

Welsh Government Press Conference – School Standards

Date and time	Tuesday 30 January – 10am
Interviewer and organisation	<i>You will be provided with a list of journalists on Tuesday morning</i>
Format	Speech Two questions from journalists (in the room and via Zoom)
Location	Press Conference room, 1 st Floor, Cathays Park
Brief summary	The speech will focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• School standards• Literacy and numeracy• Budget• Attendance
Additional info	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Press office will go through potential questions with you on Tuesday. Redacted – Section 40 will brief you on hot WG-wide issues on Tuesday morning.• The press conference will be broadcast live on the Welsh Government's social media channels,

Key messages

Today, I will outline my priorities for this school term – the twin pillars of literacy and numeracy and the work we're doing to tackle the main barriers to attainment, such as attendance.

Potential questions and lines to take

Literacy, numeracy and PISA

What do you hope the National Education Summit will achieve? Will it make a real difference?

The education system Wales is undergoing a fair bit of change, necessary change, in order to ensure that we deliver the best possible education for learners across Wales.

Tomorrow's summit is a chance to be open and clear about priorities and actions and to ensure every part of Wales is on the same footing in delivering the education system we all want to see.

Do you have any targets to achieve better literacy and numeracy? How will you measure this?

In November I published the first national report on the performance of our children in reading and numeracy and will do this annually to track recovery.

Is your target for the next PISA results 500 points?

The target for the next PISA round is to see improvement in all three domains.

(if pushed on 500 points target)

The 500 point target was based at the time on achieving the OECD average. 500 points is no longer anywhere near the average – only 3 OECD members scored over 500 in all domains

Our aim is to improve in all three domains and we very much want to achieve the OECD average or higher.

The overall OECD average in 2022/23 was 477, and the score in Wales across the three domains was 468.

Does the new curriculum provide young people with these skills?

- Our reforms are a once-in-a-generation chance to revolutionise the quality of opportunity for pupils and make the curriculum fit for the 21st century.
- Our new curriculum will ensure learners are equipped with the knowledge, skills and experiences they need to succeed in life.
- Our new curriculum and approach to education has been supported and encouraged by the OECD. They highlight the importance of resilience, equity, learning and wellbeing – all of which are central to the new Curriculum.
- Literacy and numeracy are foundational elements of learning. There is nothing more important. The richness of our new Curriculum for Wales can best be accessed by those with good literacy and numeracy.
- I've been very encouraged by the progress we are seeing in schools up and down the country. At its heart, this curriculum is about supporting learners to make the best possible progress – and for me that is the essence of a successful curriculum – its ability to reach and support learning and teaching for all our children and young people.

Why are you doing unnecessary things like changing the school year and not just concentrate on learning standards?

- I believe that now is the right time to bring forward a progressive school calendar, deliberately designed to promote a more stable rhythm for continuous learning throughout the year.
- This is about supporting our learners, particularly the most disadvantaged, their families and school staff.

- We know the more disadvantaged families and those who have children with Additional Learning Needs are impacted most by the school calendar. It is only right we explore this now.
- We have a single system and evidence points to the calendar affecting all learners to some degree – with issues around wellbeing, mental health and attendance being prominent issues we want to address by looking at it.

Do schools have the funding and resources to improve literacy and numeracy?

- We're facing an incredibly tough financial situation and we've taken some really difficult decisions to radically redesign our budget.
- We've re-shaped departmental spending plans so we can invest more in the NHS and protect local government funding for schools, social care and other services we all rely on every day.
- We've also re-prioritised funding within the Education and Welsh Language budget so we can protect school funding as much as possible. We spend more in areas under the greatest pressure because of persistently high inflation and rising demand.
- Unfortunately, our overall funding settlement is not sufficient to meet all pressures and allow us to do all the things we want to do.
- Spending more in some areas means there's less to spend in other areas.
- Our decisions are underpinned by our principles – to protect core, frontline public services as far as possible; to support the hardest hit households and to prioritise jobs, where we can.
- We have also re-focused funding away from non-devolved areas – these are areas the UK Government should be funding.

Will you be following the plans in England to make Maths compulsory to age 18?

- Wales leads the way with the Welsh Baccalaureate. The Advanced Skills Baccalaureate will be taken by the majority of 16-18 school pupils and provides a wider breadth of knowledge and skills beyond the three A-Levels that they also take, including literacy and numeracy. The qualification is well

regarded by colleges and universities and most already consider it as equivalent to an A level. This was introduced in September.

- Learners in Wales are already expected to make progress in numeracy after 16 through the Skills Challenge Certificate, GCSE resits or an Essential Skills Wales qualification.
- We are currently engaged on an ambitious programme of reform of GCSEs in Wales, to ensure they are better aligned with the new curriculum and support young people move confidently to their next steps.

