

Learner Behaviour in Further Education Colleges

Understanding, Supporting and Promoting Positive Behaviour

May 2025

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Executive summary

This report examines learner behaviour within further education (FE) colleges across Wales. It focuses on the factors that influence positive and negative behaviours, as well as the variations in behaviour across different learner groups and learning programmes. The report considers how colleges promote positive behaviours and manage negative behaviours, alongside the support and guidance available to both learners and staff. It highlights ongoing challenges such as the continued impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the rise in social media misuse and vaping. We consider the environmental factors and institutional practices that influence these behaviours. Our findings are based on visits to seven colleges, national surveys of staff and learners, and consultations with key stakeholders, including union representatives. The report includes several spotlights of effective or interesting practice based on our visits.

During our visits, and from the surveys, we identified several recurring patterns and challenges within FE colleges. Many learners demonstrate positive behaviours, including respectful interactions with staff and peers, active engagement in lessons, and a commitment to maintaining clean and orderly campuses. These outcomes are supported by an environment that fosters independence and adopts an adult-oriented teaching approach, which plays a crucial role in shaping such constructive behaviour. However, negative behaviours are also prevalent. Lateness, absenteeism, inappropriate use of social media, and vaping are commonly reported issues. More concerning behaviours, although less frequent, include incidents of sexual harassment, substance misuse, and peer violence. Staff note that serious incidents often arise from external pressures or unresolved personal challenges affecting learners.

The lasting effects of the pandemic continue to shape learner behaviour. Many young people exhibit developmental delays, particularly in social skills and resilience. Although the immediate impacts of the pandemic have lessened in the past year, the residual challenges are evident in learners' engagement and their capacity to cope with academic pressures.

Behavioural patterns vary across different learner demographics and college programmes. Younger learners, including those on 14-16 programmes as well as recent school-leavers, and those enrolled in lower-level courses often exhibit more frequent behavioural disruptions. Neurodivergent learners face unique challenges, such as difficulties with emotional regulation and peer interactions. Learners from marginalised groups, including LGBTQ+ students, are disproportionately vulnerable to bullying and harassment, as their identities are sometimes negatively perceived by peers. Male learners, particularly those on vocational trade courses like construction, are more likely to display negative behaviours. These include the use of inappropriate language towards female learners, often driven by an effort to fit in or assert dominance in predominantly male environments.

Colleges generally provide professional learning opportunities in behaviour management and trauma-informed practices, offering staff strategies to support learners with behavioural challenges. However, some staff report feeling overwhelmed when dealing with these issues on a regular basis, which can affect their ability to manage behaviour effectively.

Colleges are at varying stages in embedding behaviour management practices. Some institutions have established effective systems with clear frameworks to promote positive behaviour and address challenges, while others are in the early stages of development and face issues with consistency and resource allocation.

The stability and sustainability of behaviour management practices are further complicated by funding challenges. Colleges often rely on short-term funding streams, which hinder their ability to implement long-term support structures or retain skilled staff. This financial uncertainty undermines efforts to establish a consistent and sustained approach to managing learner behaviour, with implications for both the effectiveness of interventions and staff well-being.

Introduction

This report has been prepared in response to a request from the Welsh Government, as outlined in the [Minister's annual remit letter to Estyn for 2024-2025](#). It focuses on learner behaviour in further education (FE) colleges and will be delivered alongside Estyn's thematic report, *Fostering mutual respect - promoting positive behaviours in secondary schools*. The aim is to provide insights into the nature of learner behaviour in colleges and capture effective practice.

The review explores five key areas in relation to learner behaviour including:

- **An overview of learner behaviours:** Types of learner behaviour in various settings and how these have evolved, particularly post-pandemic
- **Factors influencing learner behaviour:** Factors like relationships, social media, and specific learner groups affecting behaviour
- **Responding to negative behaviours:** How colleges track, categorise, and manage behaviours, including disciplinary procedures, support for all learners involved, and staff support systems; it will also consider how this data and information is used
- **Promoting positive behaviours:** How colleges set expectations, target specific groups, and measure the effectiveness of positive behaviour strategies
- **Support and guidance:** Support for learners and staff, and how colleges collaborate with external bodies and make use of relevant guidance

To inform this report, we gathered evidence from a variety of activities, including:

- **National surveys:** We carried out two surveys—one targeting college staff at all levels, and the other aimed at learners.
- **College visits:** We visited seven colleges across Wales, ensuring a mix of locations (north, west, south, rural, and city-centre campuses). During these visits, which took place in the autumn term 2024, we engaged with key curriculum and business support staff at strategic and operational levels. We also interviewed learners across different age groups, programme levels, and those representing groups with protected characteristics such as LGBTQ+. We conducted learning walks and reviewed relevant resources and documentation to gain a broader understanding of learner behaviours in a college.
- **Union liaison:** We met with a group of college union representatives to discuss the impact of learner behaviour on staff well-being and workloads.

This report is intended for the Welsh Government, Medr, FE college staff, and key partner organisations that work with, or support, learners in FE settings.

Background

At a policy level in Wales, there has been limited formal review or guidance on learner behaviour specifically within further education (FE) colleges. However, the Welsh Government has recognised the importance of addressing this area, building on insights from previous thematic reviews. In particular, Estyn's 2022 report, [We don't tell our teachers](#), examined the experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among secondary school pupils in Wales, highlighting the prevalence of these issues and their impact on learner well-being. This was followed by the 2023 report, [Peer-on-peer sexual harassment among 16 to 18-year-old learners in further education](#), which extended this focus to colleges and offered a deeper understanding of general behaviour within these settings.

The 2023 report provided important insights into the behavioural challenges faced by FE colleges, emphasising the need for a strong safeguarding culture that fosters respect, healthy relationships, and consistent behavioural expectations. These thematic reviews informed the Welsh Government's policy direction, leading to a clear request for advice on learner behaviour in FE colleges to support the development of evidence-based recommendations. This report seeks to respond to that steer, ensuring that colleges receive the necessary guidance to promote positive behaviour effectively.

To build on the insights from these reviews, we examined articles and research focused on learner behaviour in FE colleges over the past five years. This analysis incorporated a wide range of perspectives, including the behavioural trends observed post-pandemic and effective strategies for fostering positive engagement. By consolidating these findings alongside the thematic reviews, this report offers an informed perspective on the factors influencing learner behaviour, the challenges faced by FE colleges, and the practices that have proven successful in addressing these issues.

Learner behaviour and the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

FE Week published an article titled [What's behind the rise in bad student behaviour in colleges?](#) (FE Week, 2024). In this article, author Jessica Hill describes how FE colleges are facing increasing levels of disruptive behaviour, suggesting that this trend may be inherited from schools. The article highlights a range of inappropriate behaviours, including cyberbullying, vaping, revenge porn, and smartphone addiction. Hill notes that:

College staff are now dealing with types of anti-social behaviour that were practically unheard of just a decade ago (Hill, 2024)

While the immediate effects of COVID-19 have lessened, the pandemic's impact has resulted in a significant number of disengaged young people who were either irregular attendees or had been excluded from school by the time they reached their GCSEs. A survey conducted for FE Week by the National Association for Managers of Student Services found that over three-quarters (77%) of college student support staff believe that students experienced greater dissatisfaction with society in 2023 compared to

previous years. Additionally, 71% of respondents think this discontent has led to an increase in challenging behaviour among students (Hill, 2024).

Understanding the influences on learner behaviour

This view is reinforced by the Education & Training Foundation's [Survey of safeguarding staff in post-16 providers in England: March 2021](#) which states:

Post-16 learners are presenting with a range of safeguarding concerns, of which the most cited were health, safety & welfare, mental health, bullying or harassment, self-neglect, risky personal behaviours and discrimination. There is an increasing prevalence of health, safety and welfare concerns, cases of cyber abuse and online harm as well as relationship and domestic violence, all of which may be interconnected and related to the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns. (The Education and Training Foundation, 2022, p. 15).

While the impact of COVID-19 is often cited as a reason for poor behaviour, other factors also contribute. The New South Wales Department of Education's [Factors influencing behaviour](#) highlights the roles of family, peers, and the wider community, as well as personal characteristics such as age, gender, personality, temperament, and both mental and physical health (New South Wales Department of Education, n.d.)

Risk factors, such as economic disadvantage, can increase the probability that a problem will develop and persist. Conversely, protective factors, such as a supportive family and community, can help minimize the impact of risk factors (New South Wales Department of Education, n.d.)

Effective strategies for behaviour management

In this context, a Unison guide to [Managing difficult behaviour in colleges](#) recognises the importance of staff collaboration in creating a supportive environment for learners. It highlights the significance of positive engagement and trust-building between staff and learners through warmth and clear communication. Furthermore, it stresses the need for staff to remain calm yet assertive, ensuring consistency regarding the consequences for poor behaviour.

Consistency of approach is essential in an institution; while it may seem tempting to break the policy when it seems more useful to do so, this strategy ultimately undermines the whole institution's approach by making it inconsistent from the student's perspective (UNISON, n.d., p. 8)

The perspectives in the Unison guide are echoed in Errol Ince's article, [Behaviour management requires a united staff front](#) (2021), published in FE Week. Ince discusses the critical role of building relationships to foster genuine connections between staff and learners, which can lead to enhanced engagement and improved behaviour.

