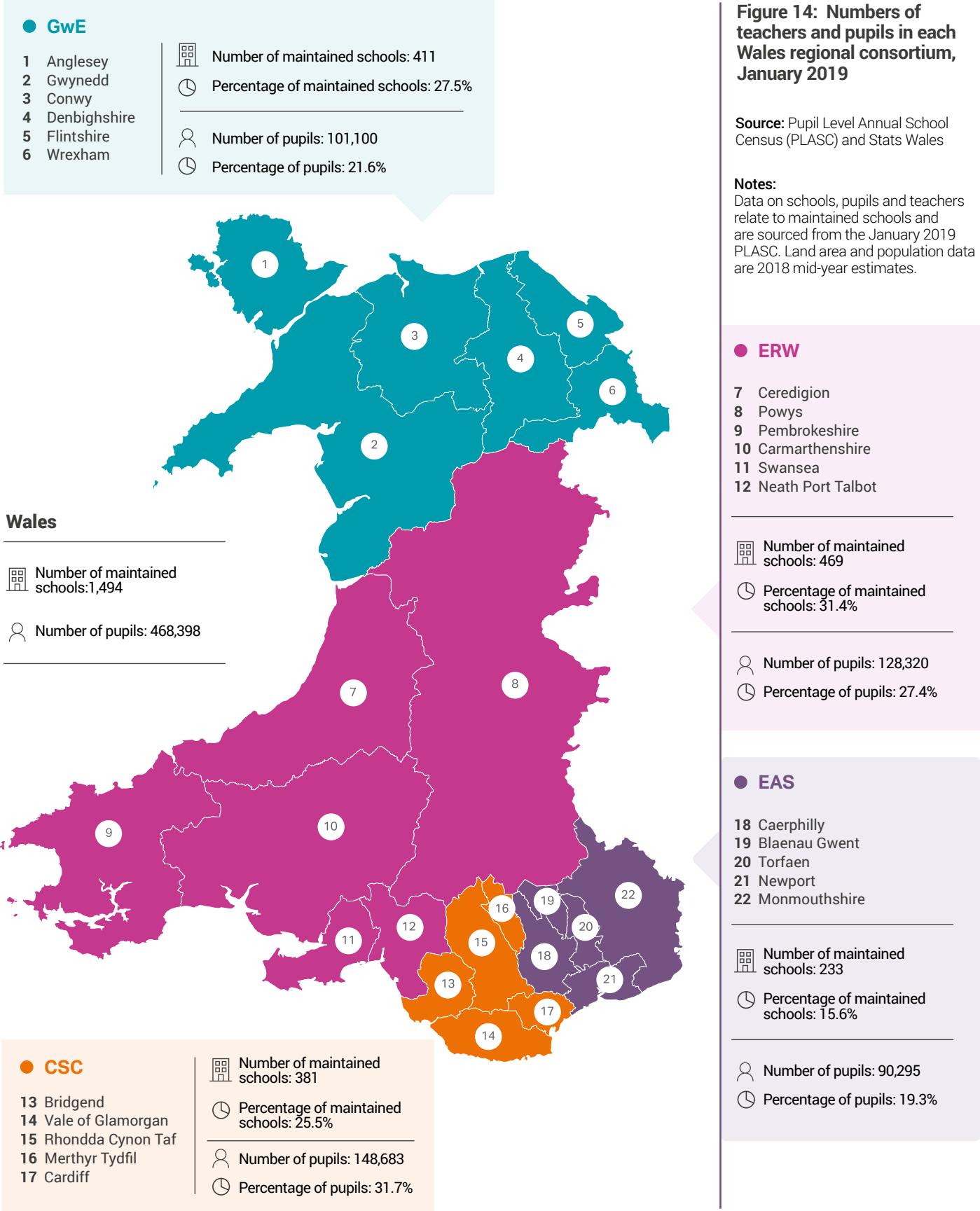


# Supporting a self-improving system



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## Local authority and regional consortium support for schools

Local authorities in Wales have a statutory responsibility for the performance of their schools, and powers to intervene in schools causing concern. They also provide a range of services that support the education of children and young people, such as youth services, counselling and sports activities. Expenditure on these local government education services has decreased in real terms over recent years and local authorities have prioritised funding for schools while managing overall budget reductions (StatsWales, 2019a).

Local authorities work together through four regional consortia to provide school improvement services that challenge and support schools (see figure 14).