(if pushed)

- The policy in England was clearly made up on the hoof – there is already a huge pressure across the UK in trying to recruit Maths teachers at pre-16, therefore it is simply not realistic to make this policy announcement without explaining where all the new maths teachers will come from.
- The Labour party has been clear that it would not pursue this policy, and instead has rightly said the focus must be improving maths standards at pre 16.

Wales scored poorly in Science too, but you don't mention any plans to improve standards in these subjects. Have you given up on Science?

- In the 2019 PISA results we saw an improvement in science. It showed that we were heading in the right direction with our reforms.
- The new curriculum encourages a holistic approach to learning progression, including within science and technology.
- The PISA framework is consistent with our approach, in that PISA also emphasises the interdependence between different elements of learning. Learners taking the Pisa tests in 2022 were yet to be learning with our new curriculum so were not benefitting from this new approach to science.
- Research has found that the strongest factor affecting secondary pupils' science scores is their literacy levels. It is the gateway to doing better across the curriculum.

Community Focused schools

We have published overarching guidance on Community Focused Schools; supplementary guidance documents on family engagement and community engagement; and a set of case studies. These can be found [on](#) the Welsh Government website. We are currently developing further supplementary guidance focused on multi-agency engagement in Community Focused Schools.

Attendance

How will you raise standards if pupils aren't going to school in the first place?

- The link between attendance and educational attainment is clear - missing sustained periods of school presents a real risk to a child's attainment and can also lead to them feeling more disengaged from their education.
- We have invested heavily to support schools, such as funding for more family engagement officers. I have also established a National Attendance Taskforce to get to grips with the challenge. This will help us think creatively, across the system, to find solutions to issues that require influence and input beyond the education sector.
- Other actions to improve attendance include:
 - Provided over £6.5m in funding this financial year for more Family Engagement Officers;
 - Provided £2.5m for Education Welfare Officers to provide more support for learners with high absence;
 - Updating the All Wales Attendance Framework;
 - Published new guidance to help schools work with families and relevant agencies to make sure learners come to school;
 - Changed the statistical definition of persistent absence from missing 20% of sessions to 10% of sessions
 - Estyn have strengthened their reporting requirements on attendance;
 - Now require all schools to make available their attendance policies – to allow a greater focus on the policy.

Why is Wales seeing poor school attendance?

- Like other parts of the UK and indeed internationally, attendance has changed. There are often complex and multiple factors lying behind non-attendance. These could include mental health and wellbeing, availability of specific learning support services, and the ever-rising cost of living and attitudes of parents and learners towards school attendance generally.
- **We have seen an** improvement in average attendance rates for this school year which now stands at 90.5%, up from 88.9% over the same period last year.

Our attendance taskforce has now met for the first time and will continue to look in depth into the reasons behind non-attendance and bring to bear their expertise to identify actions that can bring about sustained improvements.

What have the attendance taskforce achieved so far?

The attendance taskforce has met twice and with the breadth of expertise within the group I don't expect it to be long before actions are identified.

Would you consider encouraging schools to do home visits to improve attendance?

Home visits can help schools understand the individual context of children and families, explore parental attitudes, and talk about the importance of attendance in a more relaxed setting. This is covered in the guidance we provide to schools.

Home visits are just one of the ways schools can tackle low attendance, but there's no one solution to tackling this problem, which is why we're thinking across the system.

The UK Government has announced they will expand attendance hubs and their attendance mentoring programme, would you consider something similar here?

The taskforce will consider all options available to us in Wales to improve attendance

There is already good practice being shared across Wales:

- We know that we have many excellent examples of schools that have effective attendance strategies. The sharing of this good practice remains key, and we are strengthening our school to school and cluster collaboration to support this.
- We already have the Family Engagement Officers and Community Focused Schools Managers networks, both of which provide a great information sharing vehicle.
- Local authorities have various ways of sharing good attendance practice with schools, including attendance forums, cluster meetings, forums and school to school mentoring.
- Many LAs run attendance forums for Primary and Secondary sector attendance leads. These are held separately, recognising Primary and Secondary schools have different requirements.
- Many local authorities have developed toolkits for schools , with a number currently developing an attendance training package for schools/ Governors and Social Services.
- The reasons for non-attendance are complex and the issues facing us are significant. We want to support schools, by drawing on the expertise of other key services who also have a crucial role to play in improving attendance.
- We intend to undertake more in-depth analysis of the existing attendance data. This will enable us to identify those schools that could assist with sharing best practice, which could include setting up further networks.

