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# Equity of curriculum experiences for pupils who are educated other than at school (EOTAS)

June 2023

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## Executive summary

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Sometimes, local authorities need to arrange for pupils to access education otherwise than at school (EOTAS). This may be because a pupil is ill, has been or is at risk of being excluded or struggles to access school due to their social and emotional or well-being needs.

Since the pandemic, local authorities report an increase in the referral rates for EOTAS provision. This is particularly evident for local authority arranged tuition services. There has also been an increase in referrals for younger primary-aged pupils. More pupils being referred have significant social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs, rather than behavioural needs which has historically been the case.

Generally, pupil referral units (PRUs) are making appropriate progress towards delivery of Curriculum for Wales, in many cases supported suitably by school improvement services. The breadth and balance of the curriculum offer across PRUs is appropriate and improving. This is particularly evident for older secondary-aged pupils with increasingly diverse qualification pathways that support pupils to access further education, training, or employment. Nearly all PRUs have strengthened their whole provision approaches to emotional health and well-being in response to their pupils' needs. Leaders of PRUs have invested in professional learning to improve staff's understanding of specific approaches to support their pupils' emotional health and well-being. In most cases, these approaches underpin the curriculum offer strongly.

Whilst all local authorities expect EOTAS pupils to access a full-time curriculum offer where appropriate, too many pupils only have access to part-time education. Across Wales, the use and quality of pastoral support programmes (PSPs) to support part-time arrangements are inconsistent. Local authorities do not monitor these arrangements robustly enough and this impacts on children and young people's right to full-time education.

Overwhelmingly, pupils prefer attending their PRU to mainstream school. Very few pupils interviewed missed or wanted to return to their mainstream school. They feel listened to and involved in decisions about the curriculum, particularly for older secondary-aged pupils. They articulate their concerns for return to mainstream education well and talk knowledgeably about what they perceive to be the barriers. They strongly believe their well-being is a priority in PRUs and as a result they feel supported, listened to and able to access learning through specialist support. This is often in contrast to what they experienced in their mainstream school. As a result, most pupils' behaviour improves during their time at their PRU.

There have been improvements in the use of decision-making panels across nearly all local authorities to determine the EOTAS provision required for individual pupils. These improvements include a wider range of panel members with appropriate

expertise and an improved quality of information submitted by mainstream schools to inform the decision-making process more accurately.

Local authority processes for agreeing the length of EOTAS placements and review of placements arrangements remain inconsistent. Where practice is most effective, placement length and quality assurance arrangements, including review dates for pupil placements, are agreed as part of the initial local authority panel meeting. This provides clear expectations, roles, and responsibilities for the EOTAS provider, mainstream school and local authority monitoring officers.

Too many primary and younger-aged secondary pupils remain long-term in EOTAS providers. As a result, only a very few of these pupils return successfully to mainstream school. Older secondary pupils remain in EOTAS providers with a focus on gaining qualifications, which equip them with the necessary skills for their next destinations. Overall, the local authority reported numbers of pupils leaving EOTAS providers who do not access further education, training or employment is low.

The main barriers to the successful reintegration of pupils to mainstream schools include the increasing levels and complexity of pupil needs, particularly for social emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, social emotional, behavioural difficulties (SEBD) as well as other underlying additional learning needs (ALN). Consequently, these levels of need can impact the duration of placement for pupils. In many local authorities PRUs are operating more in line with special schools with pupil placements being long-term at the PRU.

A minority of local authorities' processes to quality assure and support improvement in EOTAS providers are underdeveloped. Quality assurance of the curriculum offer in pupil referral units (PRUs) is more robust than in external EOTAS providers commissioned by local authorities.

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## Introduction

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This thematic report is written in response to a request for advice from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in his remit letter to Estyn for 2022/23. The report provides an overview of the curriculum experiences for pupils attending EOTAS providers across Wales. It evaluates the equity of the curriculum offer for pupils placed in EOTAS provisions, including their access to a full-time or part-time curriculum offer. It also considers how well local authorities evaluate and improve the quality and impact of provision and reports on transition between EOTAS and schools or post-16 provision. We highlight examples of good practice in local authorities where the quality of the curriculum offer supports the needs of pupils successfully and effectively supports their return to mainstream education, further education, training, or employment.

The report draws on evidence from 17 responses we received from surveys sent to all local authorities. In addition, we met with lead officers for EOTAS from 19 local authorities. As a result, we gathered information from all but one local authority in Wales. We also met with representatives from school improvement services and visited eight PRUs. During these visits, we met with the lead of the PRU and leaders for the curriculum. In total, we engaged with over 40 pupils across the eight PRUs. Evidence from nine PRU inspections since January 2019 is also included. Further details about the evidence base can be found in the [methods and evidence base](#) section of the report. No visits to other EOTAS providers were carried out and we did not include independent special schools or external providers used by mainstream schools in the review. Although local authorities can arrange EOTAS for older pupils, this review only focused on pupils of compulsory school age.

The intended audience for this report is the Welsh Government, leaders, and staff of schools and EOTAS providers, local authorities, and school improvement services. The report will contribute to professional discussions and inform the work of the Welsh Government EOTAS Advisory Group to strengthen the [EOTAS Framework for Action guidance](#) and support and improve the work of local authorities responsible for the delivery of EOTAS provision. It may also be of interest to the parents of pupils accessing EOTAS provision.

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## Background

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### What is EOTAS?

Sometimes, local authorities need to arrange for pupils to access education otherwise than at school (EOTAS). This may be because a pupil is ill, has been or is at risk of being excluded or struggles to access school due to their social and emotional or well-being needs.

The 2016, the Welsh Government '[Inclusion and pupil support](#)' guidance describes the range of EOTAS provision available in Wales, including PRUs, local authority arranged tuition services, work-related education, training providers, third sector organisations and tailor-made packages, such as a combination of providers with part-time attendance at a mainstream school.

In February 2022, 2,254 pupils were accessing some kind of EOTAS provision. That is 4.8 of every 1,000 pupils in Wales, which is down from 5.6 of every 1,000 pupils in 2009/10 (Welsh Government, 2022b). The most commonly used EOTAS provision is PRUs, with 44.5% of all EOTAS enrolments. As of January 2023, there were 21 registered PRUs across Wales. There are five local authorities without a registered PRU: Neath Port Talbot, Vale of Glamorgan, Anglesey, Gwynedd, and Blaenau Gwent. One PRU provides education through the medium of Welsh, in Ceredigion.

The registration arrangements for a pupil receiving EOTAS vary. This includes pupils with dual registration between a school and a PRU. Alternatively, pupils can have single registration with a PRU. Once a pupil is identified as requiring EOTAS provision it is the local authority's responsibility to co-ordinate and finance the provision. Out of the 2,254 pupils accessing EOTAS in February 2022, 1,814 are **mainly** educated outside school. That is 3.8 of every 1,000 pupils in Wales, which is up from 2.1 of every 1,000 pupils in 2009/10. In addition, there is an increasing number of younger pupils entering EOTAS provisions (Welsh Government, 2022b).

### Curriculum for Wales

The [Curriculum for Wales](#) offers increased flexibility and aims for all pupils to benefit from engaging in a wide range of learning experiences. It is recognised that learning in EOTAS settings may be combined with part-time education at mainstream school as part of the package designed to provide suitable education. As such, EOTAS often requires greater curriculum flexibility than mainstream education. Emphasis is placed on educational progress as well as the focus in EOTAS provisions to support pupils to address and overcome those barriers that are preventing them from accessing full-time mainstream provision.