Establishing genuine relationships with students is by far the most effective tool in the behaviour management toolbox. A person's ability to form a rapport with others will positively impact them in all situations (Ince, 2021)

Like the Unison guide, Ince highlights the importance of setting consistent expectations and the crucial role of enforcing rules to provide clarity. Additionally, the article stresses the need for calm responses, even in challenging situations, as this approach helps de-escalate conflicts and maintain a positive environment.

The Education and Training Foundation's guide to [Understanding and promoting positive behaviour in the FE sector](#) outlines key strategies for effective behaviour management. In addition to previously mentioned strategies, it emphasises the significance of fostering a welcoming culture, ensuring smooth transitions, and staff modelling desired behaviours. It also highlights the importance of making learners feel valued, reinforcing routines, and employing scripted interventions where appropriate. The guide underscores the need for a whole-institution approach to positive behaviour management, with leadership playing a key role in setting clear expectations and supporting staff through training, identifying the importance of building trusting relationships through empathy, active listening, and consistent rule application. The guide also highlights how personalised support promotes inclusivity, alongside restorative practices that help to resolve conflicts constructively, reducing exclusions and fostering a supportive learning environment. The guide includes a range of useful checklists and prompts to support colleges with understanding and promoting positive behaviour.

The role of data dashboards

While much of the research in this area is recent, earlier studies also provide valuable insights. For instance, the 2015 Staff and Educational Development research paper on Student Behaviour in Higher Education (Janes et al) identified the important role that systems such as student dashboards play in promoting positive behaviour by providing real-time data on engagement, including attendance, level of participation in lessons, and coursework completion, allowing students to reflect on their performance and set clear expectations for their actions. The report describes how the dashboard fosters peer influence, as students compare their engagement ratings with classmates, motivating them to participate more actively. Additionally, it facilitates early communication between tutors and students, helping to identify and address potential issues before they escalate.

The impact of learner behaviour on staff well-being

In October 2023, the British Educational Research Journal published a paper on [the impact of student conduct problems on teacher well-being following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic](#) (Oxley, Asbury, and Kim, 2023) which describes the direct link between poor learner behaviour and the negative impact on teacher well-being. The paper states:

Student conduct problems (often labelled as student misbehaviour) are one of the key factors associated with teachers' experiences of burnout (Aloe et al., 2014; McCormick & Barnett, 2011) and teacher turnover (Harmsen et al., 2018; Ingersoll, 2003) (Oxley, Asbury, and Kim, 2023, p. 201)

This view is echoed in Ofsted's 2019 report, [Teacher well-being at work in schools and further education providers](#), which cites poor behaviour as an attributing factor in low occupational well-being.

Recommendations

Further education colleges should:

- R1 Collaborate to ensure that those with less well-developed behaviour management approaches can learn from those with more well-established systems and processes, enabling them to improve and refine their own practices
- R2 Ensure that there is clear guidance available to learners about the responsible use of social media and implement targeted strategies to manage social media misuse through teaching and learning, and behaviour management processes
- R3 Identify staff who may be experiencing increased stress and establish additional support systems, to address their well-being, particularly for those typically working with more disruptive learners
- R4 Increase awareness among learners and staff about the availability of specialist behavioural support teams and services, ensuring clear communication channels and visible signposting throughout the college environment
- R5 Further develop tailored, inclusive support for learners who feel more vulnerable as a result of their protected characteristics, ensuring that behavioural support systems meet their unique needs

The Welsh Government should:

- R6 Lead on developing a unified national strategy to address vaping in educational settings, working collaboratively with colleges to implement clear policies, consistent enforcement, and education campaigns on health risks

Medr should:

- R7 Consider how FE funding methodologies can enable long-term funding for FE colleges to maintain effective behavioural management systems and support the retention of skilled staff

An overview of learner behaviours

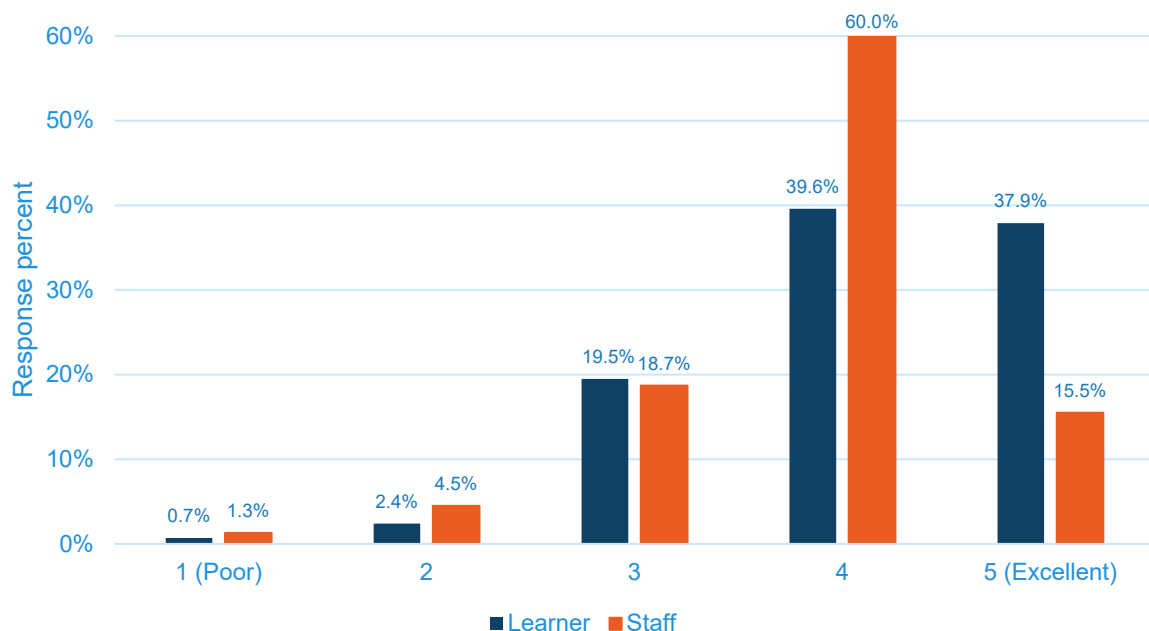
Positive behaviours

Many learners across the colleges we visited exhibited positive behaviours, strongly influenced by the supportive, adult-oriented approach of staff. These included:

- **Regular attendance and punctuality:** Demonstrating commitment to chosen courses
- **Respectful interactions with staff and peers:** Fostering a sense of community
- **Active participation in learning:** Reflected in strong levels of engagement during lessons
- **Well-maintained spaces:** Minimal litter and no visible graffiti, contributing to clean, orderly campuses

Learners frequently highlighted the relaxed yet structured nature of the colleges as a key difference from school. They valued the independence to manage their own schedules and appreciated the shared purpose with peers pursuing similar interests. This environment helped build a sense of belonging and encouraged maturity. Both staff and learner surveys supported this view with over 90% of respondents in both cases rating behaviour as three, four, or five where one was poor and five was excellent.

On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent, how would you rate the behaviour of learners in the college?



Response percent based on responses from 155 staff and 293 learners

Negative behaviours

While most negative behaviours were low-level, several common issues emerged across the colleges we visited:

- **Lateness and absenteeism:** This was supported in the staff survey with almost 60% of respondents identifying non-attendance and poor punctuality as one of their top three behavioural challenges.
- **Inattention in lessons:** This was more prevalent in less engaging or skills-based sessions.
- **Inappropriate use of mobile phones:** Learners recording and sharing content during class. This was the second most concerning behaviour identified in the staff survey.
- **Vaping and smoking:** Frequently observed near entrances and, in some cases, inside buildings. Learners highlighted vaping as the most common negative behaviour in both learning and communal areas, which was also identified as a top issue by staff.
- **Social media misuse:** This included name-calling and minor disruptive behaviour on social media platforms.

