

Vocational Qualifications Stakeholder Reference Group Meeting

Notes & actions of meeting held on 15 October 2025

Qualifications Wales attendees:

Jo Richards	(JR)	Director of Qualification Policy and Reform
Gareth Downey	(GD)	Head of VQ Monitoring
Leanne Hallett	(LH)	Senior Qualifications Manager
Dean Seabrook	(DS)	Senior Qualifications Manager
Vicki Stockton	(VS)	Qualifications Manager
Andrew Shipway	(AS)	Qualifications Manager
Elaine Carlile	(EC)	Strategic Engagement Manager

Stakeholder attendees:

Mark Campion	(MC)	Estyn
Jeff Protheroe	(JP)	ColegauCymru
Karen Smith	(KS)	NTfW
Kathryn Watkiss	(KW)	Welsh Government
Robert Stroud	(RS)	Welsh Government
Yana Williams	(YM)	Chair of CC Curriculum and Quality Group

Apologies:

Lleu Williams	(LW)	Head of Strategic Engagement
Nick Herbert	(NH)	Welsh Government
Heather Davidson	(HD)	Medr
Vivienne Wilfred	(VW)	Medr
Sarah John	(SJ)	NTfW
Kelly Edwards	(KE)	ColegauCymru
Barry Walters	(BW)	Chair of CC Strategic WBL Group

1.1 Welcome

- 1.1 EC welcomed members to the meeting and noted apologies.
- 1.2 EC led a review of the notes and requested updates on relevant actions from the June meeting, confirming that all the actions were closed.

2.1 Welsh Government Update

- 2.1 KW provided an update on the Welsh Government's (WG) development of a vocational education and training (VET) strategy, outlining the establishment of delivery strands, stakeholder engagement, and plans for a strategic outline report before the 2026 pre-election period. WG is working with stakeholders to identify five independent delivery strands to strengthen vocational education and training, aiming to create clearer and more accessible pathways for learners.
- 2.2 A VET stakeholder reference group has been established, meeting twice this year to discuss delivery strands such as future delivery and innovation, with feedback being gathered through group discussions and one-to-one engagement. The plan is to publish a strategic outline report from the reference group before the pre-election period in March 2026, with further decisions on a full strategy document to be made post-election.

3.1 Medr Update

- 3.1 As VW was unable to attend the meeting, due to Medr hosting an event to discuss its current consultation, EC shared the information provided by VW prior to the meeting. Extensive updates were provided on apprenticeship reviews covering ongoing work across screen and technical theatre, early years, digital, engineering, automotive, agriculture and environment, social care, energy, food and drink, healthcare sectors.
- 3.2 Notably, discussions on screen and technical theatre qualifications have faced delays due to staffing changes at an awarding body, while reviews in early years have moved away from a universal approach in favour of tailored pathway reviews with dates currently being agreed for working groups.
- 3.3 Annual reviews are progressing in digital and engineering with new pathways under development, although engineering is advancing more slowly with suggested working groups shared with the steering group. Further updates included preliminary work in agriculture and environment, sector-specific reviews led by Social Care Wales, a focus on renewable energy skills, and the exploration of a Level 4 brewing pathway in food and drink. Stakeholder collaboration and continuous sector development remain central to these activities.
- 3.4 It was noted that Medr's [consultation](#) on apprenticeship programmes in Wales was published on 15 September and is open until 31 October and Medr has been holding a range of online and face-to-face events which have been very well attended. Finally, as mentioned at the June meeting, Medr is developing a much improved Framework Library, a more coherent funding model and a new certifying function. This is due to be operational by August 2027 to support the new apprenticeship programme.

4.1 Estyn Update

- 4.1 As it was Mark's first meeting, he introduced himself to the group as an Assistant Director at Estyn with responsibility for post-16 education and training. MS updated the group on current thematic reviews, noting that a review of Science and Technology AOLE is underway, with field visits about to commence. Estyn is conducting one review per year for each AOLE.
- 4.2 A review focusing on participation and attendance in FE colleges and sixth forms is also in progress. Outcomes will be reported towards the end of the academic year.
- 4.3 MS noted that the first meeting with Welsh Government and Medr has been held to discuss next year's thematic review topics. Decisions will be communicated once finalised and subject to government funding.

Action 1: Once the topics for next year's thematic reviews are agreed with Welsh Government and Medr, MS will share details with EC to circulate to the group.

- 4.4 Given the extension of apprenticeship contracts and the end of the previous inspection cycle, Estyn is not conducting further apprenticeship inspections at present. Instead it is undertaking enhanced

link inspector work with all 10 apprenticeship lead providers over the next six months. The focus will be on health and social care apprenticeships, as well as on apprenticeship completion rates.

