

# Impact of all-age school model

## Impact on teaching and learning

Transition arrangements in all-age schools are robust. Many work very closely with their partner primary schools to ensure cohesion in curriculum delivery and moderation. Joint planning and subject expertise within the school and cluster ensure continuation when pupils transition to Year 7. Since teachers know their pupils from an early age, pupils from within an all-age school settle better in Year 7 than those who transition from separate primary schools. During the coronavirus pandemic, all-age schools ensured suitable transition arrangements through innovative activities such as virtual tours of the school and question and answer sessions with staff. Virtual open days were held for parents. Many all-age schools benefit from continuous transition experiences where pupils regularly attend lessons in the secondary phase of the school.

Most pupils at the end of Year 6 in an all-age school enter Year 7 in that school. A few pupils from partner schools decide not to transfer to the all-age school in Year 7. This is due to a range of reasons including language, perceived better standards and distance to travel.

As with many schools, where specific areas perform poorly, they are given support through the regional consortium or local authority, depending on the context. More general support is provided in line with school support services for schools who may have a history of poor performance. This is especially true where schools are in a follow-up category prior to amalgamation.

An accepted potential benefit of an all-age school is the ability to coordinate and plan provision across all phases. This includes planning common experiences, consistent teaching policies and planning for seamless progression. In many schools, teachers plan experiences across all phases well. Many schools have adopted the principles of the Curriculum for Wales and, as well as implementing the curriculum in early years, have planned for progression with key stage 3 pupils.

Most schools have appointed leaders for each area of learning and experience and these roles are embedded in the school's staffing structure. Planning for the Curriculum for Wales in the foundation phase is more advanced than for other phases while, in many cases, planning for key stage 2 tends to be focused on project-based work. In a few cases, teachers miss opportunities to provide a rich enough curriculum that progresses naturally as pupils move through the school.

Although schools have made advances in terms of planning experiences and have taken advantage of being an all-age school, curriculum continuity is not always strong. All-age school leaders do not always take advantage of the expertise of subject leads when planning the curriculum across the school. Even in cases where one person has the responsibility for an aspect across the whole school, they do not always understand the progression steps required by younger pupils to grasp higher levels in a subject. This means that work for pupils does not always take enough account of their prior learning, and leaders' expectations are not high enough. A few schools have more than one staff member with responsibility for an area and retain a primary and secondary split. In a few cases, schools do not take enough advantage of their facilities to enhance the experiences for younger pupils.

Developing a curriculum for Year 5 through to Year 8 is a priority for most schools. Schools are developing their interpretation of the four purposes of Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020) and there is good co-operation between teachers within schools and with other schools. Many schools place strong emphasis on ensuring pupils input into curriculum design and to what and how they learn.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most all-age schools used the lockdown periods for staff to plan and evaluate provision. This meant that schools continued with their planning for the Curriculum for Wales and tried out new approaches with their pupils. It was also an opportunity for teachers to provide guidance and support to others for delivery of the new curriculum. Many teachers developed programmes of distance and blended learning. They planned carefully and produced dynamic resources to support learning. This continued when pupils returned to school and has given way to teachers using a more blended approach in their teaching, using digital resources and providing work for pupils when they cannot attend school.

Most all-age schools have one teaching policy that outlines expectations in lessons and progress over time. Improving teaching and ascertaining non-

negotiables is a main priority for all-age schools and is also seen as a potential strength of an all-age school model. Teachers establish consistency of classroom provision such as routines, high expectations and disciplinary boundaries that pupils understand and accept as they move through the school.

Many schools make good use of specialists to deliver discrete specialist provision in the primary phase, for example in modern foreign languages, music and mathematics. Staff collaborate within the school and with other schools. They have recognised that there are benefits for staff from a secondary background to learn from primary based colleagues and vice versa. This was particularly enhanced during the pandemic where many staff were given time to work together and develop a sense of unity within the school. In a few schools, there is not enough cross-phase working and a misplaced sense of 'secondary knows best'.

