigate the impact of sixth form closures in areas where a tertiary model has been introduced, new facilities and building have accompanied its implementation. Clearly, the capital and political costs required to introduce this model across Wales appear prohibitive.

4. *Adopt a tailored approach to meet the differing needs of all existing local authorities*

In the short term, a local area approach appears to be the most feasible way forward for implementing any change. As far as policy strategy is concerned, it will be important, at the outset, to determine whether the implementation of the reviewing process and introduction of changes for this (or any other) option should be applied solely to sixth form provision or to post-16 provision as a whole.

The weight of evidence suggests that an integrated approach, incorporating the whole of post-16 provision, presents itself as the most balanced way forward. While this model may be viewed as 'more of the same', in that it conforms to existing local authority boundaries, it should be operationalised by 'local area' partnerships, which may or may not be led by the local authority, and should include key post-16 strategic partners, to achieve collaborative working, accountability and a harmonised local post-16 offer.

A local area partnership model could run the risk of colliding with any future proposals to restructure local government arrangements in Wales. However, it is unlikely that local government arrangements will a) be disbanded altogether and b) lose their statutory responsibility for local education provision. Anticipated change suggests that the overall number of local authorities will be reduced. In the event of local government reorganisation, any local

post-16 partnership arrangements that were being planned, operationalised or implemented would be rationalised to reflect the changing structure and accountability of new local government arrangements. Potential changes to local government lend weight to the proposal that leadership of post-16 local partnership arrangements should not be automatically assumed by the existing local authority.

Essential features underpinning such an approach will need to be:

1. A review by the Welsh Government of the financial incentives paid to schools and colleges and the removal (as far as possible) of anomalies and disincentives that exist in current payment systems;
2. Target-setting for removing surplus places, improving qualification outcomes and reducing duplication of provision, with set agreed timetables to achieve targets.

### **Future Research**

- 4.4 The development of innovative and effective policy is underpinned by robust evidence. Undertaking this study has highlighted gaps in evidence and examples of good practice where valuable lessons can be learnt. Suggestions for addressing these shortcomings include:
  1. Developing comparable data for schools and colleges on retention, completion and achievement rates, using common benchmarks.
  2. Collecting evidence on the extent to which cross-subsidisation between sixth forms and the rest of the school budget is occurring in schools with small sixth forms and its impact on learners and outcomes.
  3. Examining the potential for wider exploitation of e-learning and peripatetic teaching (in particular in rural areas), as well as testing and monitoring its impact on student retention and achievement rates.

4. Collating evidence relating to the factors which need to be taken into account to accommodate faith-based options.
5. Capturing good practice through conducting case studies of local authority areas where there has been harmonisation of the post-16 offer and analysing how this has been achieved.
6. Learning lessons from Welsh-medium schools which have been identified as embedding good practice through establishing cross-boundary collaborative links and harnessing the potential of e-learning and the use of peripatetic teachers.
7. Address the gaps in the evidence from the literature review about Welsh-medium in relation to: teacher and other resource shortages in vocational subjects and how this void may be filled; and how the currency and profile of Welsh-medium provision can be further enhanced within post-16 learning and beyond, including working more closely with parents.

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*Responses to the Children and Young People Committee's Inquiry into the Implementation of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009*

Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL Cymru)

Association for all School Leaders (NAHT) Cymru

Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL Cymru) and Association of Managers in Education (AMIE)

Careers Wales

Ceredigion County Council

Colleges Wales (ColegauCymru)

Estyn

Federation of Small Businesses

Governors Wales

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)

Higher Education Wales (HEW)

Minister for Education and Skills

National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)

National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)

National Training Federation of Wales (NTFW)

NUT Cymru

Sector Skills Councils

Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (National Union of Teachers of Wales)

University and College Union (UCU)

Wales 14-19 Network coordinators

Welsh Local Government Association and the Association of Directors of  
Education

## Annex A: Stakeholder discussion guide

### Discussion Guide – Interviews with key stakeholders on the possible options for the improvement of sixth form performance and efficiency

#### Background and introduction

- Explain background to the research.
- The aim of the interviews is to talk to key stakeholders, in order to: a) build up a picture of views about post-16 provision in Wales (with a specific focus on sixth form performance and efficiency); b) understand what are perceived to be the **core issues** that need to be addressed to inform any proposed changes; c) outline and discuss **possible options** for change and how these are meant to work in practice work for different groups of young people/ in different local circumstances and the benefits that respondents, recipients and the Welsh Government may derive from it.
- We are talking to a range of stakeholders, so that we can build up multiple perspectives.
- Reassure the interviewee about **confidentiality** and ask permission to tape record the interview – for the researchers' purposes only. Let the interviewee know that they can stop the interview at any time.