- 4.5 This year's FE college link visits will cover the use of AI in FE colleges, drawing on Estyn's recently published report on AI in schools. The intention is to identify effective practice, and findings may feed into a future report or Estyn's next annual report.
- 4.6 Discussions will also be held on curriculum reform, 'Made for Wales' qualifications, VCSEs, and English and maths resits. Most of these topics are for information gathering rather than report writing.
- 4.7 MS highlighted concerns regarding Welsh language development, specifically noting that learners from English-medium homes who complete their education through Welsh up to age 16 rarely continue their Welsh language development when moving onto vocational pathways. Although some improvements have been noted, Estyn intends to maintain a focus on this issue and include it in its reporting.
- 4.8 Following a question from LH regarding the review of health and social care apprenticeships, MS confirmed that findings would be published in an insight report. Findings from the completion rates will be published in another insights report, with both reports likely to be published around Easter or early in the summer term.

Action 2: Estyn will publish insights reports on health and social care apprenticeships and on completion rates around Easter/early summer term.

- 4.9 Following a question from JP regarding how findings from Estyn's work on apprenticeships, particularly in health and social care, are being shared with Medr given their current consultation, MS confirmed that Estyn regularly shares information and feedback with Medr through various formal and informal meetings, including those involving Welsh Government. Feedback is provided ahead of published reports, and Estyn is actively engaging with the ongoing consultation, including attending events and planning a formal consultation response.

5.1 Qualifications Wales

- 5.1 GD provided a brief update confirming that the summer period for vocational qualifications progressed smoothly, with no significant issues. All results were released on schedule, and collaboration between providers and awarding bodies was effective. The current priority is to continue monitoring, focusing in particular on awarding bodies that deliver reformed, approved qualifications.
- 5.2 VS provided an update on QW's work on producing learner journeys, which are vocational qualification maps developed for learners in Wales in response to the VQ review. Following a survey held in the summer and input from a wide range of stakeholders including learners, parents, colleges, training providers, a range of organisations, and awarding bodies, 21 learner journeys are planned for publication on the website prior to half term. Each of the learner journeys will be reviewed annually, via the relevant sector qualification group meeting, with updated versions republished each autumn.

- 5.3 VS also provided an update on the development of new designated land-based qualifications involving collaboration with several awarding bodies. It was noted that City & Guilds has extended most current land-based qualifications to August 2027, although some legacy (QCF) qualifications will be withdrawn in August 2026. The status of work-based learning qualifications is yet to be confirmed, with potential for a further extension. All new qualifications are scheduled for first teaching in September 2026, with a transition year to support providers moving from old to new qualifications. New Lantra qualifications will be launched bilingually from September 2026. A bulletin outlining current and upcoming qualifications at levels 1–3 has been shared with providers to assist in transition planning. Engagement with universities has been positive, particularly regarding the fully graded (PPP–DDD) structure of new level 3 qualifications, which supports progression to higher education and provides UCAS points for learners. The new qualifications are designed for both FE and work-based learning providers and are mapped to National Occupational Standards. Learners can move laterally between providers and awarding bodies, offering flexibility in progression. The extension of City & Guilds qualifications provides a phased transition, helping to avoid gaps in provision as new qualifications are introduced.
- 5.4 DS provided an update on engagement with work-based learning providers to discuss their experiences of using national construction and building services engineering qualifications for apprenticeships. Following the engagement a log of 36 action points has been created to address issues, with responsibility shared between Qualifications Wales, City & Guilds, EAL, and Medr. Providers are updated on progress roughly every two months, and some actions have already been completed (e.g., improvements to electrotechnical registration processes). EAL is currently developing a refrigeration, air conditioning and heat pumps qualification which is due to be available from September 2026. City & Guilds is developing a floor covering qualification, also due to be available from September 2026. Temporary arrangements have been agreed with Medr to cover gaps until these qualifications are launched. DS noted that WG has requested a review of the inclusivity of the range of available qualifications for work-based construction learners, including the possibility of level 2 qualifications. In response, draft qualification outlines have been produced to help gather input from providers. These proposals aim to adapt existing level 3 content for level 2, maintaining employer involvement and remaining as combined qualifications for apprenticeships (knowledge and competence elements together). The proposals were submitted to Welsh Government and Medr at the end of September, and discussions are ongoing. Updates will be shared when available. DS noted that development work on lower uptake trades (e.g., building maintenance, insulation, stone masonry) has been paused pending outcomes of this work, and timelines are being reconsidered in collaboration with City & Guilds.

Action 3: QW will provide updates on level 2 qualifications for work-based construction learners following outcomes of discussions with Medr and Welsh Government.