Many schools share approaches to assessment so that pupils are clear about what needs to be done to improve their work. In these schools, pupils recognise for themselves how to improve their own work as they move through the school.

Teachers report that their teaching has improved since working in an all-age school, with more careful lesson planning and sharing of ideas. Teachers appear to have a greater respect for their peers working in different age phases.

## **Impact on wellbeing and pastoral care**

The wellbeing of pupils is a main focus and real strength in all-age schools. Overall, inspection outcomes for all-age schools are positive for wellbeing. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the support for learners and their families was a particular strength in these schools.

Pupils reported that they were happy at school and felt safe at all times. They appreciated how the school provided guidance and direction in difficult times. For example, during the pandemic, nearly all schools contacted pupils regularly when they were not expected to attend school in person, checking up on their wellbeing and offering support. Schools offered support to families and an opportunity for additional vulnerable pupils to attend school if required. Schools are concerned about the long-term effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing and mental health of pupils and report that there is already an increase

in the number of referrals of older pupils to mental health professionals and also more pupils suffering from anxiety caused by uncertainty around qualifications and workload.

New buildings and high-quality facilities have an obvious positive effect on pupil wellbeing. This was evident in the respect shown by pupils to their environment and pride taken in ensuring that the building is clear of litter and pleasant for their peers.

In most schools, pupils behave well. Older pupils are good role models for younger pupils. An example of this is the way sixth form pupils visit the classrooms of younger pupils to support them with their reading and schoolwork. This fosters a sense of mutual respect between pupils and raises pupils' aspirations.

Many pupils believe that they are given suitable opportunities to voice their opinions and that these opinions are valued. School councils are inclusive of pupils from Year 3 to Year 13 and are very active in many schools. In schools that are on multiple sites, school councils meet virtually, which ensures the best use of time and prevents unnecessary travel. Through the school council, pupils have taken part in consultations and have put forward suggestions for improving their life in school. For example, one school provided new sports equipment following a request by the school council and another school made changes to the school day.

Pastoral care and support are strong in most all-age schools. To a large extent, they fulfil their potential of caring for their pupils and getting to know them and their families from an early age. As a result, leaders and teachers have a sound understanding of the needs of pupils and time to address concerns. Although pre-pandemic attendance levels were low in a very few schools, most have effective attendance and wellbeing officers that track pupils' attendance closely. This was especially effective during the pandemic where these officers contacted families and pupils regularly and identified vulnerable families early. They visited pupils' homes and worked with other agencies to provide relevant support.

Schools place high importance on family and parental engagement. Many work in teams around the family to achieve a holistic view of a pupil's needs. A few schools are heavily involved with community projects that further support pupils

and their families.

During the pandemic, all-age schools strived to maintain pastoral care and support to pupils. While pupils could not attend school, schools arranged virtual opportunities for pupils to check in and address any concerns. Many schools provided opportunities for pupils to attend and see staff face to face when required. Virtual meetings were arranged for pupils who were transferring from partner schools into Year 7.

On returning to school after lockdown, nearly all schools held wellbeing sessions to help pupils re-adjust to school life. Pupils benefited from mindfulness sessions, yoga and physical activities and were given opportunities to express their concerns and emotions. As a result, more pupils not previously deemed as vulnerable were provided with targeted support for their wellbeing.

Pupils with special educational needs are monitored carefully throughout their time in all-age schools. Usually there is one additional learning needs co-ordinator who works across all phases of the school. A few schools have retained two co-ordinators with separate expertise in primary and secondary schools. Early identification of a pupil's needs is key to providing the correct purposeful support. An all-age school has the advantage of knowing their own pupils from an early age and throughout their statutory education. Many schools focus on links with parents of primary aged pupils since they will be at the school for many years.

Many all-age schools deal well with any instances of bullying that arise. They have the added advantage of knowing the background and history of all pupils that start at nursery or reception year and can often successfully address any issues of bullying at an early stage.