Our 2016 report '[Education other than at school](#)' highlighted that, overall, EOTAS provision did not give pupils the same access to their curriculum entitlements as their peers in mainstream schools. A minority of pupils waited for more than 15 days to access provision, received a restricted curriculum, or followed courses that were not challenging enough. In addition, the report identified that EOTAS provisions did not

provide access to a broad and balanced curriculum to enable pupils to gain qualifications that meet their needs and potential.

In September 2022, the Welsh Government re-established the EOTAS Advisory Group to review and update the EOTAS Framework for Action (Welsh Government, 2017b; 2019b) taking into account the Children, Young People and Education Committee Inquiry into EOTAS Senedd Cymru 2019 and the twelve key principles of [EOTAS provision](#) which arose from the evidence gathered during the inquiry.

The Welsh Government EOTAS Advisory Group worked with Welsh Government officials to develop guidance to support the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales in EOTAS settings. Welsh Government sets out clear mandatory requirements in the [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Act 2021](#) including for PRUs and other EOTAS provision as set out in [Appendix 1](#).

The legal duties placed upon maintained schools in terms of the curriculum they must deliver differs from the duties placed upon PRUs and local authorities. The [Curriculum for Wales EOTAS guidance \(Welsh Government, 2022c\)](#) is for EOTAS provision, which is 'funded, organised and/or delivered by local authorities.' However, the principles of planning, designing, and implementing curriculum and assessment are broadly the same for mainstream and EOTAS settings.

In our [2022 report](#) it was recognised that the four regional consortia and the three local authorities no longer in a region have developed a vision for supporting schools and PRUs to develop their curriculum and improve teaching. In addition, all have developed helpful models that highlight the important principles of successful curriculum design in schools and PRUs. The report also recognised that all have worked well together to develop a national professional learning programme to support schools and PRUs. At that time, these professional learning opportunities provided a useful theoretical overview.

### **Local authority quality assurance processes for curriculum**

The 2016 guidance '[Inclusion and pupil support](#)' (Welsh Government) clearly states that local authorities remain accountable for the quality of education for EOTAS part or full-time. The monitoring and evaluation of provision should form a key element in local authorities' strategies and be included in their single integrated plans.

In [our 2016 report](#) we reported that most local authorities do not monitor or oversee EOTAS provision robustly enough. This report also identified that although most local authorities collect data on the qualifications gained by pupils receiving EOTAS, only a minority of local authorities monitored and evaluated the progress of pupils receiving EOTAS.

### **Return to mainstream education**

The [Children, Young People and Education Committee Inquiry into EOTAS](#) (Senedd Cymru, 2019a) identified twelve principles which include the support for learners to return to mainstream education. The report highlights that the system should 'encourage an approach, which is built around a presumption that the majority of learners, where safe and appropriate, will be supported to return to mainstream

education – this should include ensuring that there are high aspirations and expectations for EOTAS provision, and that the implementation of the new curriculum is ambitious about the learning and life-chances of learners who are educated otherwise than at school'. As a result of the inquiry these twelve principles are being taken forward as part of the Welsh Government renewed Framework for Action (Welsh Government, 2019b).

In our [2015 report](#) we clearly identify effective reintegration strategies. The report recognised that successful reintegration to mainstream schools varied considerably. However, several successful approaches were identified. These include where pupils retained close links with their mainstream schools, where pupils continued to have a regular weekly return to their mainstream school and the regular liaison between mainstream school and PRU staff including other professionals where relevant, and pupils stay on the mainstream school roll.

In the same report it is recognised that where pupils are reintegrated into school successfully, pupils, parents, PRU and school staff have a clear understanding that placement at a PRU is a short-term targeted intervention. However, for many pupils aged 15 to 16, a return to mainstream education is not an appropriate option.

This report will focus on these key areas of curriculum delivery, local authority evaluation, monitoring, and support to improve EOTAS provision, and the opportunities for pupils to return to mainstream education, further education, training, or employment.

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## Main findings

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### Curriculum experiences

1. Most leaders of PRUs recognise the benefits of the Curriculum for Wales and the flexibility this provides for the design and delivery of the curriculum. They recognise the need for pupils to be equipped with the educational tools to succeed as they return to mainstream education or transition into further education, training, or employment.
2. The most effective support for curriculum development for PRU staff derives from working as part of local school cluster arrangements. Where regional PRU networks are in place, these are identified as valuable arrangements, which allow colleagues to have professional discussions and to share good practice. This is not available to other EOTAS providers.
3. Many PRUs are considering the [Curriculum for Wales EOTAS guidance](#) (Welsh Government, 2022c) well as part of their overall curriculum design in line with the roll out of Curriculum for Wales. In many PRUs, staff have accessed valuable professional development, which focuses on approaches to support the emotional health and well-being of pupils.
4. One of the recommendations in our [2016 report](#) was that mainstream schools ‘should work closely with EOTAS providers to ensure curriculum continuity for pupils from their school’. There has been limited evidence of progress towards addressing this recommendation. In a minority of PRUs where practice is effective, there are successful links with the mainstream school to share curriculum planning to improve continuity in learning for pupils. There is little evidence of this practice across other providers for EOTAS. This remains an area for improvement.
5. In a few PRUs where practice is effective, the curriculum offer in the primary and younger secondary -aged phase is tailored to provide specific targeted interventions to support each pupil’s needs and their return to mainstream school. Strong working relationships remain in place between the mainstream school and the PRU to support shared placement arrangements. These include joint curriculum access and planning to ensure continuity of the curriculum offer with worthwhile opportunities for the mainstream staff to observe the pupil’s placement at the PRU.
6. In many PRUs, the curriculum breadth for older secondary-aged pupils to support transition to further education, training or employment is effective. The curriculum content allows pupils to access a wide and diverse range of qualifications to support their next steps well. Such qualifications provide a suitable range of academic, personal and social and vocational qualifications tailored to the individual needs of the pupil. As a result, there is a reported decline from local authorities in the number of pupils leaving PRUs and becoming ‘not engaged in education, training or employment’ (NEET).
7. There remain challenges for leaders of PRUs to appoint specialist subject teachers and too many PRUs have limited access to specialist teaching facilities. However, an

increasing number of local authorities are investing in improved, and in some cases, purpose-built PRU provisions that are fully equipped to support the full curriculum offer.

8. Too many pupils have part-time education arrangements which are not agreed consistently with the local authority. Pastoral support programmes are not used effectively or monitored well enough. As a result, part-time education remains in place for too long and impacts pupils' entitlement to a full curriculum offer. Processes to identify, monitor, review and challenge these part-time timetable arrangements by local authorities are not robust enough.
9. For pupils who receive tuition services, a very few local authorities provide more than 10 hours education per week. This offer impacts opportunities to access a full curriculum offer. Overall, too many pupils who receive local authority arranged tuition services, do not have access to a full curriculum offer. This limits their chances for a full-time return to mainstream education.
10. Where pupils have part-time education at a PRU or external EOTAS provider and mainstream school, many pupils do not attend their mainstream school when they should. Typically, this seems to be where pupils are not well supported during their time at the mainstream school and the communication and interaction between the mainstream school and EOTAS provider is underdeveloped. As a result, pupils have periods of time when they are not in education, and this raises concerns for the safeguarding arrangements for these pupils.
11. Overwhelmingly pupils prefer attending their PRU to mainstream school. Very few pupils interviewed missed or wanted to return to their mainstream school. They feel listened to and involved in decisions about the curriculum, particularly older secondary-aged pupils. They articulate their concerns about returning to mainstream education well and talk knowledgeably about what they perceive to be the barriers. These include views that schools are too big and that they do not have regular access to named staff members when they need support. They are also worried that schools do not provide them with sufficient opportunities to talk about how they feel or provide support to manage their feelings more appropriately. They strongly believe their well-being is a priority in PRUs and as a result they feel more supported and able to access learning through specialist support.