Response to Estyn's thematic report on attendance

We welcome Estyn's report on attendance. The report coincides with an improvement in average attendance rates for this school year which now stands at 90.5%, up from 88.9% over the same period last year.

Improving attendance is a national priority. We will continue to work with parents, children, local authorities and schools to remove barriers to attendance and drive sustained improvement.

A group of experts from different sectors, including from Estyn, are working Welsh Government to look at the reasons behind non-attendance and find solutions.

Calls for free school transport to improve attendance

- A group of experts from different sectors are working with us to look at the reasons behind non-attendance and find solutions, including on the provision of affordable transport.
- This is in addition to the discretionary powers already available to local authorities to make any arrangement they think fit to facilitate home to school transport.

Hot issues

It was recently reported that parents are taking the Welsh Government to court over the end of free school meal provision during the holidays. What is your response?

- Extending free school meals into the holidays was introduced during the pandemic. We were always clear that it was a time-limited crisis intervention. The support ran from early in the pandemic until May 2023. In England it ceased in April 2021.
- The Welsh Government received a claim for Judicial Review on 15 September in relation to the provision of free school meals over the school holidays. As this is active litigation, it would not be appropriate to comment further on this matter at this stage.
- The recent Welsh Government budget ensures that the rollout of term time free school meals for all primary school children will continue and by September 2024 every child in every primary school in Wales will be entitled to free school meals. This is part of the Co-operation agreement, and over 15m meals have been provided through this scheme so far.
- We are the only nation in the UK that offers a free breakfast scheme for children in all primary schools, last year 51,600 pupils benefited from this support, a rise of 7,000 since 2022. We also provided over 9 million free or subsidised milk servings through our school milk scheme last year.

Background

Redacted – not in scope for relating to misinformation, public messaging strategy, or reputational risk

Call from headteacher of St Martin's school in Caerphilly to extend UPFSM and free breakfasts to secondary schools to improve attendance.

- We are proud to be the only country in the UK that has a breakfast scheme that all primary schools can be part of. Last year 51,600 pupils benefited from this support, a rise of 7,000 since 2022.
- The Chancellor's Autumn Statement unleashed a fresh round of austerity. This means that for the second year in a row, Wales' funding settlement is not sufficient to respond to the extraordinary pressures we face. Due to budget pressures, we are not currently considering rolling out our universal free school meals for secondary schools.

Will you be increasing Tuition fees?

We made it clear in December's budget that difficult decisions would need to be taken, including looking at increasing the tuition fee cap in Wales.

This is not a decision that I take lightly but at the same time I understand the need for clarity, and I can say that I expect to make an announcement in the coming weeks.

Wider education / Welsh Language news and queries:

Background

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Lines if needed:

Equipping our learners with the right skills for post-school life and work is a key element of education and the Curriculum for Wales

This announcement by Qualifications Wales is an important step in delivering a full offer of bilingual 'Made for Wales' qualifications that work for all 14-16-year-olds.

If there are questions on some colleges being uncertain / opposed to introduction of VCSEs, you could use a version of the following:

- I welcome Qualifications Wales' commitment to working collaboratively with colleges to ensure that VCSEs are high quality, well-designed and well-

delivered qualifications that support the parity of esteem of vocational and general qualifications.

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Welsh place names – Ordnance Survey use of English names on official maps of Eryri National Park.

Strong lines:

- Mae gwarchod enwau lleoedd Cymraeg a hanesyddol yn ymrwymiad pwysig yn ein Rhaglen Lywodraethu ac yn y Cytundeb Cydweithio.
- Mae Comisiynydd y Gymraeg wrthi'n trafod gyda'r Arolwg Ordnans (Ordnance Survey) y pryderon sydd wedi cael eu nodi yn yr erthygl sy'n sôn am enwau Saesneg answyddogol yn ymddangos ar eu mapiau, ac wedi gofyn iddyn nhw ymchwilio i hyn.
- Mae Awdurdod Parc Cenedlaethol Eryri a Chomisiynydd y Gymraeg wedi bod yn gweithio ar brosiect i safoni enwau lleoedd Eryri, gan ddechrau gydag enwau llynnoedd.
- O'r hyn dwi wedi ei glywed, bydd yr Arolwg Ordnans yn diweddarau eu mapiau gyda'r enwau safonedig hyn pan fyddant yn argraffu eu map nesaf o'r ardal.
- Gobaith Awdurdod y Parc a'r Comisiynydd yw symud ymlaen i safoni enwau rhaeadrau, mynyddoedd a nentydd nesaf.
- Mae'n bwysig bod yr enwau ry'n ni'n eu rhoi ar fapiau yn rhai safonol, felly mae angen dilyn prosesau safoni penodol, ac mae hyn yn cymryd amser, wrth gwrs.
- Byddwn ni'n cadw golwg ar y sefyllfa, gan gydweithio ag Awdurdod y Parc a Swyddfa'r Comisiynydd i warchod enwau Cymraeg hirsefydlog.

