

Introduction

As Chief Inspector, I have the privilege of meeting education and training professionals on a weekly basis, seeing the passion and experience they bring to ensuring that learners in Wales fulfil their potential. What I see as I write my foreword to this year's report is a nation that can demonstrate practice that's among the best. What I also see though is a system that has been held back by inconsistency, mixed priorities and at times a lack of good quality teaching and learning driven by strong leadership. I see both a past characterised by some fundamental issues holding back progress but also with a future potential to overcome these.

Exploring the contents of this report will reveal many strengths, but it will also underline a recurring theme: overall, the system has not worked cohesively enough to secure consistently high-quality teaching and learning. Initial teacher education has been unable to ensure that we have sufficient staff with the right skills and specialisms. There is a very mixed supply of professional learning for teachers, with significant weaknesses in the development of some of the basics of education, such as reading, mathematics and digital skills. We recognise the pressure providers face in accommodating and supporting those with diverse needs. However, the numbers of young people who are receiving, education otherwise than at school or elective home education are increasing ([Welsh Government, 2025](#)).

Looking to the future, there are grounds for optimism. Over the past few years we have seen a significant period of reform, Curriculum for Wales, emergence of the new School Improvement Programme (SIP), the creation of Adnodd¹ Adnodd is a Welsh Government arm's length body that oversees and coordinates the provision of educational resources in both Welsh and English to support the teaching and learning of the Curriculum for Wales. and Dysgu² Dysgu is the national professional learning and leadership body for maintained schools and settings in Wales. and of course Medr³ Medr, Wales's Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, is the arm's-length body responsible for funding and regulating tertiary education and research. This includes further education, higher education, apprenticeships, school sixth forms, adult community learning, and government-funded research and innovation.. If the new SIP brings local authorities, Dysgu and Adnodd together in a well-co-ordinated programme with clear goals, the effect will be clear. We will see it where it counts most, in our classrooms, for our learners. Similarly, if Medr retains and delivers on its ambitions and we can raise the expectations of our learners, we can see the growth in learners progressing to level 2, 3 and beyond in both general and vocational pursuits and we will also see a more engaged and skilled workforce and society.

Estyn remains committed to ensuring that our influence across the system we serve is rigorous, constructive and fair. Feedback on our new Interim Visits in schools and PRUs has been overwhelmingly positive, highlighting their value as a tool for supporting improvement. We continue with this approach alongside our core inspection work.

Over the next three years, we plan to build on this foundation by focusing on a few key areas. The first is a renewed emphasis on reading. We have agreed with the Cabinet Secretary to prioritise reading and we are now working with all sectors to share best practice, raise the expectations we

collectively hold, and support the SIP, Dysgu and Medr with this ambition. Reading is a fundamental foundation for education and employment, relationships, understanding, and creativity, so I feel it is right to start here. We will start a three-year programme of enhanced focus on reading across all our activities from September 2026 onwards.

Next year we will continue to look at the development of generative AI in education. Building on last year's thematic for schools and PRUs, we will continue to share effective practice and expertise with our sectors, as they develop their interaction with the technology. Like everything, AI must have a purpose for its introduction, and we will support the better understanding of how to safeguard, appropriately develop and evaluate the impact of such technologies.

Turning to our annual report itself, I want to thank every setting, school, college and training provider that welcomed us this year. The dedication of staff and the voices of learners remain the most striking features of our visits. Despite significant pressures, the commitment to education is clear.

Literacy at the heart of learning

Literacy continues to be the foundation on which wider progress depends. We saw notable strengths where schools embedded purposeful and systematic approaches to reading, writing and oracy across the curriculum. A small number of schools fostered a genuine reading culture, enabling pupils to engage critically with texts and transfer skills across subjects. Yet in too many cases, provision was tokenistic. Activities were not well aligned to progression, limiting pupils' ability to develop higher order reading skills or to write with precision. Oracy remained underdeveloped. Without a sharper and more consistent focus on literacy, learners will continue to fall short of their potential.

The centrality of teaching

The quality of teaching remains one of the most important factors in learner outcomes. In a minority of schools, we saw ambitious, well-structured lessons that stretched all pupils. Teachers in these classrooms had high expectations and strong subject knowledge, and used assessment intelligently. Where we saw weaknesses in pupils' learning, expectations were too low, lessons were slow-paced, and feedback was inconsistent. In schools, while many teachers are adapting the curriculum thoughtfully, close to a third are making slower progress in providing coherent, progressive learning experiences. If teaching does not improve in depth and consistency of quality, Wales will not deliver the gains it seeks from Curriculum for Wales.