Pastoral support teams tend to be larger in all-age schools than in separate sectors. Large inclusion teams can include heads of year, heads of phases, senior leaders, attendance officers and co-ordinators. These teams identify vulnerable pupils early and plan purposeful support through a coherent, well co-ordinated approach to tracking progress and wellbeing. Leaders take good account of pupil, staff, and parent voice regarding wellbeing. This collaborative approach leads to changes in how the school approaches behaviour and pastoral issues, for example in establishing systems for pupils to take time out or access support. Communication between staff and pastoral teams is generally strong, with

information provided regularly through announcements and databases.

Additional support is provided in a minority of schools through specific learning resource bases. In general, these are effective and give pupils an opportunity to address their problems with bespoke support from well qualified staff. Many pupils see these centres as a safe haven where they can rely on staff to listen and address issues that they may have in school or at home. Schools indicate that these centres are invaluable following the COVID-19 pandemic where pupils present with more mental health issues, anxiety, and reports of domestic abuse. As with other sectors, all-age schools have close and effective links with external agencies.

## **Impact on leadership and management**

Leadership structures vary across all-age schools in Wales. There are many models and they depend on the context of the school such as size, geographical location, and individual preference. Many models have evolved over time as the changing demands on leadership become clear. In some cases, leadership structures were initially complex but have since simplified as leaders realised what worked well for an all-age school. Examples of leadership structures can be found in Appendix 4.

When establishing a new school, a few schools faced challenges that were inherited from the pre-existing schools. These included resistance from staff who had been in posts for a long time and were reluctant to change, for example a change to the school identity and concerns about their role in working with new leaders.

All-age schools offer valuable leadership opportunities for their staff. Those with prior leadership experience of either the secondary sector or primary sector are able to expand their experiences across all-ages. For example, a senior leader with secondary sector background would most likely have very little experience of foundation phase principles or the requirements of the key stage 2 curriculum. Likewise, leaders from the primary sector would most likely have little knowledge of qualifications and requirements of GCSE and A level courses.

In Estyn's report in June 2015 on best practice in leadership development in schools one of the main findings was that 'succession planning at all levels is

often a significant strength in schools with a strong professional learning culture' and 'this is particularly important at senior and middle leadership level and allows posts to be filled internally if necessary when vacancies arise' (Estyn, 2015, p.4). By developing leaders specifically for all-age schools, leadership structures have adapted to include leaders with whole school responsibilities, for example subject leaders that co-ordinate the work from nursery to Year 11, senior pastoral leaders with overall responsibility for wellbeing for all pupils and skills co-ordinators who plan for progression across all phases. Restructuring of senior leadership teams after the school has been established has mainly occurred where leadership teams remained as in the pre-existing schools. In these instances, there has subsequently been competition for leadership roles as the amalgamation has resulted in fewer leaders being required

Most schools developed a single vision for the school. This is usually based on the school providing the best education for pupils of all ages. However, in a few cases, schools still treat the secondary and primary phases differently and as if they were separate schools. A few schools noted that they overcame this barrier by adhering to the vision for the school when making appointments. This gave them a sound rationale for appointing the best person or persons for leadership roles in the new school.

Nearly all schools have clear lines of accountability. Performance management arrangements drive improvements and staff objectives are closely linked to the school's priorities. Professional learning and in-service training are relevant to improvement priorities and performance management objectives.

Most schools evaluate their work across the whole age range and have consistent approaches across the phases to quality assure processes. Schools are slowly resuming self-evaluation and improvement planning procedures after the pandemic.

Schools scrutinise pupils' work across phases and staff work together to identify strengths and areas for improvement. The findings inform the school's improvement plan. It is most common to have one improvement plan for the whole school, but they address age specific issues when required. Many make beneficial use of pupil and parent opinions to inform improvement. In a few schools, the opinions of pupils and parents contribute well to self-evaluation and improvement planning, for example when considering the quality of homework or changes to the school day.

Schools may have specific priorities that they wish to address but there is commonality in many schools' priorities. These include improving pupils' skills, reforming the curriculum and additional learning needs. One of the most pressing priorities stated by schools is renewal and reform in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the most recently opened all-age schools, establishing themselves as an all-age school is the priority and includes developing consistent teaching policy, curriculum, and systems.