### Quality assurance processes

12. The pandemic has had, and continues to have, a negative impact across local authorities with an increase in referral rates for EOTAS provision. As a result, pupil numbers in EOTAS providers are increasing and pupils need to wait longer to access provision. Many local authorities identify an increase in referrals for younger pupils, and pupils with social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs rather than behavioural needs, which has historically been the case as well as pupils requiring tuition services.
13. In nearly all local authorities, there are no formal processes to evaluate and improve the curriculum offer for pupils across their EOTAS provisions as compared with their mainstream settings. Oversight is particularly weak for EOTAS providers who are not PRUs or independent schools. As a result, local authority officers, and their school

improvement partners, cannot make robust evidence-based judgements on the breadth and quality of the curriculum offer for EOTAS pupils, or work well enough with individual providers to support improvement. Support and challenge in PRUs is most effective when there are well-established, frequent purposeful visits from school improvement partners who have leadership experience in special schools or PRUs.

14. Too many pupils remain in EOTAS providers, and particularly PRUs, for too long. This impacts the ability of providers to deliver short-term interventions and return pupils to mainstream schools quickly enough.
15. Most local authorities have improved their use of decision-making panels to determine the EOTAS provision required for individual pupils. For example, they have widened panel representation and strengthened the quality of information submitted by mainstream schools to support the decision-making process. However, the number and frequency of panels can result in placement decisions becoming overly complex and lengthy, which delays access to placements for pupils.
16. Too many local authorities do not clearly identify the expected duration of placement in EOTAS providers for pupils. Equally, review processes for pupil placements in EOTAS providers are underdeveloped in many local authorities.
17. In recent years, there have been improvements in the reporting mechanisms to ensure elected members are informed about EOTAS provisions. This allows members to effectively challenge and question the quality of and value for money of the EOTAS provision within their local authority.
18. Overall, many local authorities are using the legal definition of EOTAS to help inform their EOTAS arrangements and provision. In a few authorities, the inclusion of elective home education (EHE) pupil numbers and arrangements funded by mainstream schools who use external providers which are not regarded as EOTAS provision is providing an inaccurate picture of the numbers of pupils who are EOTAS in their local area.

### **Transition between EOTAS and mainstream schools or further education, training, or employment**

19. The number of EOTAS pupils successfully returning to mainstream school over the last four years, reported by nearly all local authorities, remains very few. In a minority of local authorities, processes to plan for pupil reintegration to mainstream education are weak. A barrier to the successful reintegration of pupils to mainstream schools is the complexity of pupils' needs, which can include underlying additional learning needs (ALN). In many local authorities, PRUs are operating more in line with special schools due to pupil placements being long-term.
20. Where practice is effective, there are clear plans in place to consider the duration that pupils are placed in EOTAS provision. The roles and responsibilities of the mainstream school and transition arrangements for return to full-time mainstream school or further education, training or employment are clearly identified at the point of entry to the EOTAS provision. Placements are reviewed regularly and adapted to support the individual needs of each pupil robustly by the EOTAS provider and the

local authority. This process is less robust where local authorities commission external EOTAS providers.

21. In a few PRUs, local authorities have more recently introduced additional small class provision specifically to target shorter-term intensive support for primary and younger secondary-aged pupils. Where these arrangements are in place, local authorities are beginning to see an increasing, but small, number of pupils returning to mainstream school with support.
22. Opportunities for return to mainstream school for older secondary aged pupils remain an option, although this is less likely to be the pathway for most pupils. In nearly all local authorities, the curriculum offer for these pupils is focused on supporting a move onto further education, training or employment. This is most effective when the curriculum and qualification offer is tailored to meet pupils' needs, interests, and aspirations.

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## Recommendations

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### **PRUs and mainstream schools should:**

1. Share practice with each other and work with local authorities, pupils, and parents to strengthen opportunities for pupils to return to mainstream education
2. Monitor pupils' attendance closely to ensure they access their full provision and, in particular, to safeguard pupils where they access education part-time in a different provider

### **Local authorities and their school improvement services should:**

3. Support more pupils to return to mainstream school where appropriate through:
  - strengthening short term intensive support in EOTAS provision
  - ensuring placement decisions are taken promptly and identify an agreed duration, clear roles and responsibilities and a review date
4. Secure curriculum provision in PRUs which meets the needs of all pupils working with the management committee and teacher in charge
5. Secure curriculum provision in EOTAS providers other than PRUs
6. Strengthen the quality assurance and monitoring processes to ensure effective delivery of the curriculum offer in all EOTAS providers
7. Robustly challenge and monitor the attendance of pupils across EOTAS providers including the appropriate use of part-time timetables and pastoral support programmes

### **The Welsh Government should:**

8. Update and ensure delivery of the EOTAS Framework for Action including all relevant accompanying EOTAS guidance to reflect the recommendations of this report

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## Curriculum experiences

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### The Curriculum for Wales

The Curriculum for Wales, with its focus on the four purposes and pupil progression, offers increased curriculum flexibility, allowing more pupils to benefit from a wider range of engaging learning experiences. It has been developed to be accessible to all. The planning, design, and implementation of a curriculum in PRUs and other EOTAS provision should provide a clear progression pathway to support each pupil.

All primary schools and funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales have been required to implement their curriculum from September 2022 for pupils up to Year 6. Secondary settings had the option to engage with Curriculum for Wales requirements a year early in September 2022 in respect of their Year 7 pupils. Curriculum for Wales will be mandatory for all Year 7 and 8 learners from September 2023. Secondary schools are then required to roll out their new curricula arrangements on a year-by-year basis through to Year 11 in September 2026. These arrangements also apply to pupils of the same ages in PRUs and other EOTAS providers.

The [Welsh Government's EOTAS guidance](#) (2022c) sets out what is needed over and above what is required for all pupils in the Curriculum for Wales framework. However, the principles of planning, designing, and implementation of curriculum and assessment are broadly the same for mainstream and EOTAS settings.

Many PRUs are carefully considering the Curriculum for Wales EOTAS guidance as part of their overall curriculum design. This guidance highlights the importance of the emotional health and well-being of pupils, which has been central to curriculum planning and delivery in PRUs over several years. Leaders of most PRUs recognise the need for pupils to be equipped with the educational tools to succeed as they return to mainstream education or transition to further education, training, or employment.

#### **Ty Glyn PRU, Torfaen**

From September 2022, the PRU introduced the Curriculum for Wales for all pupils. Leaders and staff have been trialling and evaluating the curriculum offer over several years. Over time, staff have become more confident in designing a flexible curriculum to meet pupil needs.

Health and well-being is the area of the curriculum that they have improved most. They now provide around 7 to 8 lessons per week for all pupils. During these lessons, pupils learn about a wide range of areas, such as diversity, British culture, disability and the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. Workshops focus on healthy relationships, sexual health and decision-making which includes work around risk-taking.

As a result of the increased focus on health and well-being, leaders feel that pupils are gaining in-depth knowledge and understanding of how to keep themselves safe

and understand how to make informed decisions. Pupils are keen to have open dialogue in lesson time and share their personal concerns and the implications of these concerns. Leaders are seeing pupil behaviour improve as pupils know they can talk to staff who understand their concerns and support them to take appropriate action. Consequently, pupil engagement in learning is improving and pupils enjoy attending the PRU.

Generally, PRU leaders recognise that the Curriculum for Wales provides more opportunities for pupils to engage in authentic learning experiences which support social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), and social emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. They view the more flexible approach to the curriculum as beneficial and many PRUs are well underway with their curriculum design and implementation.