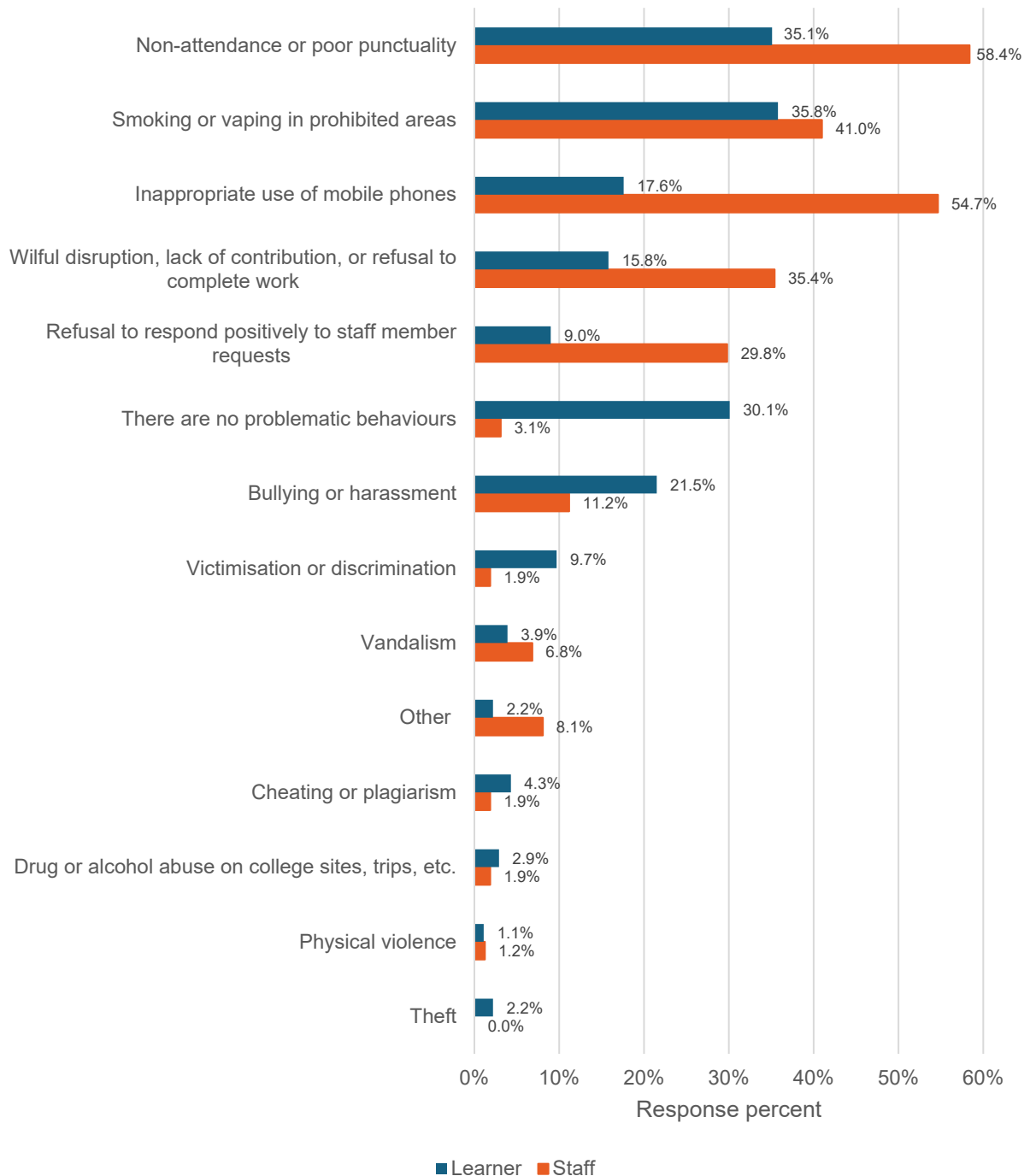
Though rare, more concerning behaviours reported during our visits included:

- **Peer-on-peer abuse:** Such as sexual harassment or coercive control.
- **Physical altercations:** Often linked to external conflicts brought into the college.
- **Theft:** Particularly in communal areas such as refectories.
- **Substance misuse:** Cannabis was the most common concern.
- **Misogynistic attitudes:** Influenced by high profile social media figures, leading to disrespectful behaviours towards female learners.

Staff noted that serious incidents involved a small number of learners and were often linked to individual circumstances, external factors, or unresolved personal conflicts. Vaping, in particular, emerged as a pervasive issue, with learners vaping frequently during breaks or between lessons.

The staff survey highlighted that refusal to respond to staff member requests was also a common issue, particularly where learners were displaying negative behaviours in communal spaces.

Based on your experiences in your classrooms or workshops this year, can you identify up to three types of negative behaviours that you most commonly experience?



Response percent based on responses from 161 staff and 279 learners

Variations across college programmes

Despite demographic and course-type differences, behavioural trends remained largely consistent across colleges. However, we found that learners and staff reported the following:

- **Younger and neurodivergent learners** exhibited punctuality issues and faced challenges with social skills.
- **In male-dominated courses**, concerns were raised regarding inappropriate language, misogynistic attitudes, and minor substance misuse.
- **Lower-level courses** reported higher levels of inattentiveness and instances of "internal truanting", where learners attend college but do not participate in lessons.
- **Larger classes in vocational subjects** experienced more frequent behavioural disruptions due to increased group sizes.

Despite these differences, discussions during our visits revealed that behaviour generally improved as learners adjusted to the expectations of their colleges.

Impact of the pandemic

Both staff and learners highlighted the substantial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner behaviours, with ongoing concerns still observed. Staff noted:

- **Developmental delays:** Many learners, particularly 16-year-olds, displayed maturity levels akin to younger children.
- **Lower resilience:** Learners were less able to cope with academic and social challenges.
- **Social skill deficits:** Reduced face-to-face interaction during lockdowns led to difficulties in building relationships.

While behaviour initially declined due to the pandemic, staff perceived that recent cohorts have shown gradual improvement as routines normalised and learning returned to pre-pandemic patterns.

Behaviour in specific settings

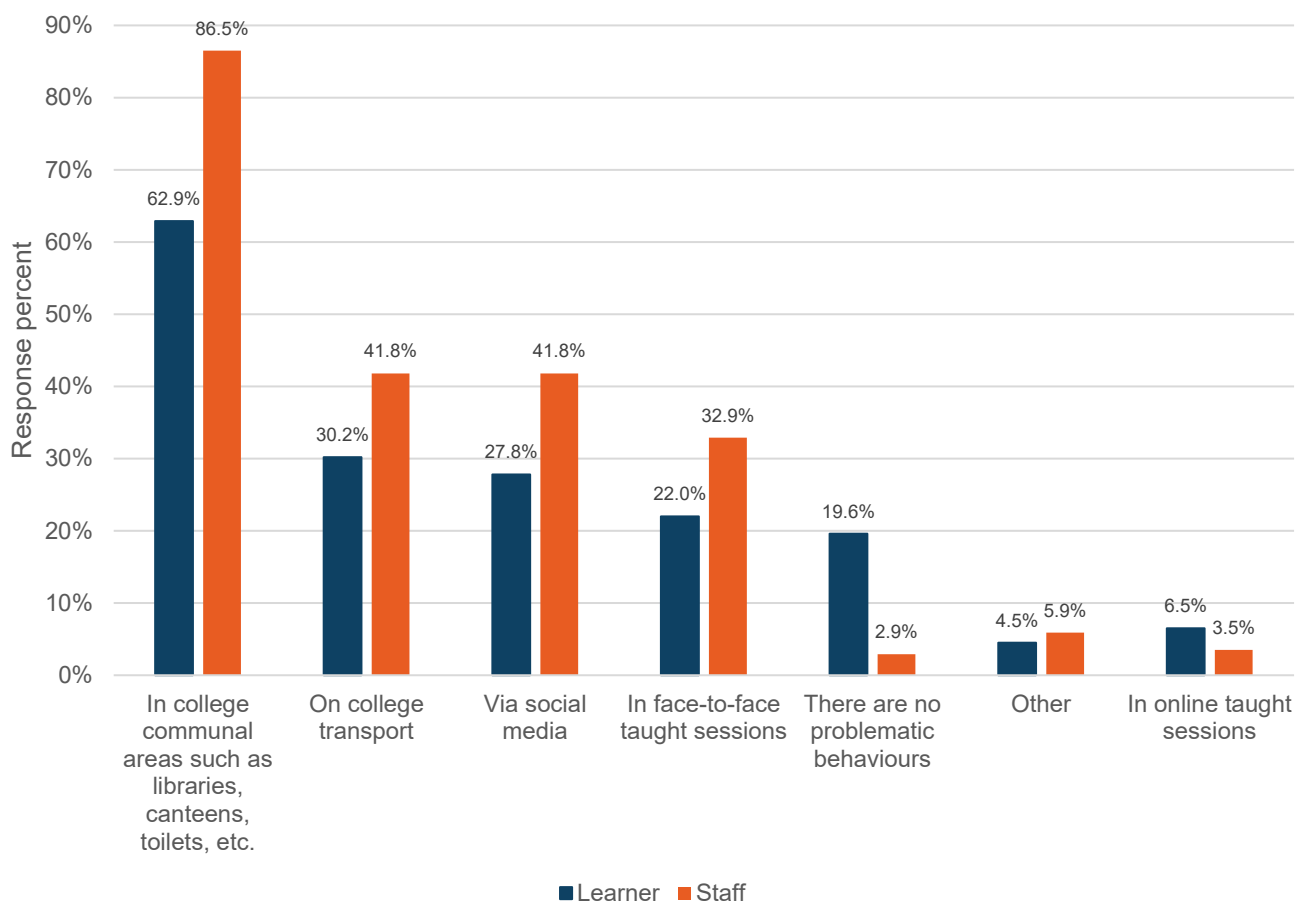
Our visit findings showed that behaviour varied across different areas of the colleges:

- **Classrooms:** Generally positive, especially in Level 3 programmes, although staff and learners reported that disruptions were more likely in larger groups, or less engaging sessions.
- **Communal areas:** These spaces, which included libraries, canteens, and toilets, were more likely to experience issues such as vaping and littering.
- **Transport:** Some disruptive behaviours, including vaping and disrespect to bus drivers, were reported, especially at the start of the academic year.

- **Online environments:** Social media misuse, such as cyberbullying, inappropriate content sharing, and disrespectful interactions, was a recurring concern.

These views were supported by the survey results which revealed that problematic behaviours among learners are most commonly reported in communal areas such as canteens, toilets, corridors, and smoking/vaping areas with a majority of learners and many staff identifying these areas as locations for behavioural issues. College transport was also a significant issue, with 30% of learners and 42% of staff highlighting poor behaviour on transport and at bus stops. Social media was frequently cited, with a minority of learners and around half of staff identifying it as a platform for problematic interactions.

In your experience, where are problematic behaviours more likely to take place? Choose up to three answers form the list below.



Response percent based on responses from 170 staff and 291 learners

Staff survey responses

Addressing emerging trends

Staff identified several emerging trends requiring attention:

- **Vaping:** An increasing challenge with learners vaping in prohibited areas.