In all schools, the governing body oversees evaluation processes and outcomes. Governors monitor the school's improvement and hold leaders to account well in most cases. Most schools have a specific committee to monitor how well the school is progressing against priorities.

During our visits to schools and discussions with local authorities, it was noted that all-age schools had also faced some specific challenges. Turnover in leadership in a few schools is an issue, with several headteachers being appointed and leaving their posts after a short time. In a few schools, responsibilities are not particularly suited to an all-age school or to the changing demands of education reform, for example responsibilities that do not span the whole age range of the school or those based on a narrow range of areas. Until recently, a few schools operated as separate primary and secondary schools where they duplicated documents and ran different systems to each other. Pupils transitioned at the end of Year 6 similarly to those pupils from partner primary schools, negating the potential benefits of an all-age school.

In recent times, in many all-age schools professional learning provided internally has been refined and developed to meet the needs of staff in all-age schools. It is usual to have professional learning activities suitable for the whole school and teachers of pupils of all ages. They focus on whole school initiatives as well as national priorities. Leaders provide phase specific training as and when required.

External professional learning specific for all-age schools is rare, with consortia providing separately for primary and secondary teachers and leaders. This does not make good use of teachers' time, as the school needs to send delegates to attend both primary and secondary learning sessions.

Many schools identify the needs of individual staff through performance review arrangements. Many schools have set up groups of three or four members of staff to work on particular aspects of teaching. Schools have also formed research



groups for teaching and learning, curriculum, and skills development. Most of these groups include staff that teach across phases and who bring their own perspective to the work. As part of the research, staff from all-age schools have visited other schools and other countries. The national network of all-age schools provides a very useful platform where leaders can discuss sector specific issues and arrange to work together on common areas.

In most schools, quality assurance of professional learning activities involves all staff and focuses on the impact of the learning activity on the individual's performance. Teachers observe each other teaching and carry out evaluation activities together to gauge the impact of their training and research. Many schools are looking to develop leaders from within to support succession planning. Headteachers believe that leaders should be developed with expertise in the all-age sector, since currently, too few leaders have experience of working in other all-age providers.

Many all-age schools are in partnership with initial teacher education providers. However, currently, there is only one specific programme for training teachers for all-age schools. This means that initial teacher education (ITE) students on placement in all-age schools miss opportunities to further their training and experience through complementary support and learning.

All-age schools could benefit from more external training and support that is specific to the sector. Leaders in particular indicate that they have to attend more training and meetings than their counterparts in primary and secondary schools. There is also demand for developing leadership roles at all levels in all-age schools.

Regional consortia provide support for all-age schools, as they would to all other schools in the region. Advisers from the local authorities and regional consortia have limited expertise in the all-age schools' sector. Generally, they provide support that is either secondary or primary based. This has led, in a few cases, to duplication of provision and double the expectation on all-age schools to participate or send delegates. Headteachers identify that sector specific support would enhance the existing co-operation with other all-age schools.

Although during our study, staff or pupils did not raise any concerns around the quality and volume of resources available to them, leaders generally commented that they were having to cope with limited financial resources. This also affects a

school's ability to drive improvements as they would wish.

A notable development is the all-age schools national network, which gives all-age schools an opportunity to collaborate, share good practice and learn lessons from each other. As more all-age schools become established, the importance of this network has grown. The forum meets regularly to consider developments in the sector and discuss how issues in education particularly affect all-age schools. This includes drawing together information from headteachers, teachers, local authorities and regional consortia. The forum also engages positively with Estyn through stakeholder events and conferences. Increasingly, the forum benefits from national and international research on all-age schools. Although there are inherently complex structures to set up and manage, understanding in detail how others operate can support leaders in developing their own schools. Most recently, it has developed its own website ([allageschoolsforum.cymru](http://allageschoolsforum.cymru)) that contains all information relevant to all-age schools (All Age Schools Forum, 2021). The aim of the website is to offer another way to share knowledge for the benefit all. It is through this network that all-age schools have accessed visits to other all-age schools in Wales and abroad.