### **The Bridge Alternative Provision Portfolio PRU, Bridgend**

The curriculum focuses on mental health, well-being, and relationships and sexuality education (RSE), with a pupil-centred approach to curriculum design. At the primary phase, the Curriculum for Wales is being developed positively. Learning is planned through themes and delivered through the areas of learning and experience (AOLEs). For younger pupils in the secondary phase, the PRU is trialling a similar thematic approach in readiness for full implementation in September 2023. In addition, all pupils choose and undertake a range of enrichment activities, which include sport, music, art therapy and drama therapy, to help support and develop their expressive and physical skills and interests.

Pupils have a strong influence over their learning, for instance through the school council, curriculum planning sessions and pupil surveys. Teachers adapt learning and the range of qualifications offered to respond to pupils' ideas and to suit the pupils' needs, abilities and interests.

Leaders are of the opinion that pupils' engagement in learning has improved over time. Their willingness to try new experiences has increased, which builds their self-confidence and supports a positive self-image. Leaders also report that this is impacting positively on pupil behaviour, attendance and their interactions with their peers.

The most effective support for curriculum development in a majority of PRUs comes from working as a part of local school cluster arrangements. In addition, where regional PRU network groups operate, this allows colleagues to discuss and share effective practice around the design and implementation of a curriculum to reflect the requirements of the Curriculum for Wales and meet pupils' needs. However, these practices are not in place across all PRUs or available to other EOTAS providers.

Where local authorities commission external providers for EOTAS, including independent special schools, most have either commissioning frameworks or contract management processes in place. As set out in the [Welsh Government's EOTAS guidance](#) (2022c) local authorities are responsible for the curriculum

requirements which these providers offer. These requirements include teaching and learning in other areas as well as the mandatory elements. Appendix 1. However, across most local authorities the curriculum arrangements require strengthening.

### Curriculum experiences

In our 2016 report '[Education other than at school](#)', we noted that pupils receiving EOTAS do not usually have access to a broad and balanced curriculum that enables them to gain qualifications that meet their needs and potential. Since then, progress is evident in the PRU sector with improvements seen in the curriculum breadth for older secondary-aged pupils to support transition to further education, training, or employment. The curriculum content allows pupils to access an improved range of relevant qualifications to support their next steps well in many PRUs. Such qualifications provide a suitable range of academic, personal, and social and vocational qualifications tailored to the individual needs of the young person. As a result, local authorities report a decline in the number of pupils leaving PRUs and becoming 'not engaged in education, training or employment' (NEET).

#### **Pembrokeshire Pupil Referral Service**

For older secondary-aged pupils, there has been a focus on enhancing the curriculum offer. As a result, the PRU has broadened the curriculum by providing opportunities for all pupils to learn skills through different activities. These activities include paddle boarding, basketball, boxing, swimming, and a debate club which provide opportunities for pupils to gain a range of relevant qualifications. Pupil voice is integral to the development of the curriculum offer. Person-centred planning (PCP) meetings help staff to identify support for individual pupils such as a specific life skill like using money. As a result, the curriculum prepares pupils for their next steps in education, training, or employment.

Pupils respond to the flexibility in the curriculum approach and the different qualification pathways available to them. Pupils access a range of GCSEs, as well as vocational qualifications. Staff support pupils to raise their aspirations through a range of activities including:

- a pre-engagement programme with the college
- work with Careers Wales
- a partnership with a vocational training company
- links with industry and apprenticeships.

As a result, very few pupils leave the PRU without a planned destination.

Underpinning the curriculum offer is a focus on pupil well-being and emotional health linked with individual pupil need. There is a positive working relationship with other agencies, including the police, school nurses and the youth offending service to provide a joined-up approach to supporting each pupil both at the PRU and in the community. An Emotional and Well-being team is based on the PRU site to support the effective sharing of information, training, and access to curriculum support for all pupils.

Between January 2019 and January 2023, we have inspected nine PRUs. In a minority of the reports PRUs are not providing a sufficiently broad and balanced curriculum. Most of the PRUs are providing an effective curriculum to support pupils' personal and social development which places a strong emphasis on pupils' emotional well-being. In most PRUs the curriculum offer for pupils' Welsh language and culture is underdeveloped. In addition, in many PRUs the progression of information and communication technology (ICT) skills across the curriculum is limited.

In most of the PRUs inspected there is effective progress in preparing for the Curriculum for Wales, for younger pupils. This is more variable for pupils aged 11 to 14. Across the PRUs for pupils aged 15 to 16 there is variability in the range of learning experiences, including qualification pathways to prepare pupils for transition to further education, training, or employment. Leaders report that their vocational curriculum offer has been impacted by the pandemic.

There remain challenges for leaders of PRUs to appoint specialist subject teachers. In a few cases, leaders are working creatively with local secondary schools to share teaching resources and specialist teachers to limit the impact of these issues on pupils' learning. In addition, too many EOTAS providers have limited access to specialist teaching facilities, such as for science. There are a few local authorities investing in improved, and in some cases purpose-built, PRU facilities equipped to support the full curriculum offer. However, where the challenges of recruitment and teaching facilities remain, this shortfall means that pupils miss important aspects of education, which can impact their future chances of employment or training. This was reported in our 2016 review '[Education other than at school](#)' and remains a concern.

Where practice is effective in PRUs, assessment and tracking processes are well established. They support staff and pupils to understand progress in learning and identify gaps in learning that need to be addressed swiftly and accurately. Learning experiences are tailored well to pupils' needs. For example, where pupils are not ready to access learning experiences in the local community, PRUs provide these experiences on site. In several PRUs, they set up learning experiences which emulate those found in the community, such as a visit to the beach, hospital, dentist or café, and use these well to support pupils' learning in a safe environment.

One of the recommendations in our 2016 '[Education other than at school](#)' report was that mainstream schools should work closely with EOTAS providers to ensure curriculum continuity for pupils from their school' (p. 8). There has been limited evidence of progress towards addressing this recommendation. In a minority of PRUs where practice is effective, there are effective links with the mainstream school to share curriculum planning to improve continuity in learning for pupils. There is little evidence of this practice across external providers for EOTAS. This remains an area for improvement.

In many PRUs, staff have accessed valuable professional learning, which focuses on approaches to develop and support the emotional health and well-being of pupils. In most cases, professional development has been sourced directly by PRU leaders.

### **Bryn Y Deryn, Cardiff**

When pupils at Bryn Y Deryn find learning challenging and struggle to engage, staff put in place well-being support based on trauma-informed approaches to address these issues, build relationships and review the barriers to success in that area of learning. In many cases, this support focuses on improving pupils' self-confidence and addressing gaps in their learning. These well-being sessions allow pupils time to talk with staff, so that they can identify the best ways to support and to help them to succeed. Leaders report that this is proving to be a successful approach which empowers pupils and helps them re-engage with areas of learning they have previously found difficult.

### **Access to full-time education**

In our report '[Education other than at school](#)' (Estyn, 2016) a recommendation highlighted the need for local authorities to provide all pupils receiving EOTAS with a full-time curriculum that meets their needs, enables them to achieve their potential and ensures that they are re-integrated wherever possible. As part of this thematic review, we found that this remains an important area for improvement.

Nearly all local authorities expect pupils in EOTAS providers to have full-time education. However, a minority acknowledge that pupils may require part-time education for specific reasons, for example, pupils who struggle to access their full-time EOTAS provider due to experiencing high levels of anxiety. As identified in the Welsh Government report '[Inclusion and pupil support](#)' (2016), EOTAS providers should agree all part-time arrangements with their local authority. Where pupils access a part-time education due to behavioural needs or disengagement, each pupil must have a pastoral support programme (PSP) in place.

Currently, there are too many pupils who have part-time arrangements which are not agreed with the local authority beforehand. EOTAS providers do not use or monitor PSPs consistently or well enough to support pupils. As a result, part-time education remains in place for too long and impacts pupils' entitlement to a full curriculum offer.

