

# Apprenticeship insights: Adult Social Care provision

Summer 2026

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## Executive Summary

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Adult social care apprenticeship provision is the largest sector of apprenticeship provision in Wales and continues to experience change resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the introduction of revised qualifications and increasing workforce pressures. Providers are adapting to changing learner demographics and increasing numbers of learners requiring additional language and learning support.

Across Levels 2 and 3, providers have generally responded positively to the introduction of revised Health and Social Care qualifications, including the core and practice model. In many cases, they have refined delivery models appropriately, strengthened learner induction processes and adapted staffing structures to support implementation. Over the last three years, learner outcomes have improved steadily across much of the sector, with attainment rates in many cases approaching pre-pandemic levels. However, a few providers continue to perform well below sector averages for framework attainment and timely completion.

Across nearly all providers, strong assessor–learner relationships were a notable strength. Learners benefited from regular contact, pastoral support and flexible approaches that adapted learning around shift patterns and workplace demands. In the strongest examples, assessors tailored delivery carefully to learners' confidence levels, prior experience and personal circumstances. Providers increasingly strengthened arrangements to identify support needs and refer learners to specialist support services.

Employer engagement in supporting learning is one of the most considerable challenges affecting learner progress and timely completion. During our evidence gathering, too many employers failed to provide protected time for off-the-job training or engage actively in progress of learning, despite commitments within apprenticeship learning agreements.

Providers of higher level apprenticeships continued to face substantial challenges in delivering the new suite of frameworks at Levels 4 and 5. Although providers and employers recognised the long-term value of revised higher apprenticeship qualifications in strengthening leadership and management capability, learner outcomes remained too low overall. Providers also raised concerns regarding delays and inconsistencies within external assessment arrangements.

Essential Skills Wales (ESW), particularly in relation to learner's literacy and numeracy skills development, remained a key barrier to learner progress and framework completion at all levels. Although providers increasingly adopted flexible and learner-centred approaches, the quality and effectiveness of the ongoing development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills was underdeveloped.

Providers also reported that current funding and programme duration arrangements did not provide sufficient flexibility or reflect the increasing complexity of learner need. In response to these challenges, a few providers had reduced or withdrawn higher apprenticeship provision. This raises concerns about future leadership and management apprenticeship capacity within the sector.

# Introduction

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The report was commissioned by Medr following findings and areas for improvement from Estyn's core apprenticeship inspection cycle (2022–2025) and annual reports. It provides an updated, thematic overview of adult social care apprenticeship provision across Wales, drawing on evidence gathered through enhanced link visits and wider sector analysis.

This report presents national insights into adult social care apprenticeship provision in Wales. It sets out key strengths and areas for improvement identified across the sector, with a particular focus on the quality of provision, learner outcomes and factors influencing timely completion. It is intended for policymakers, Medr, providers, employers and other partners involved in the design, delivery and oversight of apprenticeships.

Health, Public Services and Care (HPSC) remains the largest apprenticeship sector in Wales, accounting for around two-fifths of all apprenticeship learners. Within that sector, apprenticeship frameworks relating to adult social care provision account for just over a quarter of all apprenticeships in Wales and are delivered by all ten lead providers of apprenticeships.