- **Social media misuse:** Certain platforms, such as those with disappearing features/texts/images, were central to peer-on-peer bullying and harassment.
- **Misogynistic attitudes:** Influences from controversial social media figures were particularly evident in male-dominated courses, where inappropriate behaviours towards female learners occurred.
- **Mental health challenges:** Rising numbers of learners required additional support for anxiety and depression.
- **Additional learning needs (ALN):** Increasing numbers of young people with ALN, both diagnosed and undiagnosed.

Colleges with more established processes addressed these issues through clear policies, positive behaviour approaches, and trauma-informed practices. These measures helped create a supportive environment that encouraged respectful behaviour, while proactively addressing learners' diverse needs.

Factors influencing learner behaviour

Influencing factors

Our visits, which included discussions with staff and learners as well as learning walks, highlighted that several factors contributed to the promotion of positive behaviours across colleges:

- **Learner independence:** The ability of learners to choose courses and manage schedules fostered engagement and maturity, promoting responsibility and positive behaviour.
- **College environment:** Learners responded positively to the adult-orientated approach, with mutual respect and supportive relationships fostering better behaviour. Many learners appreciated a fresh start in learning in the college, which boosted their self-esteem and confidence.
- **Staff presence and visibility:** Consistent staff visibility in communal areas, corridors, and entry points promoted positive behaviour by fostering a sense of accountability and reducing opportunities for misconduct. Learners noted that behaviour improved considerably when staff were regularly present and engaged.

Designing college environments for success

The Torfaen Learning Zone of **Coleg Gwent** has designed its new learning environments to promote positive behaviours. Featuring large windows and open spaces, the layout creates an inviting, transparent atmosphere that encourages engagement and reduces feelings of confinement. This design fosters a calm, inclusive environment that supports both individual and group work, enhancing student well-being and encouraging respectful, productive behaviour.

Our visits also revealed that negative behaviours were also influenced by various factors, particularly among vulnerable learners:

- **Mandated Courses:** Learner behaviour was poorer in compulsory classes such as GCSE English and mathematics resits and essential skills, where content was often perceived as boring and not directly linked to career aspirations or personal interests.
- **Social media:** Platforms such as those with disappearing features/text/images exacerbated negative behaviours, such as bullying and harassment, and often played a role in prolonging disagreements and creating further conflict.
- **Pandemic-related disruptions:** Lockdowns and online learning reduced socialisation opportunities, leading to poor communication and social skills. Increased absenteeism was also linked to the assumption that learners could catch up later.
- **Personal circumstances:** Mental health challenges, adverse childhood experiences

(ACEs), and trauma shaped behaviour, particularly among vulnerable learners. Nearly half of learners in the survey identified personal circumstances as a significant factor in poor behaviour. The staff survey also reflected this, with almost 75% of respondents ranking it among the top three influences.

- **Inherited peer relationships:** Unresolved bullying or social issues from school carried into college, particularly in tight-knit friendship groups, leading to name-calling, exclusion, and harassment.
- **Building design:** While college spaces often fostered positive behaviours, the lack of clear distinctions between social, learning, and quiet areas led to confusion and misuse on occasion, with some learners sitting on floors eating in corridors.

Relationships with staff

Positive relationships with staff were an important factor in shaping good behaviour. Learners appreciated staff who treated them with respect, set clear expectations, and maintained professional boundaries. Many learners felt that the supportive, calm college environment was a marked improvement over previous school experiences where learners were more often instructed on what to do as opposed to having more freedom of choice. Where colleges adopted trauma-informed approaches, which involved creating an environment where staff were trained to understand and respond to the effects of trauma, alongside positive behaviour training, staff felt more able to proactively address behavioural challenges, creating a nurturing atmosphere where learners felt valued and respected.

Relationships with peers

Peer relationships were crucial in shaping behaviour. Positive peer interactions improved behaviour, but negative dynamics often led to bullying, exclusion, or harassment. Younger learners, especially those fresh from secondary school, were more prone to forming cliques, which sometimes led to isolation or exclusion of others. Staff interventions, such as group reshuffling or icebreakers, were effective to some extent in mitigating these challenges.

Patterns in learner groups

Based on our visits and the staff survey, several key patterns emerged regarding victims and perpetrators of negative behaviour:

- **Recipients of negative behaviour:** These learners were often quieter, exhibited characteristics associated with neurodivergence or ALN, and came from complex family backgrounds. Female learners in male-dominated fields like sports or construction were particularly vulnerable to bullying due to gender. Many victims also had mental health issues, anxiety, or lacked support at home. Additionally, learners from minority backgrounds (e.g. LGBTQ+, black, and minority ethnic learners) faced higher levels of harassment and discriminatory bullying.
- **Perpetrators of negative behaviour:** Often male, particularly those in vocational courses like construction, where disruption was sometimes seen as a way to fit in.

Many perpetrators came from multiple disadvantaged backgrounds, including low-income families, disrupted homes, or with ALN. Students from poorer socio-economic areas or those with ACEs exhibited higher levels of disruptive behaviour. These learners, often lacking emotional maturity, exhibited negative behaviours, sometimes driven by peer pressure, a sense of entitlement, or lack of accountability. Negative behaviour was more prominent in level 1 courses where in many cases, emotional maturity was still developing.

Considerations for learners with ALN

Learners with ALN faced unique challenges, contributing to their overrepresentation in incidents both as victims and as perpetrators. Common issues included:

- **Emotional regulation management:** Frustration or sensory overload led to outbursts or withdrawal.
- **Peer interaction:** ALN learners sometimes struggled to form relationships, leading to social isolation or conflict.
- **Resistance to change:** Transitions between lessons or new routines sometimes triggered anxiety or defiance.

Our findings showed that support and approaches to behaviour management for learners with ALN were generally comprehensive and robust, reflecting a commitment to inclusivity and individualised care. Examples included colleges implementing tailored, trauma-informed strategies designed to address the underlying causes of behavioural challenges, acknowledging the diverse needs of ALN learners. Consistent routines and one-to-one support were central to fostering stability, reducing anxiety, and minimising disruptive behaviours. Early identification of needs was a key priority, enabling timely interventions that pre-empted behavioural issues and supported the development of personalised plans to guide learners effectively. Collaboration with external agencies, such as local authorities and mental health services, strengthened the support framework, providing expertise to manage complex behavioural needs. Clear communication with both learners and their families was emphasised as vital to building trust, addressing behaviour holistically, and promoting consistency between home and college environments. Supported transitions, including mentoring programmes and structured pastoral lessons, were also highlighted as critical to helping ALN learners adapt to new environments, reducing the likelihood of behavioural difficulties during periods of change.

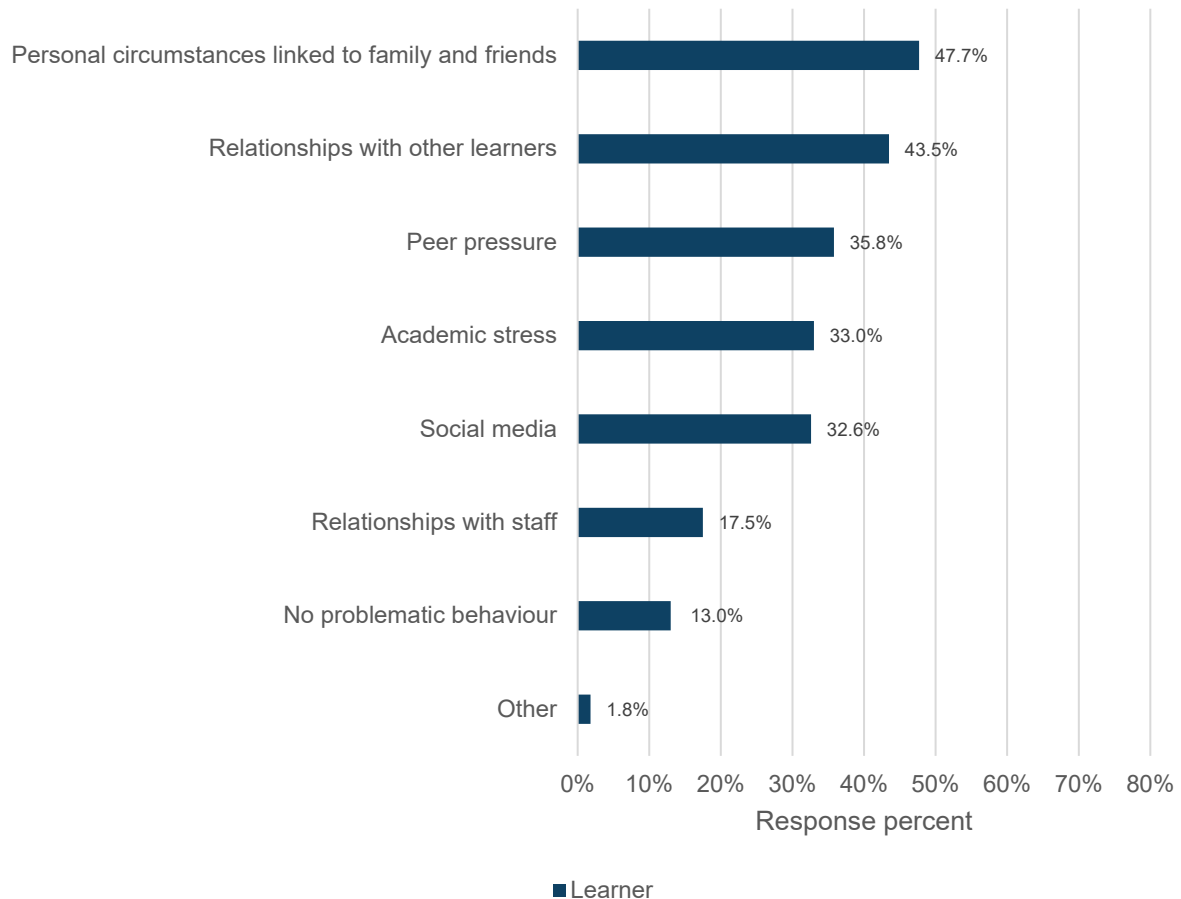
Role of social media

Social media played a dual role in influencing behaviour. While it facilitated connections for marginalised learners, it also prolonged conflicts and escalated bullying, harassment, and peer-on-peer abuse. Social media platforms were often cited as sources of inappropriate behaviour, such as photo manipulation or mocking others. Learners were often unaware of the impact of their actions, viewing them as harmless until confronted. The staff survey identified social media as the second most common factor influencing negative behaviour, with nearly 60% of respondents ranking it among the top three

factors. Many colleges have implemented digital awareness campaigns and clear reporting mechanisms, but social media remains an ongoing challenge.