For pupils who receive tuition services, a very few local authorities provide more than 10 hours education per week. In only a very few local authorities, pupils access a full curriculum as part of the local authority tuition service offer. This may involve additional access to digital learning and emotional health and well-being activities. However, overall, too many pupils who receive local authority tuition services do not have access to a full curriculum offer. This limits their chances for a full-time return to mainstream education.

### **Rhondda Cynon Taf**

The local authority provides a combination of full-time community tuition for secondary-aged pupils and one-to-one tuition, depending on pupils' needs and age. Up to thirty pupils can access full-time community-based tuition as part of the overall PRU provision. The local authority and the leader of the PRU recognise the importance of a full curriculum offer as opposed to 10 hours a week. This increased offer provides opportunities for pupils to engage with a wider range of learning experiences and skills and supports their return to full-time education.

The aim of community tuition is interim full-time provision before a return to mainstream school. Pupils remain dual registered with their mainstream school and the PRU during this short-term arrangement. All older secondary-aged pupils can access up to 7 GCSEs or their equivalents as part of their tuition package if a return to mainstream school is not appropriate.

The tuition service is under the management of Tŷ Gwyn, PRU. All curriculum planning and assessment arrangements mirror that of the PRU. Quality assurance and monitoring of the curriculum offer, and pupil progress is part of the PRU process. This provides a consistent approach and opportunities for the sharing of resources to support pupil progress. Last year, 26 pupils returned from the tuition service to full-time mainstream education.

Across Wales, expectations for pupils' attendance at EOTAS providers varies, depending on the different EOTAS package in place for each pupil. For example, pupils may attend a PRU for four-days a week, with a one day return to their mainstream school. Where practice is effective, PRU staff provide support for the time that pupils return to the mainstream school. This includes support for the mainstream school staff to develop effective behaviour strategies, support for interventions to access learning and modelling techniques to help pupils remain calm and focused. This approach develops mainstream staff's skills, allows for a consistent approach to manage pupil behaviour and improves the confidence of pupils in the mainstream setting. As a result, there is an increased likelihood of a successful return to mainstream education.

#### **Ysgol Plas Cefndy, Denbighshire**

Denbighshire has an all-age portfolio PRU, which operates across three sites. Primary-aged pupils have short-term and part-time placements at the PRU. Pupils either attend for five mornings, with afternoons in their mainstream school, or vice versa. Pupils have a block placement, usually for one term, which can be extended if required. This allows pupils to keep their identity in their mainstream schools and ensures that the mainstream school remains responsible for them, which supports full reintegration. This set pattern also helps curriculum planning between the school and PRU. PRU staff fully support the pupils during their time in the mainstream school. This strengthens the working relationship between the school and PRU. As a result, there are high rates of return for primary-aged pupils to their mainstream school.

Where pupils are not supported well at their mainstream school, and communication and interaction between the EOTAS provider and the mainstream school is underdeveloped, many do not attend the mainstream school when they should. When this happens, their mainstream school is not always aware of where the pupils are, and the pupils have no access to education during this time. This is a significant shortcoming and poses a serious safeguarding concern.

Our 2016 report '[Education other than at school](#)' states overall that EOTAS provision did not give pupils the same access to their education entitlements as their peers. In addition, the report highlighted that a minority of pupils wait for more than 15 days to

access provision, receive a restricted curriculum, or follow courses that are not challenging enough. We found that there has been progress made in addressing this recommendation across most local authorities. However, in a very few local authorities, the time taken between panel agreement for an EOTAS placement and actual access to the full-time provider remains too long. In addition, frequently there is no other educational support in place for the time that pupils are waiting to access their EOTAS full-time placement.

### Pupil voice

Nearly all pupils feel they contribute to what goes on in the PRU, including what they like to do and what needs to be improved in the curriculum. Pupils gave examples of how PRUs achieve this, for example through suggestion boxes, suggestion boards, weekly class time to look at what has gone well, pupil surveys, progress meetings and school council meetings.

Nearly all pupils respond positively to the subjects on offer and in many cases the increased range of options available to them. The wider range of experiences, such as rock climbing, abseiling, and swimming, are enjoyable and motivate them to attend regularly.

Pupils talked enthusiastically about examples of learning in subjects, which they had missed in the mainstream school due to their weaker attendance or periods of exclusion. Pupils feel there is more flexibility in the curriculum offer in PRUs. They like the range of subjects and qualifications available. For example, GCSEs, the Duke of Edinburgh Award, Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and Agored Cymru. They appreciate having access to practical qualifications which help them get a job.

Older secondary-aged pupils feel well supported to help them think about their next steps in preparation for leaving PRUs. Frequent visits with PRU staff to colleges and local employers help them think about what options are available to them when they leave. Nearly all pupils in this age range mention the strong support from Careers Wales advisers, who spend time with pupils in PRUs on a regular basis.

Nearly all pupils have more support from staff in the PRUs when compared with their mainstream experiences. They feel they have help with their learning from staff who know them well. They appreciate developing coping strategies such as breaks in learning and time to talk to staff.

Nearly all pupils agreed that staff listen to them and are always available to talk, especially when they are having difficulty in lessons. They identify that staff listen but do not judge what they are saying. They feel they are respected by staff, and this is important to them. This is often in contrast to what they experienced in their mainstream school. As a result, most pupils' behaviour improves during their time at their PRU.

Most pupils talked about how much more time is spent on well-being compared with their mainstream experiences. One pupil stated, '*when we are here our well-being comes first – in mainstream the tests come first*'. Mental health issues are well

understood by staff, and they can support pupils with strategies to manage difficulties. Pupils comment that staff in mainstream schools are not trained well enough to manage and support pupils' mental health, and this forms a barrier to accessing learning. Nearly all feel there are too few staff in mainstream schools to speak to, and when they do, they often don't understand their problems.

Very few pupils miss, or want to return to, their mainstream schools. However, pupils who are reintegrating are involved in the planning process, which they see as positive. Overall, from our meetings with pupils, they are highly positive about their experiences and their curriculum opportunities in their PRUs.

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## Quality assurance of the curriculum offer

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### The role of the local authority

Each local authority has the responsibility to make provision for the education of children of compulsory school age who require education other than at school. Overall, many local authorities are using the legal definition of EOTAS correctly to help inform their EOTAS arrangements and provision. In a few authorities, their interpretation of EOTAS legislation and guidance is inconsistent. This is particularly concerning in local authorities where elective home education (EHE) and arrangements funded by mainstream schools<sup>1</sup> who use external providers are included both of which are not considered as EOTAS. This impacts negatively on their overall understanding of how many pupils are EOTAS in their local area. Including them in data returns to Welsh Government results in EOTAS pupils being inaccurately reported via the EOTAS census.

Most local authorities have referral panels in place to consider requests from schools for EOTAS provision. The name, number, frequency and make up of these panels vary across regions and local authorities.

The number of decision-making panels can vary from one to three in different authorities. Where there is more than one panel in place, this is often determined by the type of provision required for an individual pupil. For example, schools may refer a pupil to the additional learning needs (ALN) panel, who may pass the referral to an EOTAS panel. If an out of county placement is then required this may be considered further by the Complex Needs Panel. Whilst there are less concerns about what panels are called, the internal number of panels required to make a placement decision can be lengthy and time consuming. In some cases, this prevents pupils from gaining access to placements promptly.

Similarly, the frequency of panels can vary between weekly, fortnightly, monthly or half termly. Local authority arrangements for the frequency for panel meetings tends to reflect the demand for referrals.