Over the last three years, local authorities and regional consortia have improved their knowledge of individual schools' strengths and areas for improvement. Using this knowledge, school improvement staff are supporting and challenging schools better, particularly schools causing concern. The regional consortia have prioritised supporting schools to develop pupils' literacy and numeracy. Support for schools to develop pupils' digital competence is comparably weaker. For schools causing concern, school improvement staff are not always focused enough on improving the quality of teaching.

Regional consortia work closely with the Welsh Government to support schools on curriculum reform. Their support includes providing professional learning for teachers and school leaders, and for identifying and facilitating schools to support other schools. Most activity has so far focused on supporting schools to understand the curriculum reform process by engaging with the development of the draft curriculum and on supporting senior school leaders in managing change. Each region has approached providing support for schools to prepare for curriculum reform in different ways, and has designed its own tools to measure and support engagement with curriculum reform. These tools are used to identify strengths in practice and priority areas for development.

As part of the Welsh Government's ALN reform programme, five ALN transformational leads have worked with local authorities to support their work in reforming processes for pupils with additional learning needs. The ALN leads provide local authorities with advice, support and challenge as they prepare for the implementation of the reforms. Local authorities have developed local plans to help schools, non-maintained settings and further education institutions in their local authority area to prepare for change. The Welsh Government recognised the scale of the challenge that ALN reform presents and the Minister for Education announced in September 2019 that implementation of the new ALN system would be delayed and start, on a phased basis, from September 2021 rather than 2020, in order to "provide time for further dedicated training and development" (Welsh Government, 2019n).

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## School organisation

There have been many successful school reorganisations in recent years. This year, there have been 55 school reorganisation proposals under the School Organisation Code (Welsh Government, 2018e), considerably more than in the previous two years. Of these, 31 were received in the autumn term prior to the publication of a new Welsh Government School Organisation Code that came into effect on 1 November 2018, which is more proposals than for the previous year as a whole, when local authorities submitted 29 proposals. Around a third of this year's proposals were for increasing capacity in individual schools, including increasing the age range to allow for more nursery pupils. A few local authorities submitted proposals as part of a review of education in a particular area, which accounted for a further third of submissions. In addition, a few local authorities submitted proposals to reorganise SEN provision, for example by relocating, re-designating and opening new learning resource centres<sup>18</sup>. In line with recent trends, two proposals reorganised education provision by opening all-age schools. Around a third of all proposals were linked to increasing Welsh-medium education, for example by changing the language status of five dual stream primary schools to Welsh medium in Carmarthenshire.

In most of these cases, Estyn agreed that the proposal was likely to at least maintain education standards. School reorganisation programmes should be primarily about school improvement rather than a resource management exercise that is separate from the interests of learners. In some cases, local authorities make broad generalisations about the benefits of reorganisation without evaluating the impact on learner outcomes in the particular situations.

Currently, a range of strategies such as schools closures, amalgamations, federalisation and the removal of redundant buildings and demountable classrooms are being employed across Wales to rationalise school places and improve school buildings. Local remodelling of primary sector provision has replaced many unsuitable and inefficient buildings with appropriate new provision, often serving wider areas than before. Federations of schools and all-age schools are proving increasingly popular options for remodelling education provision.

These school reorganisation strategies often need substantial financial investment and political commitment. Welsh Government funding is often a catalyst for assisting local authorities to re-structure their school estate. The introduction of the 21st Century Schools programme requires local authorities to be more strategic in applying Welsh Government capital funding. Many local authorities have been reluctant to take decisions on school rationalisation despite a significant decline in pupil numbers within some areas of their authority. This reluctance is often due to strong local opposition from communities and their local political representatives.

Where reorganisations work well, school leaders are involved closely in the preparation period before a new school opens, often for at least a year in advance. This allows them to co-develop the vision with other leaders and teachers and to ensure that pupils' learning is not disrupted. Where new schools have not been successful, particularly secondary schools, it is often because this preparatory work was weak in the year before the school opened.

<sup>18</sup> A learning resource centre is a classroom or classrooms based within a mainstream school for pupils with complex needs. This enables the school to make sure that these pupils' individual needs are supported while providing opportunities for them to take part in mainstream activities and lessons and to socialise with their peers.

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Schools increasingly work in partnership with other statutory and voluntary agencies to meet a range of community needs. Such use is aligned to developing the community focus of schools and can result in surplus areas within a school being used as the base for other services. Where this happens there are opportunities for closer multi-agency working with the police, library services, health or social services. Although such practice is increasing, it is still unusual to see surplus capacity used in this way.

