Youth engagement and progression lead worker review

In July 2024, we published our thematic report on the youth engagement and progression lead worker role in Wales. The report was written in response to a request from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in Estyn's annual remit letter 2023 to 2024 as updated in October 2023.

The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) is designed to facilitate young individuals in accessing education, training, or employment opportunities. Central to this framework is the assignment of a lead worker who provides support to young people either not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET. Our report draws on findings from a series of visits and virtual meetings with key stakeholders, including 11 local authorities, nine secondary schools, five colleges, five training providers, and Careers Wales teams. Our focus was on evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the lead worker role in assisting at-risk young people through their transition into post-16 education, training, or employment.

Our recommendations

The Welsh Government, Careers Wales, local authorities and all other partners involved in supporting young people through lead workers should:

- Improve post-16 transition support by ensuring continuity of a young person's lead worker until 31st January following a young person's move into their post-16 destination, whether this is in school, at college, with a training provider, or employment
- Develop ways to measure the success of work to prevent young people becoming NEET that are based on longer-term evaluations and do not over-emphasise the value of initial destination survey data
- Support better data sharing about the circumstances of individual young people to facilitate stronger collaboration between all partners, including education and training providers, and enable young people to receive relevant and timely support
- Support the professional learning needs of lead workers in all agencies and share effective practice in the provision of lead worker support
- Improve practice in line with the effective practice featured in this report and address the shortcomings highlighted in this report

What did our thematic say?

In a young person's life, the lead worker often served as the only consistent and reliable presence. They played a pivotal role in providing young people with personalised support in relation to their current situation and accessing progression opportunities. Adapting to post-pandemic challenges, lead workers commonly addressed issues like social anxiety, mental health, and financial struggles.

Lead workers' influence often extended beyond the young person as the support they provided also positively impacted on families and the wider community. This is what some of the young people shared with us.

"I feel she's proper like helped us, and we are in school every day, and if we didn't have a lead worker, we wouldn't be doing as good as we are now."

"I could turn to Megan, she always texted and called even when I didn't answer. I don't see Megan as often now. I'm giving 'Inspire' a go and hopefully I will go on a placement and get a job."

"I would have struggled if my lead worker support was taken away when I was in year 10."

"We can talk about anything, and she wouldn't judge. If I see her in the corridor, we have a chat."

Our evidence indicated significant, yet often appropriate, variation in relation to the lead worker role across Wales. Approaches were influenced by local contexts such as geography and demographics, as well as available support agencies. Leaders and managers in local authorities faced challenges in relation to assessing the scale of need and the type of support required, as well as meeting need. Complexity of need and the rates of referrals were increasing.

Transition activities into post-16 colleges were typically well-structured, but collaboration between post-16 providers and lead workers was often lacking once a young person enrolled with many training providers being unaware of the lead worker role and its benefits. Handover at this stage posed a risk as young people often lost continuity of support. There were no systematic procedures to ensure that students retained their places and when young people were identified as at-risk, they were usually assigned a new lead worker instead of reconnecting with their previous one.

Local collaboration to support the lead worker role varied, with the best cases involving strong representation from relevant agencies at strategic and operational levels with leaders committing to transparent data sharing. However, in many cases there were challenges due to anxieties around GDPR and a lack of understanding about what information could and could not be shared. Collaboration at a regional and national level was limited with very few examples of pan-Wales sharing of knowledge, experiences, and professional learning.

Leaders monitored and evaluated the impact of lead worker services using various approaches, including data tracking, learner well-being surveys, case studies, and feedback from young people and lead workers. However, attributing successful outcomes, such as a sustained place in education, training, or employment beyond age 16, solely to lead worker interventions was challenging due to the number of other services that a young person often received support from.

Lead worker recruitment and retention challenges stemmed from short-term contracts and difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified youth workers. Recruiting Welsh speakers was particularly challenging, limiting support services in Welsh. However, demand for Welsh-medium support was low and therefore meeting need did not pose challenges at the time of our visit.