Panel membership is equally as variable across local authorities. In the most effective examples, there is a multi-agency approach including membership from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), social services and the

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<sup>1</sup> The Welsh Government's Education otherwise than at school framework for action (2019) identifies that 'A number of mainstream schools commission services which they refer to as 'Alternative Provision'. It is important to note that the term 'Alternative Provision' is not defined in primary legislation which applies to Wales. The use of this term alongside EOTAS has caused confusion within the sector about who maintains responsibility for the services being used. The Welsh Government recognise that this confusion is compounded by the use of the term 'Alternative Provision' within some non-statutory guidance'. The guidance identifies that while it is appropriate for schools to commission external providers as part of the delivery of their curriculum arrangements, 'The Welsh Government does not consider it appropriate for schools to commission external provision for the purposes of addressing behavioural issues, for example, home tuition for school refusers.'

teacher-in-charge of the PRU. Where these arrangements are operating well, a high level of sharing of information strengthens the decision-making process.

The Welsh Government 2016 [‘Inclusion and pupil support’](#) guidance clearly states that local authorities remain accountable for the quality of education for part-time or full-time EOTAS. In our 2016 review [‘Education other than at school’](#), we report that most local authorities do not monitor or oversee EOTAS provision robustly enough.

The Welsh Government (2020) [Review of Local Authority Commissioning Arrangements for Education Otherwise than at School Provision](#) identified that the majority of local authorities were confident they adopt appropriate criteria for assessing the quality of external providers and the review found that provider policies and processes are considered extensively within this assessment. The fieldwork with local authorities revealed that a more formal and robust quality assessment of providers is undertaken by those which adopt a competitive tendering process to identify providers. However, overall, there is less focus on assessing the quality of provision for learners when accessing external providers.

### Local authority quality assurance processes

As part of this thematic review, we found that there is still too much variation across local authorities and school improvement services in the quality assurance processes for the curriculum offer in EOTAS providers. A few local authorities’ quality assurance processes are underdeveloped. Only a very few local authorities have made in-depth evaluations of the curriculum offer for pupils across their EOTAS providers, when compared with their mainstream schools. As a result, many local authorities and school improvement services are not able to make robust evidence-based judgements on the breadth and the quality of the curriculum offer for most pupils who receive EOTAS.

Many local authorities expect EOTAS providers to deliver English and mathematics as part of the main curriculum offer. However, outside of these two subject areas there is little evidence of any other curriculum requirements from local authorities. Local authority officers generally report that the curriculum offer should be flexible and reflect the needs of individual pupils. In the few local authorities who commission external EOTAS providers, there is less evidence of the breadth and balance of the curriculum offer in these provisions. As a result, local authorities do not have robust evidence to evaluate pupils’ experiences and progress well enough.

Many local authorities leave PRU quality assurance processes in the hands of the PRU management committee. As local authority officers are part of the management committee, they consider that this provides appropriate quality assurance. However, the robustness of management committees to evaluate and support improvement in the breadth and balance of the curriculum across PRUs is inconsistent.

Where local authorities work with regional school improvement partners, they provide the quality assurance of the curriculum offer in PRUs. In these cases, school improvement partners engage solely with PRUs and are not responsible for any other EOTAS providers that the local authority has in place. Overall, the work of the school improvement partners, and curriculum quality assurance systems are variable. The

expertise of the school improvement partner in supporting and quality assuring the PRU curriculum offer in most cases is not specific enough and reports are too generic. Where school improvement partners have leadership experience in special schools or PRUs this significantly strengthens the quality of the assurance processes.

#### **Newport local authority**

In Newport local authority, there is a robust quality assurance cycle in place. This involves the school improvement partner, and the local authority. Professional discussions are held using the Team Around the School (TAS) approach which includes the PRU leader. Areas for discussion include the curriculum offer in the PRU which is tailored to meet the range of ages and needs of pupils across the PRU sites. Where there are concerns, these can be escalated to the formal schools causing concern meetings which are regularly held by the local authority.

Where school improvement partners are not involved, local authority officers are directly responsible for the quality assurance of the curriculum offer in all the EOTAS providers. In these cases, quality assurance processes remain too dependent on the level of knowledge and experience of officers to evaluate and support improvement in the quality of the curriculum offer effectively. As a result, quality assurance processes are not robust enough in a minority of local authorities.

In a very few local authorities, EOTAS steering boards operate at a strategic level to monitor and oversee decisions for the EOTAS service. These arrangements significantly strengthen the quality assurance processes across EOTAS providers including an oversight of the appropriateness of the curriculum offer.

#### **Swansea local authority**

In Swansea local authority, the EOTAS steering group is responsible for the strategic monitoring of all EOTAS provision. Each half-term, this group monitors whether EOTAS providers deliver appropriate education for pupils and adhere to local authority policy. Where concerns are raised these can be addressed in a timely manner with identified lead officers having responsibility for the actions.

The Welsh Government's 2020 report '[Review of Local Authority Commissioning Arrangements for Education Otherwise than at School Provision](#)' notes that most local authorities have either contracts or service level agreements in place with external providers. However, it recognises that local authorities could be more proactive in the monitoring of provision particularly around the quality of provision and the extent to which the provision meets pupils' needs.

Where local authorities commission external providers for EOTAS, most have a commissioning framework or service level agreement in place which includes a quality assurance framework. These contractual agreements provide inconsistent levels of challenge to quality assure the curriculum offer. Where practice is effective, the challenge is via the quality assurance framework, with regular quality assurance meetings and visits to the premises of providers to assess suitability of the learning

environment and experiences. However, in a few local authorities this practice is at the very early stages of implementation.

### **Cardiff local authority**

Cardiff has an EOTAS Quality Assurance (EQA) Group in place to ensure consistency in the quality of all EOTAS providers procured by the local authority, so that the needs of all pupils are met and that they receive a good quality education. The group monitors a wide range of practice, such as pupil attendance, the curriculum offer and pupil progress.

Membership of the group includes a wide range of members, such as the local authority EOTAS lead officer, community teaching manager, looked after children in education co-ordinator, and inclusion officer. Other officers are co-opted as required. The EQA Group meets on a monthly basis and identifies actions for group members to be completed by the next meeting.

The Chair of the group provides regular updates to the EOTAS Board and local authority lead officers for Achievement and Inclusion. The EQA group provides a robust process of monitoring and quality assurance where concerns are addressed swiftly.

### **Monitoring access to a full-time education**

The Welsh Government expectation is that all pupils, regardless of where they are educated, should receive a full-time education. Full-time education is not defined in law. Whilst nearly all local authorities expect all EOTAS pupils to have access to a full-time curriculum this may not always be appropriate. However, this should not be a unilateral decision by the local authority or provider but in agreement with the parents, carers and pupil.

Many local authorities acknowledge that a number of pupils have part-time curriculum offers across their EOTAS providers, and that these numbers fluctuate. The reasons for these part-time arrangements include phased transition into EOTAS providers, pupils who require a part time curriculum offer due to mental health or medical needs or in response to the behavioural needs of pupils.

For pupils who have local authority arranged tuition, which includes home and community-based tuition, many authorities provide a maximum of 10 hours per week. This is not always based on the needs of the individual pupil but is often linked with the lack of capacity to provide more than this. In most cases, no other educational support is provided for the remainder of the time for these pupils. In many local authorities this provision is not monitored well enough resulting in pupils remaining on part-time education for prolonged periods of time, which significantly impacts the likelihood of them returning to mainstream education. A very few local authorities provide a full-time tuition offer for pupils through a combination of direct teaching, digital learning and access to a range of beneficial well-being activities. In these local authorities' numbers of pupils returning to full-time mainstream education are consistently higher than those in local authorities who provide part-time education.

Most authorities monitor pupils' access to a full-time curriculum across all EOTAS providers through pupils' attendance. The frequency and effectiveness of this attendance monitoring varies. Many local authorities use their Education Welfare Service (EWS) or local authority officers with responsibility for EOTAS to monitor the attendance figures. The frequency of these monitoring activities varies from weekly to termly monitoring. In addition, the level of challenge to EOTAS providers from local authorities to address pupils who do not consistently attend and access a full-time curriculum offer is too variable.