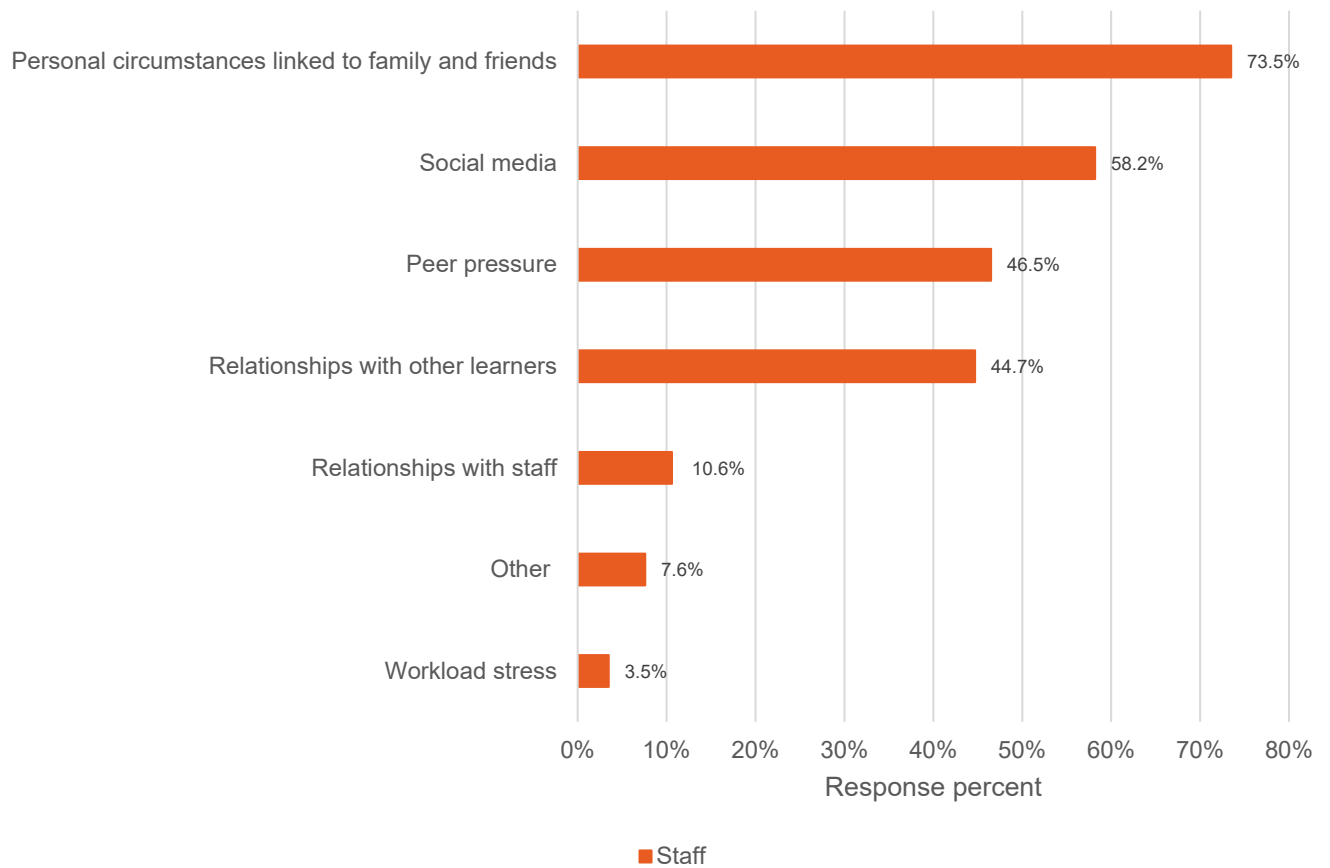
Which factors do you think influence poor learner behaviour the most? (Select up to three)

Learner survey responses



Response percent based on responses from 285 learners

Staff survey responses



Response percent based on responses from 170 staff

Responding to negative behaviours

Recording and tracking behaviour

Most colleges we visited had established processes for recording and tracking behaviour, often using digital platforms. Behavioural incidents typically recorded included punctuality issues, poor attendance, bullying, discrimination, disruptive behaviour such as phone misuse or vaping, and more serious incidents like fighting or substance misuse. The staff survey supported this finding, where almost 80% of staff reported that their colleges kept behaviour records. Among those who did not respond positively, almost all indicated that they were unsure whether these records were kept, rather than stating that they were not. These recording and tracking systems enabled staff to log incidents systematically, providing an accessible overview of individual and group behavioural trends.

In one college, behaviour recording was inconsistent, relying on informal communication or incomplete documentation. This hindered the identification of recurring issues and the evaluation of intervention effectiveness. Where this was the case, the college had introduced a pilot programme to include more robust digital tracking systems, which staff reported as improving both consistency and responsiveness.

Categorisation of behaviours

The categorisation of negative behaviours was a common feature in most colleges we visited. Clear frameworks were used to distinguish between minor, moderate, and serious incidents, helping to ensure proportionate responses. For example, minor issues such as occasional lateness were addressed informally, while more severe cases, including bullying or physical aggression, triggered formal disciplinary procedures.

Colleges that adopted structured systems, often referred to as tiered frameworks or behaviour matrices, provided clear examples of behaviours at different levels and corresponding guidance on appropriate responses. These systems supported consistency across departments and helped staff ensure fairness in addressing negative behaviours. However, in a very few colleges, staff noted a lack of clarity in categorisation, which led to inconsistencies in how behaviours were managed.

How information on behaviour issues is used

Behavioural data played a significant role in shaping college strategies and individualised interventions. Senior leadership teams frequently analysed aggregated data to identify trends and adjust policies. For instance, one college noted a pattern of increased disruptions during unsupervised periods and implemented structured activities during these times, leading to fewer incidents.

Behaviour records were used to tailor support plans on an individual level, such as assigning mentors to learners with high absenteeism and creating personalised timetables, which led to improved attendance and engagement. However, a few colleges reported a lack of staff expertise or time to analyse data effectively, hindering its application in decision-making.

Behaviour management approaches

Most colleges employed balanced approaches to behaviour management, combining sanctions with supportive measures. These policies aimed to address the root causes of negative behaviours while maintaining clear boundaries. Common strategies included:

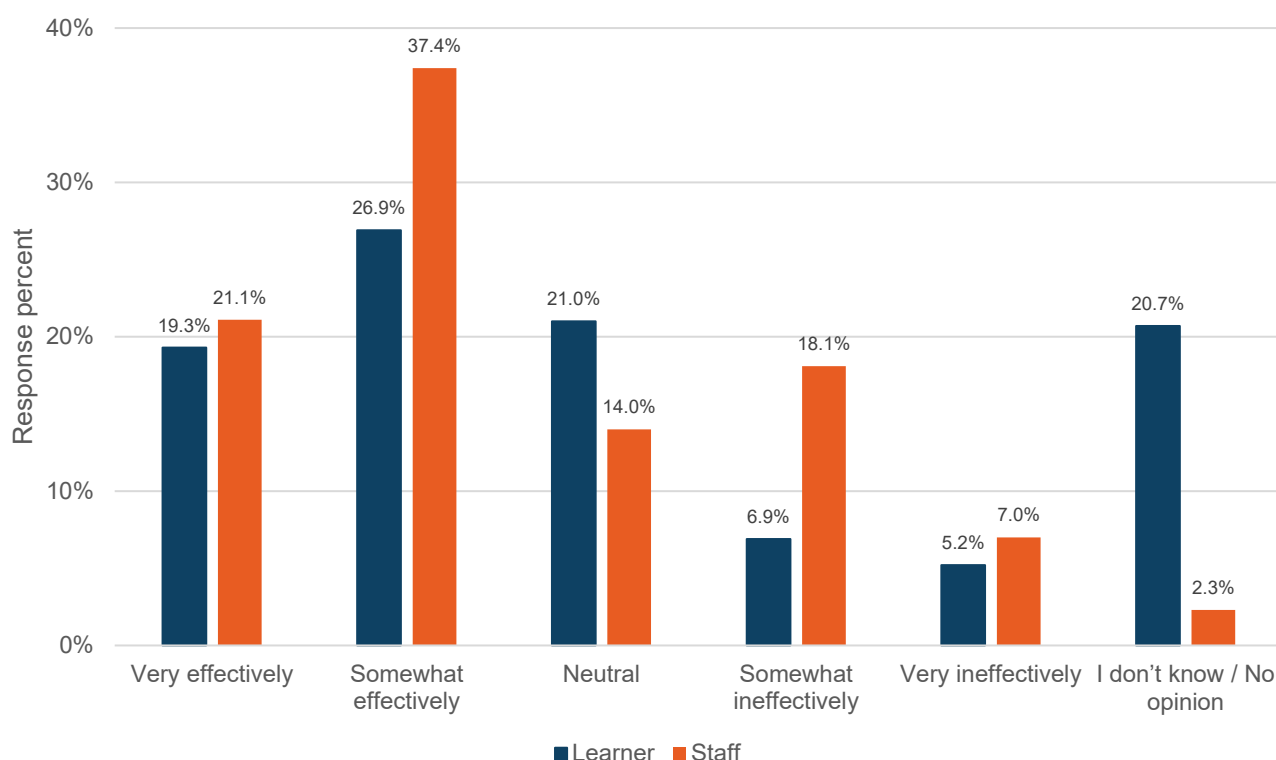
- **Pastoral interventions**, including counselling
- **Restorative practices** that facilitated meaningful conversations between affected parties
- **Staff behavioural workshops** focusing on skills such as conflict resolution or emotional regulation
- **Mentoring programmes**, pairing learners with supportive staff or peers
- **Alternative timetabling** or personalised schedules to address individual needs
- **Suspensions** paired with supportive measures to encourage reflection