## Federated schools

The number of federated schools has grown steadily over the past few years. Federation in Wales is a formal and legal agreement by which between two and six schools share governance arrangements and have a single governing body. Federations can involve a mix of maintained schools which are either nursery, primary, special or secondary schools. At the start of September 2019, there were 34 federations across Wales, containing around 5% of all maintained schools. Most of these federations consist of primary schools. In most cases, governing bodies and local authorities enter into federation to increase the likelihood of securing effective leadership and the long-term viability of schools. This is particularly the case for small schools, for schools in rural or otherwise isolated positions, for Welsh-medium schools, and for schools where headteacher recruitment is particularly challenging. The role of the headteacher in a federation is more attractive as it often means that they have a reduced teaching commitment if any, and become 'executive headteachers' with responsibility for leading more than one school.

The revision of the Welsh Government School Organisation Code, which came into effect in November 2018, makes special arrangements in regard to rural schools and establishing a procedural presumption against their closure. The code notes that "this does not mean that a rural school will never close but the case for closure must be strong and all viable alternatives to closure must have been conscientiously considered by the proposer, including federation" (Welsh Government, 2018e, p.11). Since the introduction of this new code, there has been an increase in the number of schools forming a federation.

In 2019, Estyn (2019a) published a thematic report on the common features of effective federation. Where federation is most successful, governing bodies, senior leaders and local authorities have a clear vision of what they wish to achieve through the federation process. Their vision focuses sharply on outcomes for pupils. They are explicit from the outset about what federation does and does not involve and they communicate this clearly to staff, parents and pupils. They quickly establish leadership structures that support their vision for the federation.

In a few cases, federations use staff expertise to support the progress of specific groups of learners, such as those with social, emotional and behavioural needs. But overall, senior leaders do not take full enough advantage of the staff expertise available across the federation to enhance learning experiences for all pupils and to ensure that the progress of particular groups of pupils is rapid enough, including the more able or those who are disadvantaged.

In a minority of federated schools, teachers plan regular opportunities for pupils to work collaboratively with their peers from the other schools. This has a

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positive impact on pupils' social skills and sense of wellbeing. In nearly all cases, federation has a positive impact on the transition experience for many pupils as they move from key stage 2 to key stage 3. In most cases, federated schools do not use ICT effectively to support pupil collaboration across school sites.

The quality of support that local authorities provide governing bodies to assist them through the federation process is variable. In the best cases, local authorities ensure consistency of support across all schools in the federation, for example through the deployment of the same challenge adviser to each school. However, there is not enough support for headteachers that will prepare them to lead a federation.

Federation frequently results in budget efficiencies for schools, such as through sharing administrative staff. In federations of smaller schools, managing two or three separate budgets and the pooling of resources can be a challenge for governing bodies and for headteachers.

## All-age schools

All-age schools provide education for pupils from age three or four up to 16 or 19 years old. In January 2019, there were 19 all-age schools in Wales. The sector continues to grow with a further two schools planned to open in September 2019 and further plans and consultations in at least another five areas. The sector is diverse in terms of the different number of sites for each school, the wide range of pupil numbers in different phases, the urban as well as rural locations of the schools, and in language medium.

A particular feature of all-age schools is the continuity in care and support for pupils as they progress through the phases of a single school. Even so, all the all-age schools inspected so far receive at least a half of their Year 7 cohort from external primary schools, so there is a difference within the pupil cohort post-Year 7 in the extent of the continuity in care and support that pupils have received.

In 2020 we will publish a report on leadership, provision and performance in all-age schools, which will focus on the benefits and challenges of the all-age model.

## Cymraeg 2050: a million Welsh speakers

In August 2017, the Welsh Government published its strategy, 'Cymraeg 2050: a million Welsh speakers' (2017a) with overall targets of a million people speaking Welsh by 2050 and 20% of those speaking Welsh every day. Education has an important role to play in achieving these targets. A key aim of the government's strategy is to expand Welsh-medium provision in the early years as an entry point into Welsh-medium education in schools. Around 21% of Year 1 pupils are educated in Welsh-medium settings, and this figure has remained broadly the same in recent years. 'Cymraeg 2050' includes a target to increase this proportion to 30% by 2031 and 40% by 2050.

Local authorities in Wales have published statutory Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) since 2014. These plans have provided a useful and structured framework for local authorities to develop their

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Welsh-medium education provision (Estyn, 2016). There have been weaknesses in the way many local authorities implement their WESPs and this is one reason for the slow progress made against many of the targets in the Welsh Assembly Government's Welsh-medium Education Strategy (2010). More recent plans demonstrate a stronger commitment by leaders to supporting Welsh-medium education.