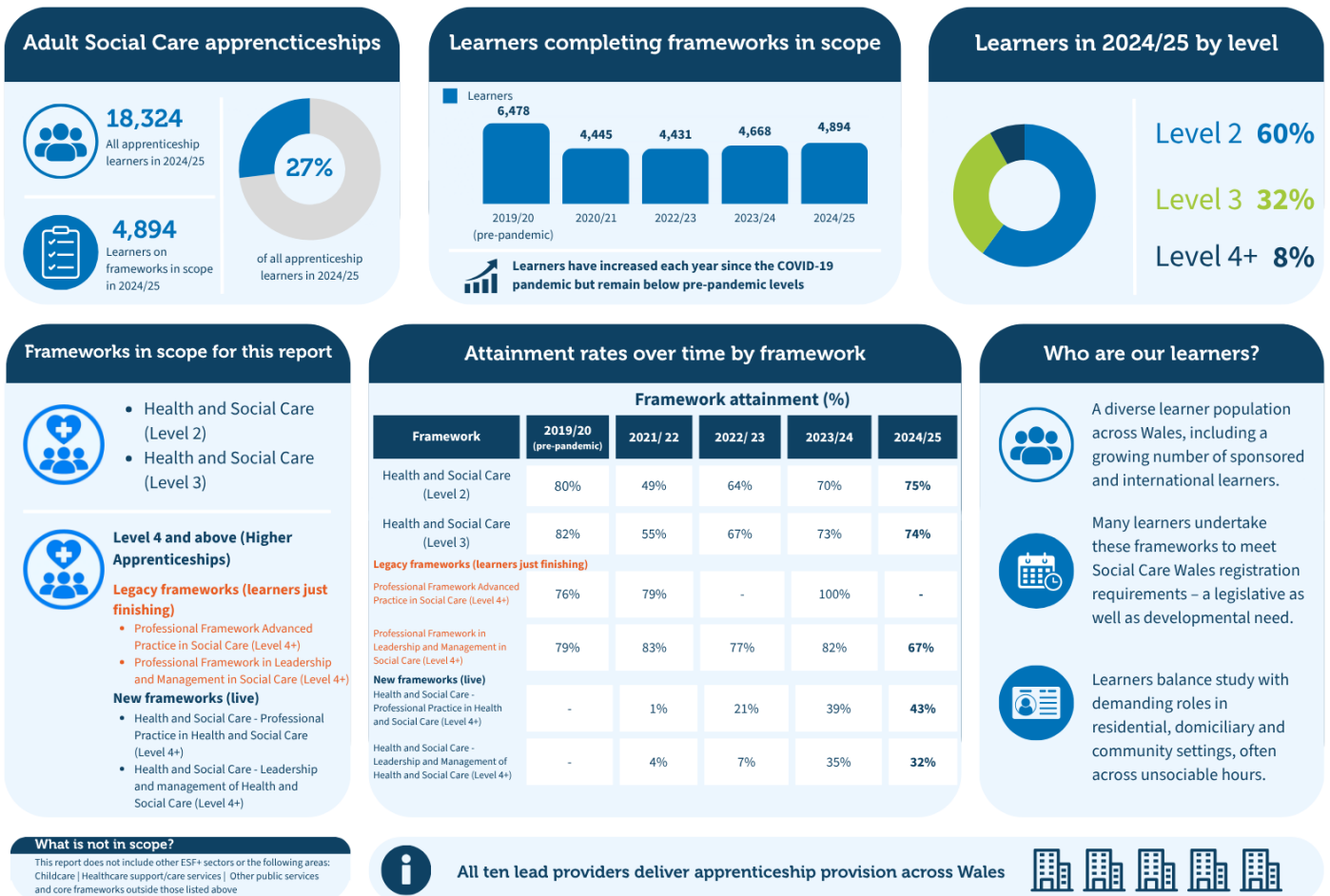
Over recent years, the adult social care sector has experienced considerable change. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted access to learners and workplaces, contributed to high levels of staff and learner churn, and accelerated a shift towards online and blended delivery models. These factors had affected both learner outcomes and timely completion. In addition, the introduction of a new suite of qualifications, including the Level 2 and 3 core and practice model and revised higher apprenticeships, has required providers to adapt delivery approaches and resources. At the same time, apprenticeship participation continues to be shaped by workforce and legislative requirements, including Social Care Wales registration expectations. The learner demographic has also evolved, with an increasing proportion of sponsored and international learners in the workforce.

The report focuses on apprenticeship frameworks within adult social care from Levels 2 to 5, including foundation apprenticeships, apprenticeships and higher apprenticeships. It does not include other sectors within HPSC, such as childcare or healthcare provision outside the specified frameworks.

The findings are based on a range of evidence; inspectors analysed three years of published framework attainment and completion data and undertook enhanced link visits to all ten lead providers. During these visits, inspectors met with senior and middle leaders, practitioners and quality staff responsible for HPSC provision. They also gathered evidence from employers and learners and engaged with key parties, including Qualifications Wales and Social Care Wales.