In many cases, colleges had implemented specific frameworks to guide behaviour management. ‘**Ready, Respectful, Safe**’ was one such model, focusing on proactive strategies to encourage appropriate behaviours and prevent misconduct. Colleges using positive behaviour approaches, such as this, reported reductions in severe incidents and improvements in overall learner engagement.

Trauma-informed practices were also widely adopted, particularly in settings with diverse or vulnerable learner populations. These approaches helped staff understand the root causes of challenging behaviours and respond with empathy and targeted support. Staff reported that trauma-informed training had increased their confidence in managing complex cases effectively.

In a very few colleges, however, behaviour policies leaned heavily on punitive measures including formal disciplinary processes, in some instances leading to warnings, and action plans, and in certain instances suspensions or exclusions. Staff in these settings reported that this often failed to address underlying issues, leading to repeated misconduct. In response, these colleges had begun to integrate restorative approaches, reporting improved relationships between staff and learners as a result. The staff survey revealed that a minority of staff felt that learner behaviour was dealt with somewhat ineffectively or very ineffectively in their colleges. A minority of respondents shared that they did not know how their colleges evaluated the impact of their behaviour approaches.

In your opinion, how well does the college deal with poor learner behaviour?



Response percent based on responses from 171 staff and 290 learners

Decisions about suspensions and exclusions

Decision-making processes around suspensions and exclusions were guided by formal policies in most colleges. Typically, these processes involved:

- **A review of the incident** by senior staff to ensure that decisions were fair and proportionate
- **Efforts to explore alternative interventions**, such as restorative meetings or enhanced support plans, before excluding learners
- **Regular communication with parents or carers** to provide transparency and support

In a minority of colleges, inconsistencies were noted in how these decisions were made, often due to unclear policies or limited staff training. In the best cases, colleges introduced comprehensive training programmes and updated their disciplinary procedures to address these issues. These changes helped ensure fairness and consistency in handling serious behavioural incidents.

Where learners were suspended, colleges typically offered a structured approach to support reintegration and address any underlying issues. The period of suspension was not generally viewed as punitive, but rather as an opportunity for reflection and de-escalation, allowing learners to gain the necessary perspective before returning to their

studies. In cases of exclusion, colleges often brokered alternative arrangements through partnership working with local authority teams and other appropriate agencies.

Supporting positive change through clear steps

Cardiff & Vale College addresses behavioural and disciplinary issues through a clear three-stage process. Stage 1 focuses on early intervention, with at-risk students identified and reported weekly by engagement officers. Stage 2 involves clearer consequences, with defined thresholds for each stage and more consistent responses to poor behaviour. Stage 3 is the final stage, where formal consequences are applied, with four possible outcomes outlined including suspension and exclusion. The process is effective, ensuring staff consistency and appropriate responses. The impact has been positive, with improvements in handling behaviour and the introduction of a new, carefully developed behaviour management approach that was well-received by staff.

Promoting positive behaviours

Setting expectations and ensuring consistency

Most colleges set clear expectations for learner behaviour through structured policies and consistent practices, a finding echoed in the learner survey results in which 80% of learners stated that clear expectations were in place. Behavioural frameworks emphasised being prepared, showing respect, and maintaining safety. These principles were used across many institutions to provide straightforward guidance for learners and staff. Messaging was supported by bilingual posters, on-screen displays, and consistent reinforcement during induction sessions, ensuring accessibility for diverse learner populations. This view was also supported in the learner survey results where over two thirds of learners shared that those expectations in relation to behaviour had been made clear at induction. Campaigns such as "love your campus" further reinforced expectations, promoting pride in the learning environment through visual materials and staff communication.

Key approaches included:

- **Requiring lanyards** to be worn at all times, with staff consistently challenging non-compliance
- **Greeting learners** as they come into college and at the start of lessons and saying goodbye at the end to foster a culture of respect and consistency
- **Rewarding positive behaviour** through certificates, prize draws, and immediate feedback, which learners reported as motivating and encouraging
- **Explaining policies** to learners during induction, using accessible language and clear frameworks
- **Communicating with parents and carers** through reports, meetings, and engagement events ensuring families are informed and involved in supporting learner behaviour

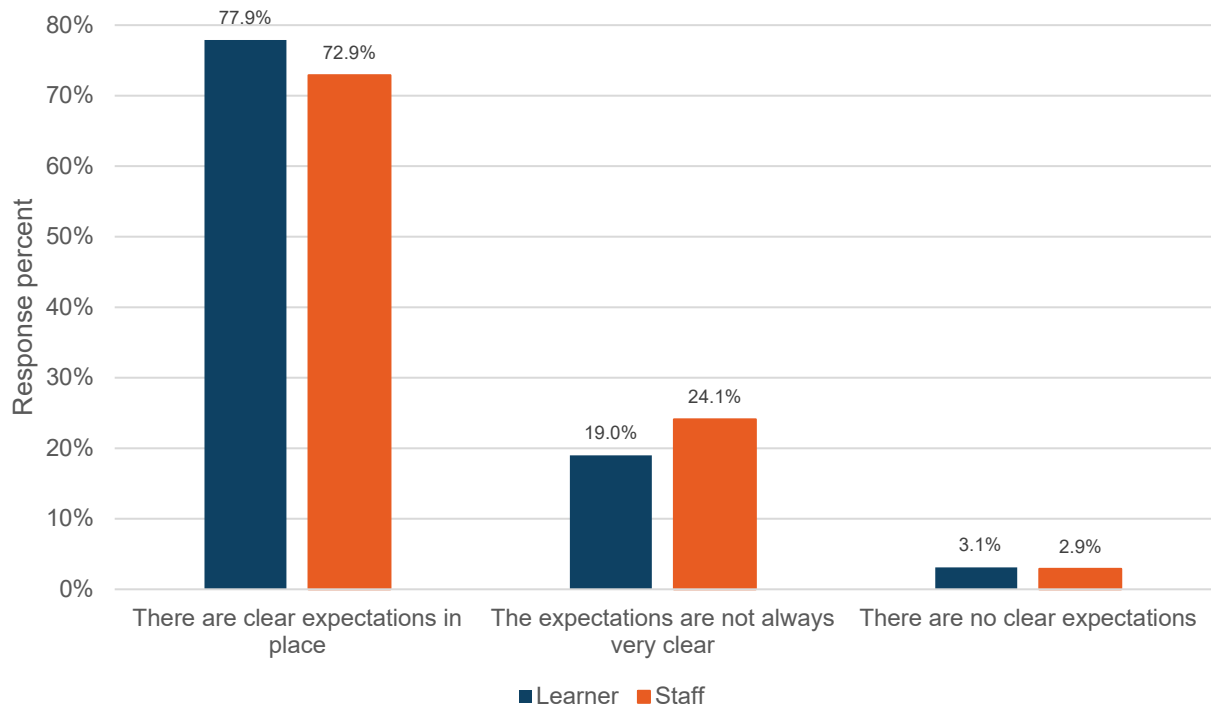
These strategies, combined with visual messaging, such as posters and digital displays reinforcing messages about expected behaviours, along with visible leadership, helped to establish and maintain a consistent culture of high expectations.

Embedding positive behaviours through Ready, Respectful, Safe

St David's Catholic Sixth Form College promotes its ethos of "Ready, Respectful, Safe" through a clear focus on fostering positive learner behaviours. These three principles underpin the College Charter and guide interactions in classrooms and the wider campus. The campaign emphasises practical actions and values such as punctuality, kindness, and prioritising safety, supported by visible reminders like posters. Staff model these behaviours through initiatives like meeting and greeting students, building relationships, and recognising positive conduct. A restorative approach is used to

address challenges, ensuring accountability and growth. This ethos cultivates a supportive environment aligned with the college's mission of respect and community.

In your opinion which of the following statements about behaviour are true about the expectations at your college?