Leadership and self-evaluation

Leadership has a decisive influence on teaching and learning. Where it is strongest, leaders set a clear vision, align professional learning with priorities and monitor impact with rigour. Too often, however, self-evaluation is superficial, compliance-driven and insufficiently focused on learners' progress. Weak self-evaluation undermines improvement planning, leading to vague priorities and limited accountability. This remains a system-wide concern. In particular, variation persists in the effectiveness of middle leaders and governors, and in how local authorities evaluate and support improvement. While a few authorities use self-evaluation purposefully to drive improvement across schools and services, most have yet to apply evaluation effectively. Unless self-evaluation sharpens significantly at every level, other reforms will be weakened.

Findings from our cross-cutting evaluations

Alongside core inspection work, this year we focused on:

- literacy and its impact on reading, writing and oracy
- planning for the development of pupils' numeracy skills
- supporting pupils to become independent thinkers
- the influence of leadership on teaching
- the development of the Humanities Area of Learning and Experience
- ensuring that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils reach their potential

These evaluations confirmed that while some schools are planning progressively for numeracy and developing engaging Humanities experiences rooted in 'cynefin', others still offer fragmented learning. Work to nurture independence in learners has grown, but in too many classrooms, adult direction stifles curiosity and critical thinking. There is variation in the success of providers in securing regular and attendance and sufficient progress in learning for pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Welsh language development

For the first time, our annual report includes inspection evidence on Welsh language immersion provision. These small, specialist provisions play a vital role in helping latecomers to develop confidence in their Welsh oracy. Local authorities were increasingly planning with ambition for Welsh immersion provision and to develop Welsh-medium specialist provision in their Welsh in Education Strategic Plans.

We also saw positive practice in our first Welsh for Adults themed inspection, with numbers of Welsh learners continuing to grow and impact being seen where Work Welsh activities were co-ordinated across particular employment sectors.

However, there are persistent challenges in ensuring the progressive development of Welsh language skills in English-medium education and training provision. We saw some positive work to raise staff awareness, confidence and Welsh language skills, for example in further education colleges. However, transition into post-16 Welsh-medium or bilingual provision and take up of Welsh-medium assessments in post-16 settings remained limited. This is particularly challenging in areas where there are fewer options for learners to continue their Welsh-medium education outside schools.

Additional learning needs

The new additional learning needs (ALN) system continues to embed, including in colleges and specialist post-16 settings, with strong staff commitment and increased person-centred approaches. The new Early Years ALN Lead Officers were working well with parents and settings to ensure the right support is in place for younger children with ALN. However, challenges remained across the education system in the interpretation of the ALN Code and the use of individual development plans.

Overall, inspection evidence suggests there continued to be increased demand for provision in special schools, pupil referral units and for individual tuition for pupils. We saw this beginning to impact negatively on the quality of learning experiences, for example with less room for sensory provision to help pupils regulate their emotions, or too many pupils with limited curriculum choices due to being on part-time timetables for too long.

Post-16 education and training

This year saw the first fully operational year for Medr, the new tertiary education body. We completed our cycle of apprenticeship inspections and saw the benefits for apprentices in terms of developing their practical skills, knowledge and confidence. However, providers and employers needed to plan more carefully for assessments to ensure that apprentices completed their programmes in a timely way.

We saw good practice in a minority of cases in adult men's prisons to develop learners' literacy and numeracy skills. However, provision for these was not always aligned well enough with vocational contexts.

In further education colleges, most learners developed the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to support their learning well. In a few cases, teachers did not challenge learners enough to achieve their full potential.

Most adult learners made sound progress over time, often overcoming significant hurdles. However, potential learners sometimes struggle to know how to access adult learning opportunities in their local area.

Wider sector insights

Well-being and safeguarding remain strong across most schools and providers, with inclusive cultures and effective pastoral support. Attendance, however, is still well below pre-pandemic levels, particularly among pupils eligible for free school meals or from low-income backgrounds. Schools that used attendance data intelligently and engaged families purposefully made progress, but national variation remains too great.

Youth services have again played a vital role in building confidence and resilience, while Welsh for Adults provision remains a national asset. Non-maintained nursery provision continues to enable young children to learn and thrive.

The recruitment of teachers remains an urgent priority. Shortages in mathematics, science and Welsh-medium education risk slowing reform and jeopardising ambitions for a bilingual workforce.

Looking ahead

The evidence from 2024-2025 shows that Wales has examples of innovation and strong provision to build upon. However, systemic weaknesses in literacy, teaching quality and self-evaluation must be addressed with urgency. Estyn will continue to provide independent scrutiny, highlight best practice and support improvement. Our role is to ensure that every learner in Wales benefits from consistently high-quality education and training. For Learners, for Wales.