## The size and scope of adult social care apprenticeships

Adult social care apprenticeship provision plays a key role in supporting workforce development across Wales. Most apprenticeship activity within the sector is concentrated at foundation apprenticeship (Level 2) and apprenticeship level (Level 3), reflecting workforce registration requirements and the operational demands of the sector.



## Provision at Levels 2 and 3

### Adapting delivery to revised qualifications

Across the sector, most provision within adult social care was at Level 2 foundation apprenticeship or Level 3 apprenticeship level. In delivering these programmes, providers had generally responded positively to the introduction of the revised Health and Social Care qualifications, including the move to the core and practice model. In most cases, they had refined their delivery models in line with these changes and adapted staffing structures and resources appropriately.

Many providers demonstrated how learner induction had evolved to become more comprehensive since the introduction of the revised qualifications. This typically included more detailed skills scans, clearer communication of programme expectations and closer alignment with qualification requirements

meaning learners developed a clearer understanding of the links between theory and workplace practice.

As a result, learner outcomes had improved steadily over time, with attainment rates in many cases approaching pre-pandemic levels. However, despite this improving picture overall, a few providers continued to perform well below sector averages for framework attainment.

### **Assessor–learner relationships and learner support**

Across nearly all providers, assessor–learner relationships were a notable feature of provision. Regular contact, clear guidance and pastoral support contributed positively to learner confidence, engagement and retention. In addition, many providers developed flexible delivery approaches that adapted learning around shift patterns and unsociable working hours and, in the best cases, tailored delivery to meet individual learner needs.

Providers increasingly adapted delivery approaches to respond to changing learner profiles within the sector, including rising numbers of learners entering through sponsored arrangements from overseas and a growing range of additional learning needs. In the strongest examples, assessors co-designed learning around learners' confidence levels, work patterns and personal circumstances. Learners benefited from flexible communication methods, recap sessions, simplified explanations of technical terminology and additional one-to-one support, which helped sustain engagement and build confidence.

Continuity of assessor support was a particularly important feature of stronger provision, where stable relationships enabled learners to make more consistent progress through their programmes. In weaker examples, frequent assessor changes disrupted learner progress and reduced confidence, particularly where employers played only a limited role in monitoring and supporting learner progress.

### **Flexible delivery and collaborative learning**

Providers employed a range of delivery models, with many adopting predominantly one-to-one approaches. While this supported flexibility and enabled assessors to tailor learning to individual needs, collaborative learning opportunities were less well developed across the sector. Where providers facilitated opportunities for peer learning, either with learners from the same workplace or from different employers, learners reported that shared experiences and professional discussion enhanced their engagement and learning experience.

### **Recognition of prior learning and programme planning**

In the strongest examples, providers undertook detailed analysis of learners' prior learning, workplace experience and existing qualifications at the start of programmes. Practitioners assessed learners' existing knowledge, confidence and competence carefully and adapted programme content, pace and assessment activity accordingly. These providers aligned apprenticeship delivery effectively with existing employer induction processes and the All Wales Induction Framework (AWIF), reducing unnecessary duplication and

enabling learners to progress more efficiently through core qualification elements.

However, this practice was not consistent across the sector. In a few cases, providers duplicated learning unnecessarily and did not take sufficient account of prior learning already completed by learners. In a minority of cases, providers adhered too rigidly to standardised delivery structures rather than adapting programmes to reflect individual learner capability, confidence and progress. As a result, there was considerable variation in the time taken to complete the core element of qualifications, ranging from a few months to over a year, which affected both framework attainment and timely completion rates.

### **Tracking learner progress and additional support**

Many providers had strengthened their use of data to monitor learner progress. The introduction of clearer milestones, increased focus on planned end dates and the use of tracking tools supported earlier identification of learners at risk of delay.

Where assessor practice was particularly effective, learners benefited from a suitable balance between support and challenge. Assessors intervened promptly when progress slowed, negotiated stretching targets and maintained learners' focus on timely completion. However, in a minority of cases, assessors placed too much emphasis on learner well-being and support at the expense of offering appropriate challenge where tasks set within progress reviews were not achieved on time. In these cases, learners' targets were often not met or delayed until late in the programme.