Response percent based on responses from 170 staff and 290 learners

Setting the ethos and culture

The ethos and culture in the colleges we visited were shaped collaboratively by staff and learners, as well as with external partners such as the local police, community support officers, and the fire service. Roles such as pastoral managers and senior leaders overseeing behaviour played an important part in maintaining alignment with institutional values.

Key contributors included:

- **Staff at all levels**, whose consistent application of behavioural policies fostered trust among learners
- **Learners**, through roles like student representatives and ambassadors, played a key role in influencing policies and fostering a shared positive culture; half of the respondents to the learner survey reported that these types of opportunities were available for learners who demonstrated good behaviours
- **Parents and carers**, who were engaged through events and meetings, which supported mutual understanding of expectations
- **External partners**, such as police officers and local organisations, who delivered workshops on relevant issues like knife crime and social media awareness

- **Links with employers**, who set expectations about course demands and emphasised the professional behaviours required for the workplace

These collaborative efforts ensured behavioural policies were relevant and responsive to learner needs.

Partnerships in action: Transforming learner behaviours

Pembrokeshire College fosters positive learner behaviour through strong partnership and multi-agency working. The college maintains close links with schools via an annually reviewed agreements with the local authority and formal committee membership involving secondary heads and governors. Strong employer links play a pivotal role in open evenings, curriculum events, job fairs, and career-focused destination programmes, embedding workplace expectations into learning. The college also collaborates with the Regional Safeguarding Board and other FE institutions to strengthen safeguarding procedures and well-being initiatives. An on-site youth worker further supports learners through direct engagement with local authority teams, ensuring personalised transitions and a co-ordinated approach to learner success.

Behaviour focus in learner programmes

Colleges placed a strong emphasis on embedding behaviour into learners' programmes through structured activities designed to develop personal, social, and professional skills. Tutorials were at the forefront of this approach, providing a consistent and focused opportunity for learners to engage with key behavioural themes.

Key strategies included:

- **Tutorial programmes** were a cornerstone of behavioural development, addressing themes such as respect, resilience, and inclusivity. Sessions frequently explored critical issues, including racism, sexism, and modern social challenges, enabling learners to reflect on their own behaviours and societal responsibilities.
- **Pastoral sessions** complemented tutorials by focusing on broader well-being topics such as mental health, resilience, and safe social media usage, helping learners manage personal challenges.
- **Regular guest speaker events** brought additional expertise to behavioural programmes, covering topics like driving safety, anti-racism, fraud, and drug awareness, which learners found engaging and thought-provoking.
- **Recognition initiatives**, including termly prize draws, annual awards, and certificates for positive behaviour, motivated learners and reinforced the value of respectful and responsible conduct.

These structured activities were integral to fostering a culture of respect, inclusion, and personal growth, ensuring learners were well-prepared for future academic or professional pathways.

Immersive innovation: Shaping behaviours through experience

Coleg Cambria has made a significant investment in a virtual reality immersive room aimed at enhancing experiences around a range of topics, including behaviour. This resource is designed not only to support curriculum delivery but also to provide unique opportunities to promote positive behaviour. It can decrease discrimination through 'a journey through other cultures', promote understanding of body language and aggressive behaviour through 'a city centre demonstration experience' and reduce emotional crisis for neurodivergent and anxious learners through preparation before a live trip or visit. This initiative encourages discussions that help dismantle stereotypes and promote greater tolerance and understanding, ultimately influencing behaviours both within the college and in the wider community.

Approaches for specific groups and individuals

The colleges we visited employed a range of tailored approaches to support learners with additional needs or behavioural challenges. Where trauma-informed practices and proactive interventions were used, these approaches addressed specific requirements effectively.

Key approaches included:

- **Support for learners with additional learning needs (ALN)**, such as sensory-friendly spaces and individualised routines
- **Collaboration with schools** and local authorities to identify challenges early and implement one-to-one interventions
- **Access to well-being hubs** and time-out cards for learners requiring extra support
- **Specific events and policies** for diverse groups, including anti-racism workshops and Pride celebrations

These well-considered approaches ensured that learners were further supported to overcome barriers and challenges while also promoting a culture of respect, understanding, and inclusivity.

Support and guidance

Support for learners

The colleges we visited provided a range of targeted services to promote positive behaviour and address disruptive influences. Internal teams, such as well-being co-ordinators, provided early interventions for low-level issues such as poor punctuality and using phones without permission. Regular events introduced learners to support resources, particularly at critical times such as the start of term or after extended breaks. Trauma-informed approaches supported learners with complex behavioural challenges, including those with ALN. Safe, anonymous reporting systems encouraged learners to share concerns about bullying or harassment, promoting accountability and trust.

Interestingly, more than half of learner survey respondents were unaware if support was available for perpetrators or witnesses of negative behaviour. Nearly half were also uncertain about the availability of specialist staff to address behavioural issues. This uncertainty was reflected in the staff survey, where a quarter of respondents were unsure whether a dedicated learner behaviour team existed, and another quarter reported that no such team was available at their college.

External partnerships played a vital role in supporting learners and addressing behavioural challenges in the colleges we visited. By collaborating with a range of external agencies, colleges adopted a holistic approach that addressed both the immediate and underlying causes of disruptive behaviour. Partnerships with mental health services were particularly important in supporting learners dealing with issues such as anxiety, depression, and trauma, all common factors behind behavioural challenges. These collaborations not only helped improve engagement but also ensured that learners had access to the support needed to succeed. However, colleges reported challenges with accessing services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), citing huge queues (virtual?) and long waiting times thereby increasing the pressure on colleges who were trying to fill the gap.

Specific examples of these partnerships in action included links with **youth justice services**, which worked to address behavioural issues for learners at risk of criminal behaviour. The **Samaritans** offered essential emotional support, especially for those dealing with mental health challenges. Furthermore, colleges partnered with organisations like **food banks** and **welfare services** to help reduce socio-economic barriers that could negatively impact learner behaviour. **Safeguarding agencies** played a key role in managing complex cases, ensuring that issues like peer-on-peer bullying and sexual harassment were addressed effectively. These partnerships enabled colleges to provide targeted, comprehensive support, particularly for underrepresented groups, those with mental health challenges, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds, all of which contributed to more positive and supportive behavioural outcomes.

Collaborative support: Empowering positive learner behaviour

Bridgend College hosts regular support fairs as part of its commitment to improving learner behaviour, well-being, and reducing barriers to learning. These events, organised by the well-being team, are held three times a year – in September, January, and April. The fairs are supported by a wide range of local and national agencies, including NHS services, local authorities, and specialised community organisations such as Lads and Dads (supporting male students), Barod (alcohol and drug support), ARC (mental health services), and Sexual Health Clinics. These partnerships ensure that students have access to vital resources, including mental health support, sexual health advice, substance abuse assistance, and more. By providing these services in one accessible space, Bridgend College empowers learners to seek the help they need, improving engagement, retention, and overall behaviour.

Support for staff

Professional learning and training were widely available to staff in addressing learner behaviour, and the staff survey highlighted that the majority of respondents found the behaviour focussed professional learning to be somewhat or very effective. However, substantial shortcomings were evident in other areas of support, notably due to the lack of long-term security for internal referral structures. This issue stemmed from the time-bound nature of funding, which prevented these structures from reaching a well-established state. Further, the inconsistent availability of well-being and emotional support mechanisms for staff was also a notable gap.

What is working well

- **Training and development:** Staff appreciated the availability of training opportunities, particularly in trauma-informed practices, which enhanced their ability to manage challenging behaviours empathetically. Reflective observations and bite-sized sessions allowed for targeted skill development, and training extended to non-teaching staff to ensure a consistent approach across organisations.
- **Supportive structures:** Reflective conversations and well-being check-ins created opportunities for staff to voice concerns and feel supported. Dedicated pastoral teams and behaviour management specialists helped to alleviate the burden on teaching staff, allowing for targeted interventions and support by focusing on learner well-being, personal development, and behaviour, ultimately supporting delivery teams.
- **Resources and systems:** Behaviour tracking tools, such as dashboards and portals, provided staff with accessible systems for monitoring and addressing learner behaviour alongside clear processes detailing structured approaches to managing behavioural challenges. In addition, toolkits and tutorial resources supported staff with integrating a behaviour focus into the curriculum.

Fostering inclusivity: A collaborative toolkit for positive behaviour

Coleg Sir Gâr has developed a practical resource, the 'Creating an Inclusive Environment' toolkit, to enhance teaching strategies and support learner behaviour. This collaborative guide, shaped by input from the Learning Support Team, Teaching and Learning Team, staff, and learner feedback, offers classroom strategies, tips, and technologies to foster inclusivity. It encourages staff to better understand learner needs and adapt teaching delivery. While training is in its early stages, the toolkit promotes shared learning among staff, enhancing their ability to provide tailored, inclusive education and address behavioural challenges in a proactive, supportive manner.