Where authorities have school improvement partners from regional consortia, monitoring access to full-time curriculum in PRUs may form part of their responsibilities. However, this practice is not consistently in place across Wales. The processes for monitoring part-time arrangements across many local authorities are not robust enough and require urgent attention

### **Involvement of local authority elected members**

In our 2016 report '[Education other than at school](#)', we identified many shortcomings relating to the roles and responsibilities of local authority elected members. Since this report, most local authorities have an improved range of reporting mechanisms in place to provide elected members with information about their EOTAS service. This is beginning to provide members with evidence to make more robust judgements on the quality of the EOTAS service and value for money.

In the most effective practice, regular reports, presentations, visits to PRUs and regular meetings with officers are among the activities elected members are involved with. These increase elected members' involvement and their understanding of their EOTAS service and also provide members with key information in a timely manner. In a few local authorities, elected members are members of the PRU management committee. This provides members with a more in depth understanding of the needs of the pupils and the work of the PRU.

#### **Gwynedd local authority**

In Gwynedd local authority the cabinet member for education receives monthly information including data for EOTAS provision in the authority. This information is shared with all cabinet members. The inclusion officer presents to the education scrutiny committee on a regular basis to update and inform members on all EOTAS matters. The county quality board and the regional quality board require regular updates on EOTAS numbers, attendance, exclusions and qualifications. The information allows elected members to challenge and evaluate carefully how effective the EOTAS provision is across the local authority.

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## Transition to between EOTAS providers and mainstream schools, further education, training, or employment

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### Return to mainstream school

Local authorities report that the numbers of pupils returning successfully to mainstream school remain very low over the last four years. One possible reason for this is that pupils are referred for EOTAS too late, by which time their behaviours and disengagement from education have become entrenched. This extends the placement length and may significantly reduce the chances of a successful return to full-time mainstream education. As a result, there is an increasing concern in the sector that PRUs are operating more as special schools, rather than a short-term provision to support pupils. In many cases, it is unclear how local authorities are addressing these concerns.

Where practice is effective, there are clear plans in place for a pupil's length of placement with EOTAS providers. The roles and responsibilities of the mainstream school, and transition arrangements for returning to full-time mainstream school or further education, training, or employment are clearly identified at the point of entry to the provider. They are regularly reviewed by the provider and local authority and are adapted to support the individual needs of each pupil. This process is less robust where local authorities commission external EOTAS providers compared to PRU placements.

#### **Powys PRU**

In Powys PRU, all pupils have an initial 12-week placement. During this period, staff at the PRU complete baseline assessments to identify specific areas of learning that need to be addressed and identify interventions that are required to meet these needs. In addition to these assessments, any underlying physical or additional learning needs are identified, and the support required to address these needs.

The PRU maintains regular contact with the mainstream school throughout the 12-week period, with the aim of ensuring a full-time return to the mainstream school. Baseline assessments are reviewed after 10 weeks of intervention to assess progress and pupils' readiness to begin their transition back to mainstream education. If the decision is that a pupil requires a longer period at the PRU, then this is agreed at the local authority panel and an additional 12-week block of support and intervention at the PRU is provided.

When a pupil is ready to return to mainstream school, this is planned carefully and managed jointly between the school and PRU. Pupils are fully involved in the planning of their return. This helps them feel included in the process and to voice their worries or concerns to help staff overcome any perceived barriers. As part of the transition arrangements, a familiar member of the PRU staff supports the pupil's transition. They attend the mainstream school in the initial stages to help settle the pupil and provide support for school staff by sharing strategies and interventions which support the pupil.

Where local authority panel processes identify the expected length of a pupil's placement, these vary considerably. They range from a six-week block of provision up to 12 months. Typically, these placements arrangements are for primary and younger secondary-aged pupils. Since the pandemic, these block provision placements are increasingly extended due to the complexity of pupil needs.

Whilst reintegration to mainstream schools is available for older secondary-aged pupils, this is less likely for a range of reasons, including the challenges presented in matching pupils' needs to the curriculum options available in a mainstream school. For these older pupils, nearly all local authorities focus on their pathways to further education, training, or employment.

While there is no single model that supports a more effective return to mainstream education, there are key actions that increase the likelihood of a successful return. For example, pupils retaining close links with their mainstream schools, pupils continuing to have a regular weekly return to their mainstream school and a regular liaison between the mainstream school and EOTAS provider all have a positive impact. Such practices are not firmly embedded across many local authorities.

For younger pupils in PRUs, there are different models in place for their reintegration to mainstream schools. Where practice is effective, the PRU's tailored curriculum supports specific gaps in pupils' learning. Curriculum planning and coverage is shared between the PRU and mainstream school, which supports continuity of learning. Pupils benefit from regular opportunities to spend time in their mainstream schools to maintain links with their peers and access a wider range of curriculum experiences. This is most effective where pupils have support from PRU staff. In the most effective practice, there are opportunities for the mainstream staff to observe the pupils' placement at the PRU. This allows mainstream staff opportunities to replicate successful strategies to manage pupils' behaviour and learning established at the PRU.

PRU leaders identify that the curriculum is not in itself a barrier to the successful reintegration of pupils to mainstream schools. A bigger issue is the increasing level of pupils' needs, and particularly social emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs, social emotional, behavioural difficulties (SEBD) as well as other underlying additional learning needs (ALN). The impact of this means too many pupils are attending EOTAS providers, especially PRUs, for too long. This prevents the effective through flow of pupils who would benefit from short-term intervention so longer term they can continue in a mainstream school.

### **Ysgol Plas Cefndy**

Ysgol Plas Cefndy, Denbighshire offers support for predominantly primary aged pupils to return to mainstream school. The PRU outreach team's integral role in forming links with mainstream schools is a key strength. In addition, staff understanding of pupils' barriers to learning ensures the curriculum is tailored to meet pupils' individual needs and to overcome these barriers. As a result, over time, a high percentage of pupils from the PRU return to and maintain their placements at mainstream schools. This means more pupils access the PRU and its bespoke curriculum, allowing pupils to develop the skills and confidence they need to make a successful return to school.

In a few PRUs, local authorities have more recently introduced additional small-class provision specifically to target shorter-term placements for younger secondary-aged pupils. This is alongside longer-term provision for pupils. The shorter-term provision targets pupils who show increased potential for a timely return to mainstream education with more intensive support at the PRU. Where these arrangements are in place, local authorities report that they are beginning to see an increasing, but small, number of pupils returning to mainstream school with support. This approach is in line with the intended Welsh Government role for EOTAS provision. Many local authorities report that since the pandemic they are seeing increasing numbers of referrals for younger primary-aged pupils.

### **Newport local authority**

In Newport local authority, the PRU has two classes that target short-term intervention, one for older primary-aged pupils and one for younger secondary-aged pupils. The expectation is that these pupils return to mainstream school within six to eight weeks. Pupil progress is monitored weekly with updates to the local authority managed move panel. The PRU maintains close links with the mainstream schools through regular meetings and visits. Pupils remain registered at both providers and return to school a minimum of once per week. This increases over time as part of the process. Outreach from PRU staff is provided for those pupils returning to mainstream school. This allows PRU staff to provide pupils with additional support and to settle them into the routine of the mainstream school well. School staff benefit from the strategies used by the PRU staff to support pupils effectively in the school setting. As result of this approach, many of the primary pupils successfully return full-time to their mainstream school. Leaders report for younger secondary-aged pupils, numbers who successfully return to and maintain their placement in mainstream school are gradually increasing.