Most providers had well-established referral pathways to wider learner support services. In the strongest examples, providers identified barriers to learning early through detailed diagnostic assessment and learner profiling. They referred learners promptly to specialist support, for example well-being or examination access arrangements. Staff adapted learning materials, assessment approaches and review processes effectively to support learners to make steady progress and participate fully in apprenticeship activities. Increasingly, learners benefited from assistive technologies such as dictation software, translation tools and digital learning platforms, which supported learner independence and reduced barriers to assessment.

# Employer involvement

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## Off-the-job training and protected learning time

At the start of every apprenticeship programme, a tripartite learning agreement is signed by the three key partners in the apprenticeship learning process: the learner, the employer and the provider. Within this agreement, employers commit to releasing apprentices for training and assessment activity during contracted working hours, participating in regular progress reviews and providing appropriate workplace supervision and support.

However, evidence from visits indicated that, in many cases, employer support and involvement did not meet these expectations and therefore, did not meeting the contractual obligation within the learning agreement.

A key area of concern was the failure of too many employers to provide protected time during the working day for off-the-job training. Despite contractual requirements, too many learners reported attending training sessions in their own time, often after long or unsociable shifts. This had become accepted practice across parts of the sector. This contrasted notably with other apprenticeship sectors, such as engineering and construction, where release for training during paid working hours is more consistently embedded.

Weaker employer engagement was particularly evident within domiciliary care settings, where workforce pressures substantially limited employer capacity to support learning. This had a disproportionate impact on learners requiring additional learning support or English language support needs, who needed more intense support from their provider and employer.

## The effectiveness of the tripartite relationship

In the strongest examples, employers engaged actively in the learning process. These employers released learners appropriately for training, participated meaningfully in progress reviews and provided structured mentoring and workplace support. They maintained regular dialogue with providers and intervened promptly where concerns arose. However, in too many cases employer involvement was limited to digital, compliance-driven sign-off processes or email communication, rather than meaningful engagement in discussions about learner progress and next steps.

Too many employers relied heavily on providers to manage apprenticeship delivery rather than recognising their own responsibility to support learners to achieve. This weakened the effectiveness of the tripartite relationship and reduced the impact of workplace learning on learner progress. The effectiveness of provision relied too heavily on the commitment, adaptability and pastoral support of individual assessors, rather than on consistently embedded systems of employer support. A minority of employers viewed apprenticeships primarily as a means for attaining qualifications for Social Care Wales registration

rather than as broader programmes of workforce development and professional learning.

### **Employer accountability**

Providers did not always hold employers to account where they failed to meet contractual responsibilities. A few providers had reduced or ceased working with employers where support arrangements were persistently weak. However, competitive pressures and employer demand for apprenticeship places often limited providers' willingness to challenge employers robustly. As a result, expectations set out within apprenticeship learning agreements were not enforced consistently across the sector.

## Higher apprenticeships (Levels 4 and 5)

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### Adapting delivery models

Providers across the sector continued to adapt delivery models in response to the introduction of revised higher apprenticeship qualifications. While there were clear signs that providers were refining and strengthening their approaches over time, learner outcomes for higher apprentices on the new revised qualifications were not improving quickly enough and remained too low overall.

Many providers had refined delivery models through more structured approaches, including workshops, cohort delivery and study days designed to support learners with the academic demands of higher-level study. They had strengthened induction, initial assessment and learner selection processes notably in recognising that, in the past, learners had too often been enrolled onto programmes without fully understanding the academic demands, programme length and level of independent study required alongside demanding workplace responsibilities.

As a result, providers had become more selective and structured in their recruitment and induction arrangements, placing greater emphasis on ensuring that learners and employers understood expectations around attendance at workshops and study days, external assessment requirements and the overall commitment required to complete successfully.

These approaches particularly benefited learners progressing from practice-based roles into academically demanding programmes. Learners valued opportunities for peer discussion, collaborative learning and structured teaching support. However, many learners continued to find the academic rigour of programmes demanding. Balancing work pressures with study commitments remained difficult, particularly given the demanding leadership roles learners often hold within the sector.