- 5.5 DS provided an update on behalf of LH regarding the suite of approved health and social care and childcare qualifications from level 2 to 5 that are no longer subject to the restriction of being developed/delivered by one provider (the City & Guilds/WJEC consortium). Updated approval criteria for unrestricted qualifications have been published on QW's website. City & Guilds and WJEC will continue offering these qualifications, but other awarding bodies may now develop

qualifications to meet QW's approval criteria, ensuring they meet bilingual requirements and collaborate with Social Care Wales.

- 5.6 AS provided a comprehensive update on the Essential Skills Wales qualification reform, noting progress and ongoing stakeholder engagement. A formal consultation is scheduled to open in November, running for approximately 12 weeks, with approval criteria expected to be published in May 2026. Focusing on the purpose of the qualifications AS noted that they aim to support progression for learners at entry level through to levels one and two, with a focus on transferable skills relevant to life, learning, and work. Proposed content has been refined following stakeholder feedback, improving progression and reducing duplication across levels. Notable changes include the removal of planning in mathematics, inclusion of financial maths, differentiated content for English and Welsh, and broad, technology-agnostic digital content including AI. In terms of assessment proposals, which have been shaped by discussing earlier proposals with a wide range of stakeholders, for Application of Number proposals include a retention of an on-screen, on-demand auto-marked test along with another externally set on-demand test, not auto-marked, which would lead to a significant reduction in overall assessment time compared to the current qualification. For Communication, two assessments are proposed, again significantly reducing the assessment time, with one on-demand, on-screen externally-set, partly auto-marked test covering reading and writing and another on-demand externally set, internally marked and externally verified assessment in speaking and listening. For digital skills, proposals include replacing the structured discussion with an on-screen, on-demand external assessment. The second assessment will be externally set or centre set and will be completed digitally. It will be internally marked and externally moderated. Due to the nature of the assessment, current proposals are for the assessment to be up to four hours. Comments and feedback are welcomed on this, as there is not a significant reduction in assessment time compared to the current qualifications. The consultation will also propose changes to the qualification titles, to Essential Numeracy Skills, Essential Literacy Skills, and Essential Digital Skills. Finally, it is proposed to remove provision of level 3 qualifications in communication, application of number, and digital, and removal of entry level one and entry level two in digital literacy.
- 5.7 JP noted ongoing concerns within FE and work-based learning providers about assessment manageability, particularly highlighting the challenges for apprentices to attend centres to complete assessments. AS responded noting that provider concerns regarding manageability have been considered and original proposals have been adapted based on feedback received in discussions over the past two months.

Action 4: QW will inform the group once the ESW consultation is published as well as sharing details of a webinar for stakeholders that will be held in November to explain the proposals.

- 5.8 EC displayed a slide detailing other relevant work that QW is undertaking, including an update on QW's [Cymraeg strategy](#), which consolidates all Welsh language work under one framework, building on the previous 'Choice for All' strategy and supporting Welsh Government's policy initiatives. EC also highlighted aspects of the recently published [Survey of public opinions of non-degree qualifications in Wales 2024](#) which indicates strong confidence (over 80%) among Welsh

adults in vocational qualifications, with similar trust in the Advanced Skills Baccalaureate Wales, GCSEs, and A levels. Finally, EC provided a brief overview of roll-out of National Qualifications for 14-16 year olds noting that wave 1 qualifications are now being taught in schools and approved wave 2 WJEC specifications have been published for first teaching from September 2026. EC noted that engagement with stakeholders continues regarding the availability of GCSE science qualifications with the withdrawal of separate GCSE sciences delayed until at least 2028, when further consultation will be held. QW is currently going through the recognition process for awarding bodies who wish to develop/deliver wave 3 qualifications for first teaching in 2027.

6. Matters arising from Further Education and Work Based Learning engagement

6.1 On behalf of ColegauCymru, JP highlighted ongoing concerns about the impact of Essential Skills Wales qualification reforms, particularly assessment methods on the flexibility and manageability of apprenticeship delivery. The provision of on-demand assessments was appreciated, but the importance of maintaining agility to meet FE and WBL learner needs, as well as those of employers, was noted. AS confirmed that remote invigilation and online assessments would remain part of the approach and sought clarification on what additional flexibility stakeholders were seeking, such as portfolio based assessments, noting the need to balance validity and reliability with manageability of the qualifications.

7. AOB/forward plan

7.1 QW's high level Forward Plan was circulated prior to the meeting, including qualification reform and decision reports. Proposed dates for the next meetings were 25 February at 13:00 and 23 June at 13:00. Members to inform EC if there are any issues with the proposed dates.

Action 5: Members to inform EC if there are any issues with the proposed dates for the meetings in February and June 2026.

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Action 2: Estyn will publish insights reports on health and social care apprenticeships and on completion rates around Easter/early summer term.

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Next meetings

25 February 2026 (13:00- 14:30)

23 June 2026 (13:00- 14:30)