Where primary pupils attend EOTAS providers, their transition to secondary mainstream education has additional challenges. A key challenge is pupils needing support to access the wider secondary curriculum. As a result, transition arrangements need to be well planned and monitored to support pupils' well-being, confidence, and social skills to make the transition successful. Since the pandemic, the local authority reported numbers of pupils transferring from primary EOTAS provision to secondary mainstream school has decreased noticeably. This is a likely impact of the disrupted access to education during the pandemic.

The return to mainstream education for pupils accessing local authority tuition services can be more complex. For pupils who access the service due to short-term medical conditions, there is usually a clear timescale for support and return to mainstream school. For pupils who have underlying mental health needs and may be receiving specialist services, such as CAMHS or hospital tuition, return to full-time education involves multi-agency co-ordination. Often this return is dependent on health advice and guidance. Increasingly, local authorities are providing full-time community-based tuition services to support pupils' resilience and emotional health and well-being. This encourages pupils to leave their homes to access learning with an expected return to mainstream schools.

Where pupils access local authority home tuition and are disengaged or school refusers, cases are often complex and lengthy. In these circumstances, local authorities review pupils on a case-by-case basis, and this may involve far greater multi-agency working to develop a co-ordinated approach to reengage pupils in education. A higher number of these pupils do not return to full-time education in mainstream or EOTAS providers.

In a minority of local authorities, there are no clear processes in place to revisit pupil placements or to plan for pupil reintegration to mainstream education. This is an area of concern that needs improvement.

### Transition to further education, training, or employment

Generally, while opportunities for return to mainstream school for older secondary aged pupils remain an option, this is less likely to be the pathway for most pupils. In nearly all local authorities, the agreed curriculum for these pupils is focused on supporting them to move towards further education, training, or employment. This is most effective when it is tailored to meet their individual needs, interests, and aspirations. In many PRUs, the breadth and balance of the curriculum are suitable to meet these needs, with a range of flexible, recognised qualification pathways in place.

Lead workers in PRUs and Careers Wales support pupils' transition to further education, training, or employment well. For example, they support pupils to gain access to vocational training opportunities, such as barista and nail technician training. This provides pupils with first-hand experiences, which motivate them to achieve relevant qualifications and, in some cases, improve their attendance.

The wide range of experiences, including careers fairs, pre-engagement programmes with colleges and partnership working with vocational companies, ensures that most pupils are well supported across many PRUs. Community activities provide pupils with opportunities to develop their awareness and perceptions of what they can do to contribute positively to the local community. External work experiences, to develop pupils' wider skills and independence, are beginning to be re-established following the pandemic. These experiences are extremely valuable for pupils. Overall, in many local authorities the reported figures for Year 11 pupils leaving PRUs who become NEET are consistently low.

#### **Ty Gwyn PRU, Rhondda Cynon Taf**

Leaders at the PRU place a strong focus on careers development for older secondary-aged pupils. The PRU has a strong working relationship with Careers Wales. The careers adviser spends time developing positive working relationships with pupils. Together with PRU staff, the careers adviser works with pupils individually to help them try to achieve their end goal when they leave the PRU.

The PRU offers a wide range of external visits to provide pupils with experiences to broaden the opportunities available to them. These include visits to local companies and colleges. In addition, the PRU organises opportunities for on-site visits from companies and providers that offer apprenticeships. All these

opportunities raise pupil aspirations, support pupils in selecting their qualification pathways and prepare them well for their next steps.

Most pupils go to college when they leave the PRU. The careers adviser continues to support them in these placements having already developed positive working links with them in the PRU. This effectively supports pupils to maintain their placements. As a result, very few pupils over the last few years have become NEET when they leave the PRU.

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## Appendix 1

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### Curriculum requirements for EOTAS providers

The Welsh Government sets out clear mandatory requirements for the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Act 2021 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk) including EOTAS provision. The local authority and management committee and teacher in charge are required to design a curriculum for the PRU which meets a prescribed set of requirements.

These are:

- To secure curriculum provision that enables learners to develop in the ways described in the four purposes; that is broad and balanced, suitable for the learner's ages, abilities, and aptitudes, and offers appropriate progression
- To secure, for the individual learner, learning that develops the cross-curricular skills, encompasses developmentally appropriate relationships and sexuality education, and encompasses the Health and Well-being Area
- To ensure that curriculum provision, if it is reasonably possible and appropriate to do so, includes teaching and learning in other areas and in the other mandatory elements (Welsh, English and religion, values, and ethics)
- The teacher in charge must take account of learners' additional learning needs

For EOTAS provided other than a PRU, the local authority must:

- Secure curriculum provision that enables learners to develop in the ways described in the four purposes; that is broad and balanced, suitable for the learner's ages, abilities, and aptitudes, and offers appropriate progression
- Secure for the individual learner learning that develops the cross-curricular skills, encompasses developmentally appropriate relationships and sexuality education, and encompasses the Health and Well-being Area
- Ensure that curriculum provision, if it is reasonably possible and appropriate to do so, includes teaching and learning in other areas and in the other mandatory elements (Welsh, English and religion, values, and ethics)

## Methods and evidence base

This report draws on evidence collected during the latter half of the autumn term 2022. We sent an initial survey to all local authorities to provide an overview of current EOTAS provision and practice. We had 17 responses from authorities to this survey. In addition to the survey, we offered a combination of face-to-face or virtual meetings with lead officers for EOTAS in all local authorities. We met with a total of nineteen. As a result we received information from all but one local authority. We also met with representatives for the school improvement services across all the regional consortia, to discuss their involvement with EOTAS.

We visited eight pupil referral units (PRUs). During these visits, we met with the leader of the PRU, curriculum leaders and pupils. We met with over 40 pupils across the eight PRUs. We looked at a range of documents including curriculum planning and qualification pathways during the visits. The sample included single site and portfolio PRUs, and covered pupils aged five to sixteen. The sample also included PRUs who had agreed to roll out the curriculum for Wales from September 2022. We did not include independent special schools or arrangements made by mainstream schools who access external providers as part of the scope for the thematic. We did not visit external EOTAS providers. The field work was concluded by the start of the spring term 2023.

In addition, we used evidence from nine PRU inspections carried out between January 2019 and December 2022.

Estyn would like to thank the pupils, local authority officers, regional consortia staff and leaders of PRUs who supported the thematic review.

PRU	Phase	Local authority
The Bridge Alternative Portfolio PRU	All-age	Bridgend
Bryn Y Deryn School and Student Support	Secondary	Cardiff
Monmouthshire Pupil Referral Service	Upper primary and secondary	Monmouthshire
Pembrokeshire Pupil Referral Service	All-age	Pembrokeshire
Powys Portfolio PRU	All-age	Powys
Ty Glyn PRU	Secondary	Torfaen
Ty Gwyn Education Centre	Secondary	Rhondda Cynon Taf
Ysgol Plas Cefndy	All-age	Denbighshire

## 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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## Glossary

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<b>ALN</b>	Additional learning needs
<b>CAMHS</b>	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
<b>DCF</b>	Digital Competency Framework
<b>EHE</b>	Elective Home Education
<b>EOTAS</b>	Education other than at school
<b>FE</b>	Further education
<b>ICT</b>	Information, communication technology
<b>IDP</b>	Individual development plan
<b>PRU</b>	Pupil referral unit
<b>PSP</b>	Pastoral support programme
<b>SEBD</b>	Social, emotional, behavioural difficulties
<b>SEN</b>	Special educational needs
<b>SEMH</b>	Social, emotional mental health
<b>TAS</b>	Team around the school

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## Legislation

Section 4 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006

Section 19A(1) of the Education Act 1996

Section 19(6) of the Education Act 1996

Section 463 of the Education Act 1996

The Education (Pupil Registration) (Wales) Regulations 2020