#### About your role

- Note to interviewer: these questions are important to set the context for the next stage of discussion.
- Some respondents may not be able to answer specific questions about sixth form/post-16 provision in Wales or its design/development, depending on the nature of their involvement.

- **What is your current job role?**
  
- **What is/ was your involvement in post-16/sixth form arrangements in Wales?**

PROBE:

What is your role (if different)?

Are you involved at school/college, local authority or at national level?

Find out whether involved in the design, development, and/or implementation of post-16 provision.

## About current post-16 provision

- Note: This discussion will be fairly loosely structured. The key aims are to find out:
  - What are the key principles that underlie current post-16 provision and delivery, especially within 6<sup>th</sup> forms?
  - How are these designed to work/inter-relate?

- **What would you say are the core principles on which it (post-16 learning) is based?**
- **Tell me about post-16 learning in Wales and its effectiveness.**
  - PROBE IF NECESSARY, in respect of:
    - Young people?
    - Sixth Forms?
    - Providing learner choice?
    - Increasing and improving post-16 participation, retention and achievement rates?
- **How effective do you think changes over the last few years to the curriculum offer have been overall e.g. the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure and the Transformation policy?**
  - PROBE, in respect of:
    - Young people?
    - Providing learner choice?
    - Increasing and improving post-16 participation, retention and achievement rates?
- **To what extent do sixth form schools, FE colleges and other post-16 providers work together to provide and deliver a harmonised post-16 offer?**
  - PROBE in terms of;
    - The barriers to achieving co-working
    - What works best where, why and how?
    - How they could work more closely together
    - The availability of objective IAG



## Potential change to School Sixth Forms

- **What are your views about current school sixth form provision and coverage within your locality and nationally?**
  - PROBE FOR (if necessary):
    - Number and size
    - Performance and efficiency
    - Scope for improvement and change
    - Relationships between schools and FE sector
    - Funding arrangements
- **What do you feel are the main strengths and weaknesses within current post-16 arrangements?**
  - PROBE FOR (if necessary):
    - Learner choice
    - Range and access to provision
    - Quality and outcomes
    - Value for money and cost effectiveness
    - Ability to meet local, community and business needs
- **What do you feel are the main strengths and weaknesses within current schools with sixth forms?**
  - PROBE FOR (if necessary):
    - Learner choice
    - Range and access to provision
    - Quality and outcomes
    - Value for money and cost effectiveness
    - Ability to meet local, community and business needs

- **To what extent, if any, is change needed to Schools with Sixth Forms to:**
  - **Improve learner choice**
  - **Improve attainment rates**
  - **Address falling school rolls in many localities**
  - **Reduce duplication of provision**
  - **Reduce drop-out rates?**

- **How could changes be made to Schools with Sixth Forms while sustaining a commitment to the role of the Welsh language in teaching and learning?**

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

Local and regional differences and requirements

Retaining all Welsh-medium sixth forms

Ensuring a breadth of Welsh-medium coverage within vocational learning

- **What (if any) are the barriers to changing the provision offered by Schools with Sixth Forms?**

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

Competition from other post-16 providers

30 options requirement

The impact of urban and rural factors on provision and learner access

Access to impartial IAG

Transport issues

- **What (if any) are the barriers to reducing the number of schools with sixth forms?**

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

Learner/parental choice

The impact on local communities

Transport issues

Delivery of a broad based curriculum (academic and vocational)

- **How do you think that these barriers (if any) can be overcome?**

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

Removing funding anomalies/disincentives within post-16 education and training

Creating centres of excellence across academic and vocational learning within and between localities

Reducing duplication of provision/small class sizes

Minimising complex transport and timetabling arrangements

Encouraging greater co-working between school sixth forms and FE providers

- **How can value for money be achieved, while retaining learners' choice, access to provision and qualification outcomes?**