Despite these challenges, providers, employers and learners were generally positive about the long-term value and direction of the revised higher apprenticeship qualifications. They recognised their potential to professionalise the sector further by strengthening leadership and management capability at operational and strategic levels. Employers valued the stronger emphasis on reflective practice, leadership behaviours and service improvement, and felt that the qualifications better reflected the complexity and accountability of management roles within adult social care.

**Cohort-based delivery models for higher apprenticeships** - A few providers had adapted higher apprenticeship delivery models successfully in response to the increasing academic demands of revised Level 4 and 5 qualifications to enable peers to learn together and support each other.

**Coleg Cambria** had strengthened higher apprenticeship delivery through structured workshop models and increased specialist staffing. Leaders recognised that peer learning and collaborative discussion were particularly important in helping learners manage the theoretical and written demands of

higher-level study. Mixed cohorts and regular workshops created supportive learning networks that reduced learner isolation and encouraged learners to share experiences and approaches to leadership practice.

Similarly, at **Gower College Swansea**, learners attended fortnightly full-day workshops that combined taught sessions, assessment guidance and protected study time. Learners valued the clear structure of delivery, regular access to specialist staff and opportunities to learn collaboratively with peers. Strong induction arrangements, detailed timetabling and clear milestone tracking also helped learners and employers understand programme expectations well.

### **External assessment arrangements**

External assessment arrangements presented considerable challenges for providers and learners on higher apprenticeships. Providers raised concerns about delays in accessing external assessors, cancellations of planned visits and extended waiting times, and the level of detail of external assessment activity. These issues disrupted learner progress and created bottlenecks within cohort delivery models. Providers and learners also expressed frustration about external assessment feedback arrangements. In a few cases, feedback was too limited to help learners understand how to improve. In addition, provider assessors were not permitted to interpret or discuss external feedback directly with learners, limiting opportunities for targeted support and contributing to delays and reduced learner confidence.

### **Capacity and sustainability of higher-level provision**

A few providers experienced difficulties recruiting and retaining suitably experienced staff to deliver higher-level provision. High levels of staff turnover and wider workforce instability within both providers and the social care sector affected continuity for learners and disrupted assessor relationships and programme delivery. In a few cases, staffing instability also limited providers' capacity to expand or sustain delivery at Levels 4 and 5.

As a result of these challenges, a minority of providers had reduced the scale of higher apprenticeship provision or withdrawn from delivery altogether. This had begun to affect employer access to higher apprenticeship opportunities and raises concerns about future capacity for developing leaders and managers within the sector.

# Essential Skills Wales (ESW)

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## Learner-centred delivery approaches

Essential Skills Wales (ESW), particularly in relation to learner's literacy and numeracy skills development, remained a key barrier to learner progress and timely completion across adult social care apprenticeships at all levels. Many of the key issues identified in our thematic review [Delivery of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeship programmes](#), published in November 2023, remained present.

Providers demonstrated a growing strategic focus on improving Essential Skills delivery through a range of flexible approaches, including one-to-one support, workshops, online learning and blended delivery models. In the strongest practice, providers adopted learner-centred approaches that used initial assessment outcomes effectively to tailor support to individual learner needs. Staff responsible for Essential Skills delivery were appropriately trained and demonstrated a strong understanding of adult literacy and numeracy pedagogy.

The most effective providers recognised that the development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills was a shared responsibility across the apprenticeship team, rather than the sole responsibility of Essential Skills specialists. Across these providers, staff understood clearly their role in supporting skills development within their own practice. For example, reviewers used diagnostic information to identify barriers and signpost learners to additional support, monitoring learners' progress in developing their skills over time. Vocational assessors identified naturally occurring opportunities to reinforce literacy and numeracy through day-to-day workplace activity, such as report writing, record keeping or the use of measurements when administering medication. As a result, literacy and numeracy development became more embedded within the learner's overall apprenticeship experience rather than being viewed as a separate qualification activity.

However, the quality and effectiveness of Essential Skills delivery remained too variable across the sector. Too often, delivery focused narrowly on assessment preparation rather than on developing broader underpinning literacy and numeracy skills. In weaker practice, provision relied too heavily on generic delivery models, without sufficient consideration of how individuals learned most effectively or recognising that some benefited more from one-to-one guidance, while others learned more effectively through collaborative workshop-based approaches.