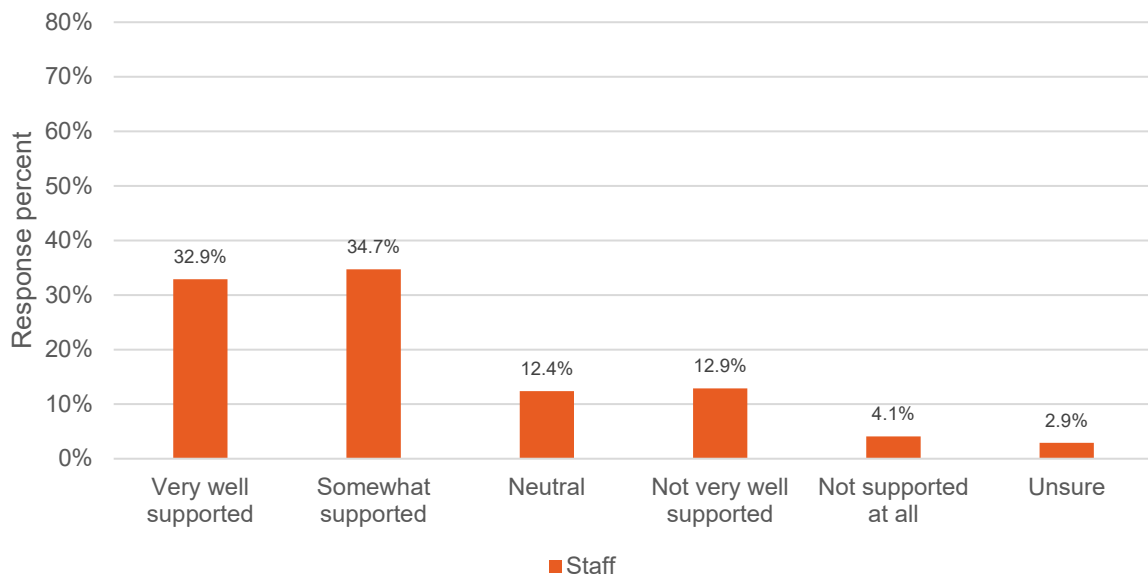
What requires improvement

- **Feedback and communication:** Staff often feel disconnected from the outcomes of behaviour incidents they report, with limited follow-up or clarity on resolutions impacting negatively on their confidence in the behaviour management process.
- **Resource pressures:** Rising demands for additional learning needs and mental health support are not always matched with sufficient resources, creating significant pressure on staff. Time constraints also limit opportunities for staff to participate in ongoing training and reflective practices.
- **Clarity in policies:** In a few instances, behaviour management policies, particularly newer initiatives, are not well understood by staff, leaving them uncertain about their roles and responsibilities. Clearer communication and guidance are needed to ensure consistent implementation.
- **Focus on staff well-being:** While well-being initiatives are appreciated, some staff feel that they are insufficient to address the emotional impact of managing challenging behaviours.

The majority of staff survey respondents felt that their colleges' behaviour policies were either very or somewhat effective, with most spending 20% or less of their working week addressing behavioural issues. When support was needed, staff typically sought assistance from line managers or colleagues, with two-thirds of respondents stating that they felt supported. However, the survey also revealed that, where poor learner behaviour was not consistently addressed, this impacted negatively on staff well-being. Many of the comments in the staff survey were echoed by union representatives and typically referred to increased stress, frustration, and anxiety, leading to burnout, higher absenteeism, and lower morale. Responses included comments about disruptive behaviour increasing staff workloads, and taking time away from teaching as a result of the administrative tasks associated with managing behaviour. Where inappropriate behaviour was not being managed consistently, staff reported feeling frustrated and powerlessness.

How well supported do you feel when faced with challenges relating to managing learner behaviour?

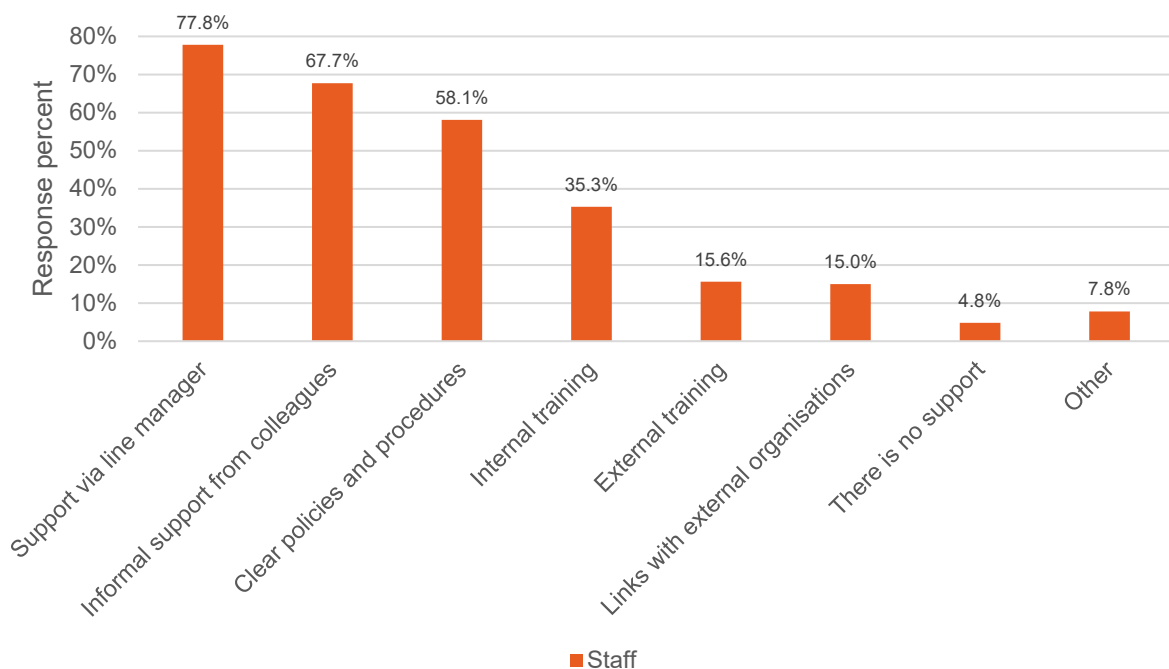
Staff survey responses



Response percent based on responses from 170 staff

In your experience, how are staff supported in addressing learner behavioural issues? Select all that apply

Staff survey responses



Response percent based on responses from 167 staff

Support from the Welsh Government and Medr

Findings from our visits revealed that a few colleges have accessed Welsh Government guidance to support their work around behaviour, for example the [Suicide and Self-Harm Prevention Strategy](#). However, colleges also identified gaps in governmental support, particularly around emerging issues such as transgender/non-binary learners, sexual harassment, peer-on-peer abuse, and healthy relationships. Additionally, several colleges noted that the current Welsh Government guidance does not comprehensively address emerging vulnerabilities, including those stemming from artificial intelligence (AI), social media, and vaping, highlighting gaps in support and guidance.

Colleges also face significant challenges due to the temporary nature of certain funding, particularly for key roles such as attendance and pastoral officers. The funding stream for mental health and well-being funding, operates on an annual allocation basis tied to budget setting processes. Now administered by Medr, this funding is subject to annual confirmation, which impacts on the continuity of these essential services and undermines the ability to establish long-term, sustainable support systems, particularly as external support services continue to be under increased pressure due to scale of demand. College leaders and staff expressed concern that this may lead to the loss of staff expertise in critical areas like trauma-informed practices and behavioural management, further weakening the colleges' support infrastructures.

Methods and evidence base

To inform this report, we collected evidence through a variety of activities, including two national surveys. One survey targeted college staff, receiving 172 responses, while the other focused on learners, with 295 responses. In the autumn term 2024, we visited seven colleges across Wales, representing a mix of locations, including the north, west, south, rural areas, and city-centre campuses. During these visits, we engaged with key curriculum and business support staff at both strategic and operational levels. We interviewed learners from different age groups and programme levels, including representatives from diverse groups such as LGBTQ+. Additionally, we undertook learning walks and reviewed relevant resources and documentation to gain a comprehensive understanding of learner behaviours within the college setting.

We also held meetings with college union representatives to discuss how learner behaviour affects staff well-being and workloads. Furthermore, we consulted with Colegau Cymru to explore concerns and insights regarding staff capacity and workload pressures as a result of the work they are leading on in relation to staff workload in further education settings.

Additionally, we conducted a desktop review to gather relevant documentation related to the study's focus. This review included an analysis of recent publications and resources, including previously published Estyn thematic reports. This approach provided a robust evidence base, enabling us to understand the prevailing issues and effective practices in the field, which underpin our findings and recommendations.

Estyn would like to thank the following organisations for their participation in this thematic review:

Organisation	Sector
Bridgend College	Further education
Cardiff and the Vale College	Further education
Coleg Cambria	Further education
Coleg Gwent	Further education
Coleg Sir Gar	Further education
Colegau Cymru	Education charity
Pembrokeshire College	Further education
St David's Catholic Sixth Form College	Further education
National Education Union (NEU)	Union
University and College Union (UCU)	Union

Copies of the questionnaires we used for this thematic review can be found on the publication page.

Glossary

ACE	Adverse Childhood Experience
ALN	Additional Learning Needs
ARC	Assisting Recovery in the Community
FE	Further Educations
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other sexual orientations and gender identities
Medr	Medr is responsible for funding and regulating the tertiary education and research sector in Wales. This includes further education.
NHS	National Health Service
Restorative approach	A restorative approach focusing on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships through dialogue, accountability, and mutual respect, rather than punishment. It encourages understanding the impact of wrongdoing and working together to find solutions.
Trauma-informed approach	A trauma-informed approach involving understanding and responding to the impact of trauma on individuals. It focuses on creating a safe, supportive environment where people's emotional and psychological needs are respected, helping them heal and thrive.

Numbers – quantities and proportions

nearly all =	with very few exceptions
most =	90% or more
many =	70% or more
a majority =	over 60%
half =	50%
around half =	close to 50%
a minority =	below 40%
few =	below 20%
very few =	less than 10%

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