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

Removing funding anomalies/disincentives within post-16 education and training

Creating centres of excellence across academic and vocational learning, both within and between localities

Ensuring learners' access to impartial IAG to reduce post-16 drop-out

Reducing duplication of provision/small class sizes

Minimising complex transport and timetabling arrangements

Encouraging greater co-working between school sixth forms and FE providers

- **How can learner choice (30 options offer) be retained within current delivery structures in school sixth forms**

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

Retention of a significant number of small sixth forms

Reducing duplication of provision/small class sizes

Minimising complex transport and timetabling arrangements

Encouraging greater co-working between school sixth forms and FE providers

# Possible Options for Improving the Performance and Efficiency of Sixth Forms

■ Note: The purpose of this research is to develop a series of options for improving the performance of Schools with Sixth Forms. We would welcome your views and insights into what changes should be made and what changes should be avoided and how any changes could be implemented.

## Set of options

- **To do nothing**
  - Retain the current number of sixth form schools and FE providers.
  - Continue with the delivery of the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure.
  - Manage the reducing post-16 population within existing arrangements.
  - Raise post-16 retention and achievement rates within existing arrangements.
  - Retain existing partnership and collaborative links.
  
- **To adopt a tailored approach to meet the differing needs of all existing LAs :**
  - Conduct a review of sixth form and FE provision within each LA, with a view to addressing: a) duplication of provision; b) transport and timetabling issues; c) small group sizes and d) increase attainment.
  - Provide an economic or social case for retaining sixth form schools with fewer than, say, 150 students, based on a religious, language and/or geographical needs assessments.
  - Develop within area and outside area 'centres of excellence' of post-16 learning (both schools and FE), in order to harmonise and synchronise provision and to increase attainment.
  - Review post-16 funding and structural arrangements, in order to identify ways in which competition between post-16 providers can be reduced.
  - Harness and exploit existing partnership and collaborative links.
  - Give strategic responsibility for the commissioning and rationalisation of provision to a local partnership, in order to achieve local efficiencies and greater responsiveness to meeting local needs.
  
- **Implement regional boundary proposals, in order to operationalise a 'harmonised' post-16 offer between localities**

- Review and evaluate existing arrangements within and between LAs, to identify ways in which economies of scale and greater value for money can be achieved.
- Ensure new provision maximises the use of existing resources within sixth form schools, while allowing for new development in terms of e.g. IT facilities and capacity.
- Move towards single 'regional area' post-16 prospectus and common application procedure to ensure young people access information to all available provision.
- Develop, within new boundary areas, 'centres of excellence' of post-16 learning (both schools and FE), in order to harmonise and synchronise provision and increase attainment.
- Provide an economic or social case for retaining sixth form schools with fewer than, say, 150 students, based on a religious, language and/or geographical needs assessment.
- Manage and engage with local community needs and requirements through consultation and governance arrangements.
- Further extend partnership and collaborative links.

Boundary arrangements could also be organised around the three regional economic partnerships, 14-19 regional partnerships or by developing strategies to meet the post-16 learning needs of four differing types of local authorities i.e. urban, rural, valleys and mixed.

- **Implement 'a one size fits all' tertiary model across Wales**
  - A tertiary model that will be adapted and adopted by all LAs to meet local needs.
  - Joint governance arrangements between sixth form schools and FE colleges will be developed and implemented.
  - Arrangements may include clusters of schools merging and operating with one FE provider.
  - Management arrangements may be led by each LA and comprise senior team representation from school and colleges, as part of a post-16 Learning Board at local level.
  - Pool partnership and collaborative links.
- **Are there any other possible options that you wish to propose and discuss?**

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

Rationale, logistics and the pros and cons of the proposed option

- **Are you aware of post-16 reorganisations that have taken place in some local authority areas e.g. Merthyr Tydfil, Pembrokeshire?**

PROBE FOR (if necessary):

Feedback about specific reorganisations and their effectiveness

Lessons learnt and their capacity for transferability

### **Finally**

Are there any other aspects with regard to Welsh Sixth Form Schools that we have not addressed in the interview and that you wish to discuss?

**Thank participant for their time.**