Background

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Cross-government Hot Issues

Gilestone Farm

Briefing following written statement 29 January 2024

Top lines

- In September last year, Welsh Government announced the sighting of a pair of potentially breeding ospreys at Gilestone Farm. I was both surprised and delighted to learn that a pair of ospreys had decided to nest on the site and this is the first time that the birds had been observed this far south in Wales in around 200 years.
- The birds' welfare and that of the nest are of paramount importance and to protect them, we ensured that initial surveillance and site security was installed at the site. We also appointed the UK's leading expert on ospreys to undertake an 'Osprey Conservation Plan' for Gilestone Farm and have now received that report.
- After taking the report's recommendations into consideration, in particular a 750m restricted zone around the nest, it is clear that the full commercial and charitable objectives of the Green Man proposal at Gilestone Farm can no longer be realised.
- I believe that this decision is the right thing to do to protect the ospreys at Gilestone Farm. We have been consistent that we would ensure that all relevant environmental protection measures would be taken before we allowed any new activities to take place at the site. We have kept this promise by ensuring the protection of the ospreys at Gilestone Farm.
- Green Man is a great commercial and cultural asset for Wales. The company is a firm partner of the Welsh Government and we are committed to continuing our work with Green Man to support the company to grow their brand here in Wales.
- Green Man's business plan represented a positive opportunity for jobs in and investment in rural Wales that matches the strategic priorities - agreed by the UK Government, Welsh Government and local authorities - in the *Growing Mid Wales* partnership action plan.

Specifically on the question "will you sell Gilestone Farm?"

"We will now work to the Identification and Disposal of Welsh Government Non-Core Surplus Land and Buildings guidance.

"This Government guidance provides for the consideration of using such assets for delivery of alternative Welsh Government policy proposals in the first instance, prior to the asset being offered to other public sector organisations prior to being offered on sale to the open market. "

[Guidance for the Identification and Disposal of Welsh Government Non-Core Surplus Land and Buildings](#)

Background

Redacted – not in scope for relating to misinformation, public messaging strategy, or reputational risk

20mph

- The new 20mph default speed limit in Wales is estimated to save up to 100 lives in its first decade and help avoid 20,000 casualties.
- Independent data produced by Agilisys illustrates encouraging signs of continuing compliance.
- It found average speeds were down 2.4mph (3.9km/h) compared to speeds before the change last September.
- Welsh Government will be publishing its own data next month.

Is it right that the 20mph review is being chaired by the same person whose company worked on the implementation of the policy?

- Phil Jones did not recommend the 20mph policy to the Welsh Government. He chaired the Task Force Group that published a report in July 2020, and it recommended a default approach, which was endorsed in principle with cross-party support by the Senedd.
- The Welsh Government has appointed a small team to work with local authorities to consider the way the policy has been implemented and how the exceptions guidance has been applied.
- The review team includes Professor Peter Jones, Professor of Transport and Sustainable Development at University College London. The other two members of the panel are Kaarina Ruta, Transport Adviser at the WLGA, and Phil Jones, the Chair of the 20mph Task Force Group that made the initial recommendations.
- I've met Council Leaders to agree review of 20mph roll-out. Prof Peter Jones will provide independent challenge, the WLGA will give practical advice and Phil Jones will test against the expert panel Interim report next month.

The First Minister recently said motorists wouldn't be fined if they are genuinely confused by the new speed limit. Doesn't this imply that you don't know what you're doing with regard to enforcing the 20mph default?

- Engagement sessions will take place where the speed limit should be clear to the motorist, so there is no reason to exceed the limit. The engagement sessions reinforce the change to the default position in Wales that motorists should "see streetlights, think 20".
- Operation Ugain started in January 2024 and will see GoSafe, Fire and Rescue Services and Welsh police forces continue their engagement-focused approach to 20mph.
- We have always been clear that drivers will be given a choice between roadside engagement or points and a fine, but anyone caught exceeding the

speed limit to a greater degree will not be eligible for engagement sessions and will be prosecuted. Drivers who turn down the engagement session will face prosecution.

- If drivers choose the engagement session, the Welsh Fire and Rescue Services will deliver a free presentation that lasts approximately 10 minutes.
- It aims to inform people on the change in default speed limit, the reasons behind the change, and how they can identify the roads it applies to.
- GoSafe, in conjunction with the four police forces in Wales, will issue a statement ahead of wider enforcement taking place.