A notable challenge across the sector related to the limited contextualisation of ESW within adult social care practice. Although a few providers had begun using sector-specific resources and contextualised activities, this practice was not yet widespread. Consequently, many learners and employers questioned the relevance of formal tasks and assessments to workplace roles, which reduced learner motivation and engagement. Opportunities to develop literacy and numeracy skills through naturally occurring workplace activities and evidence were often underdeveloped.

## **Programme planning and learner progress**

Many providers prioritised front-loading Essential Skills early within programmes to reduce assessment delays later in the learner journey. In stronger examples, this approach supported more timely completion and reduced the number of learners remaining “in learning” solely because of Essential Skills requirements. However, across a few providers, overly rigid delivery structures and logistical barriers, including travel to workshops and assessments contributed to low attendance and slower learner progress. Where this happened, the requirement to complete Essential Skills often became a bigger barrier to timely successful completion

Employer understanding and support for Essential Skills also remained too variable. Many employers expressed concerns about the time required for learners to complete Essential Skills qualifications and the operational impact of releasing staff for training and assessments. In stronger partnerships, employers recognised the wider value of literacy and numeracy development and supported learners through protected learning time and active engagement in progress reviews. However, too many employers continued to view Essential Skills primarily as compliance requirements rather than as part of broader workforce development.

A growing proportion of learners with English as an additional language required substantial additional support, particularly in relation to technical vocabulary, professional discussion and assessment requirements. However, only a few providers had developed sufficiently tailored approaches to meet these increasingly complex needs. In the strongest examples, providers drew effectively on specialist staff, peer-support approaches and pre-programme language assessment to help learners develop confidence before entering apprenticeship provision.

A few providers had strengthened opportunities for learners to develop Welsh language and bilingual skills within adult social care apprenticeships. In the strongest examples, providers increased access to Welsh-medium resources, appointed Welsh language coordinators or ambassadors and supported learners to apply Welsh language skills within workplace practice to support residents and service users. However, despite national investment and strategic initiatives to increase the use of Welsh within the care sector, opportunities for learners to develop Welsh language skills remained too variable and were not embedded systematically across apprenticeship provision.

## **Funding and programme flexibility**

Providers consistently reported that current funding and programme duration models did not sufficiently reflect the increasing complexity of learner need, particularly for learners requiring additional support. Providers felt that the “one-size-fits-all” funding approach limited their ability to individualise programme length and intensity appropriately. In addition, a few more experienced learners, particularly those undertaking higher-level programmes, questioned the relevance of completing lower-level Essential Skills qualifications that did not align closely enough with their existing responsibilities or professional roles.

## Reflective questions

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To continue improving outcomes and experiences for adult social care apprentices, providers, Medr and wider partners should consider the following reflective questions:

For providers:

- How can the alignment between learners' prior experience, existing knowledge and capability be better considered when planning apprenticeship programmes?
- How can opportunities for collaborative and peer learning across provision be expanded?
- How can resource planning ensure continuity of assessor support for learners throughout their programmes?
- How can providers ensure that employers understand their contractual obligation and responsibilities within apprenticeship learning agreements better?
- How can employers be consistently and collectively challenged and held accountable where contractual expectations relating to off-the-job training and learner support are not met?
- How can approaches to teaching, learning and assessment better support learners with English as an additional language?
- How can the development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills, contextualised within adult social care practice, be improved?

For Medr:

- How can the apprenticeship learning agreement be strengthened further to set clearer expectations and accountability for employers, particularly in relation to active engagement in the apprenticeship process and the protection of off-the-job training time within paid working hours?
- How can funding and programme duration arrangements better support flexible and individualised delivery models while responding more effectively to the increasing complexity of learner need within the adult social care sector?
- How can Medr work with key partners, including Qualifications Wales, to improve the consistency, efficiency and timeliness of external assessment arrangements to support learner progress and timely completion?
- How could more contextualised approaches to developing learners' literacy and numeracy skills within adult social care improve learner engagement, outcomes and progression?

For Welsh Government:

- To what extent are current ESW qualification requirements within adult social care frameworks the most effective approach for supporting learners' literacy and numeracy skills development?