

Equality and Social Justice Committee
Senedd
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

6 October 2023

Dear Equality and Social Justice Committee,

We are pleased to have the opportunity to respond and present our feedback to the **Equality and Social Justice Committee's Inquiry into the Welsh Government's Draft Child Poverty Strategy**.

Colegau Cymru is an education charity which promotes the public benefit of post-compulsory education and learning in Wales. We undertake research, policy development and provide practical support to FE colleges in Wales, working closely with Welsh Government, their agencies, and other stakeholders, we help shape policies affecting the FE sector, their learners and staff.

Around one in three children in Wales are now living in poverty. These figures are stark, and poverty levels in Wales remain stubbornly high. As society continues to recover from the impact of Covid-19 and the pressures of increasing inflation, the FE sector is continuing to do everything it can to support young people to gain the skills, qualifications and experience they need to help them escape a vicious poverty cycle, despite challenging economic circumstances.

Some of the most profound and damaging consequences of child poverty are the impact it has on learners' educational attainment, their wider wellbeing, and their future life chances. The Welsh Government's Draft Child Poverty Strategy offers a list of relevant policy initiatives, as opposed to clear targets, measurable indicators and robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms, as to who will deliver against those different policies in order to reduce and eradicate child poverty.

There is a growing number of young people who are turning their back on education and training opportunities, in place of immediate low skilled, high paid employment. Whilst this satisfies the short-term need to support themselves and/or their families, it will have a longer-lasting detrimental effect on their job and career prospects, as well as Wales' social and economic prosperity.

Apprenticeships

The Welsh Government's apprenticeships programme is delivered by colleges and private training providers in partnership with employers. Apprenticeships are key to helping unlock higher earnings in better careers for people, and can help to futureproof, motivate, and diversify the workforce.

However, the National Apprenticeship Minimum Wage (NAMW) is set at just £5.28 per hour (or £10,296 per annum for someone working 37.5 hours per week). Experience from across Wales demonstrates that it is incredibly challenging for young apprentices to pay for daily travel and food, on top of any learning materials, with a wage at this low level in place. Colegau Cymru has highlighted this issue previously in evidence sessions to the Senedd's Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee. Most recently, in his evidence session in September 2023, Dr Barry Walters, Chair of the Colegau Cymru



Strategic Work-Based Learning group, shared a story of one learner whose first two hours pay every day is swallowed up by the cost of two buses to get to work and the cost of lunch.

While recognising that the UK Government are responsible for setting the rate of the national minimum wage, the Welsh Government should nonetheless carefully consider what more can be done to support this group in order to both attract and retain young people in these all important apprenticeships. As a result of these cost pressures, some young apprentices are choosing to take up the opportunity of work in other sectors, which are often areas of the economy with poorer long-term progression and pay prospects. There is concern that young people who choose to go into full time work instead of joining a funded apprenticeship programme will not receive either the training they require or the wrap around support that their counterparts within education and training receive (for example mental health support, wellbeing support). This support is especially important for those learners whose families are living in poverty.

Colleges across Wales are doing everything they can to support learners from the most deprived backgrounds. One example is the Pembrokeshire College led work based learning consortium (B-WBL), which has created a Financial Contingency Fund (FCF) which supports students facing hardship. As a consortium, all allocations to members are top sliced, which is pooled into a deprivation fund. While in the past the fund has not been fully utilised, over the last 12 months there has been a significant increase in the demand for that funding. Evidence from colleges illustrates it is not only those learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds struggling with the cost of living, but now those middle earners are also facing financial hardship, therefore Colegau Cymru suggests that eligibility for receiving support from the FCF must be reviewed to reflect current hardship levels.

Post-16 Learner Travel

An ongoing concern across the college sector is the cost of the transport, and the resulting barriers facing some children and young people continuing their education and training. According to a new report from the Welsh Government, 41% of 16 to 24 years olds identified transport as being the number one barrier to getting a new course, training or a job.¹ Colegau Cymru welcomes the forthcoming review of the Learner Travel measure by the Welsh Government, and is keen to see a specific section relating to post-16 education as part of the review – to include both those who attend college, as well as those enrolled onto apprenticeships who have work placements.

Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)

The increase in the EMA allowance has been welcomed across the FE sector, however more still needs to be done to support learners who are struggling daily with the cost of living, and we look forward to the outcome of the full EMA review. In particular, we are keen to hear what flexibilities are available for learners with disabilities who receive EMA. With the scheme being based on attendance, learners with disabilities may find their payments in jeopardy over unexpected absences. In 2022, 38% of

¹ [Young Person's Guarantee National Conversation: update for participants](#)

children who lived in a family where there was someone with a disability were in relative income poverty compared with 26% of those in families where no-one was disabled.²

Family learning

Colleges across Wales deliver learning and support designed in different ways to meet different needs. Family learning can help develop positive attitudes to learning, and greater confidence and employability. Improved health and wellbeing and improvements to young people's development and attainment helps to break the link between opportunity and background. There are a wide range of programmes being carried out in communities across Wales in this space, being driven by the further education sector.

The Cardiff and Vale College Families Learning Together programme delivers a varied range of courses for adults and parents in over 80 schools throughout Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan. The courses provide families with the tools and knowledge to help parents support their children to learn whilst developing their own lifelong skills. Each course is tailored to the needs of the family cohort and supports the development of literacy, numeracy, Welsh, speaking and listening, science, digital skills, and English as a second language. The programme works with schools and community partners to engage families and break down barriers, develop links between local schools, the local community and the college, and fostering positive attitudes to education. The team deliver workshops in areas of high deprivation, according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD), during the school holidays which are free and fun, that all families can attend with their children. The programme links to the Community Focused School programmes and supports attendance and attainment of children in schools, and above all meets the goals set out in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. The programme is unique in its capacity to support that the Families Learning Together team see first-hand the implications of the cost-of-living crisis and help support their learners practically and emotionally. They distribute free period dignity care products discreetly in sessions, support them to access student discount apps for free food and heavily discounted products. They also continually discuss ideas and events that families can attend for free during term time as well as school holidays.

Success in education and training is a fundamental part of the route out of poverty for young people, and Colegau Cymru is committed to working with partners, including the Senedd and Welsh Government, to ensure that all children and young people have access to education, regardless of their background, and we are happy to engage further with the Committee on this important topic.

Yours sincerely,



David Hagendyk
Chief Executive, Colegau Cymru

² [Child poverty strategy: 2022 progress report | GOV.WALES](#)