A few local authorities have very effective provision for language immersion for pupils joining Welsh-medium or bilingual schools with little or no prior Welsh. They offer opportunities for a new cohort of pupils to develop their skills in Welsh and provide a sound linguistic basis for them to participate fully in bilingual education and to take advantage of the experiences offered.

The proportion of pupils who do not continue in Welsh-medium education between the primary and secondary phases of education has reduced over time. For example, 10% of pupils assessed in Welsh first-language at the end of key stage 2 in 2013 were not assessed in 2016 at the end of key stage 3. This compares with nearly 18% in the period 2008-2011 five years earlier. Overall, however, around 20% of pupils who are in Welsh-medium education at the end of the foundation phase do not continue to develop their Welsh language skills to their full potential during their time in statutory education and do not gain a GCSE qualification in Welsh (first language) at the end of key stage 4. Similarly, too many pupils in bilingual secondary schools in a minority of local authorities do not receive enough opportunities to continue to develop and apply their Welsh language skills in subjects across the curriculum. These schools do not plan carefully enough to develop pupils' language skills, including promoting the advantages of pursuing courses through the medium of Welsh.

English-medium schools have an important contribution to make towards realising the 2050 targets and to ensure that learners from all backgrounds have the opportunities to develop strong Welsh language skills. The 'Draft Curriculum for Wales 2022' guidance (Welsh Government, 2019b) emphasises that the teaching and learning of Welsh is integral to the new curriculum and offers a valuable opportunity for English-medium schools to focus more on their Welsh language provision. There are significant implications for the professional learning required for staff to meet the challenge of these increased expectations. Teachers who are not specialists in language teaching methods often teach Welsh in English-medium primary and secondary schools. There is often a weak understanding in many of these schools of what constitutes effective approaches to the teaching and learning of Welsh.

## Self-evaluation and planning for improvement

In the most effective schools, there is a well-established culture of continuous improvement where all staff contribute to the ongoing evaluation of standards and provision. In these schools, leaders establish a clear understanding of their school's strengths and priorities for improvement through a wide range of evaluative activities. They use this understanding to identify specific improvement priorities, plan relevant actions and monitor their implementation.



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In the inspection cycle 2010-2017, the weakest aspect of leadership in schools was self-evaluation and planning for improvement. Although most schools have an established cycle of self-evaluation activities, in a third of primary schools and half of secondary schools, leaders do not evaluate pupil outcomes or the effectiveness of their provision well enough. In particular, they do not focus closely enough on the impact of teaching. This makes it difficult for them to identify aspects of teaching that need to improve or to plan and secure those improvements. In the first two years of the current inspection cycle, the situation has improved slightly in the primary sector. In secondary schools, the proportion that have shortcomings in their arrangements for self-evaluation and improvement planning remains broadly similar. Of the primary and secondary schools placed in a statutory category over this period, three-quarters were given a specific recommendation to strengthen self-evaluation and improvement planning.

In 2018, Estyn was asked by the Welsh Government to work with school practitioners, regional consortia, the OECD and other partners to support the co-creation of a National Evaluation and Improvement Resource (NEIR) for use in primary, secondary and special schools. The first stage of this project took the form of a wide-ranging consultation, focused on identifying the factors that foster effective self-evaluation and improvement processes or limit them. In successful schools, self-evaluation and improvement processes are:

- consistently focused on achieving the best standards and wellbeing for all pupils
- an ongoing process that is an ingrained part of school culture, not an 'one-off' event
- linked closely with professional learning
- an aspect of the school's work that involves all staff, not just senior leaders
- sustainable and manageable
- honest, frank and transparent

Where self-evaluation and improvement planning processes are ineffective, it is often because they are:

- focused too much on providing evidence for an external audience
- an annual event rather than an ongoing process
- concentrate on the quality of documentation rather than the impact of actions
- the sole responsibility of senior leaders and do not involve all staff
- recording actions and checking compliance to school policies (often through a 'tick-box' approach) rather than evaluating improvement
- bureaucratic and burdensome
- based on too narrow a range of evidence

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During the first phase of the project, the working group developed a range of tools, approaches and prompts for professional dialogue, to provide a practical resource that can be used by any school, to strengthen this aspect of their work. The resource is aligned with other aspects of education policy, such as curriculum reform and the national mission. Phase two of the project started in autumn term 2019 and focuses on piloting, testing and developing the resource. Schools, alongside their regional consortium, are piloting aspects of the NEIR and developing the tools and approaches that will sit within it.

There are often also weaknesses in local authorities' work to evaluate the effectiveness of their services on supporting schools to improve. They do not use the range of information they gather to identify what strategies are working well, and what they may need to change.

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