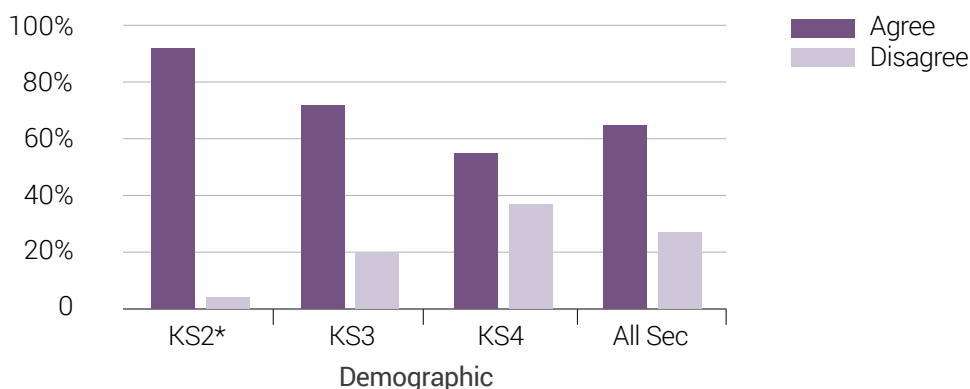


## Excellence, equity and wellbeing

### Pupil voice

In recent years, schools in Wales have strengthened their commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), with increasing numbers using it to underpin their work to promote excellence, equity and wellbeing. As part of this work, they are giving pupils a more influential voice in decisions about their education, from choosing a learning activity through to agreeing the individual support they will receive or shaping school policies. Around nine-in-ten pupils in key stage 2 feel that teachers and other adults in school listen to them and care about what they think about the school. However, this reduces to around seven-in-ten pupils in key stage 3 and to around a half of pupils in key stage 4. In a few primary schools and in a majority of secondary schools, 'pupil voice' groups are directed too much by adults. In these schools, despite opportunities for participation, pupils are not involved enough in decision-making about core aspects of school life, including aspects of teaching and learning.

Figure 7: Pupil voice (2016-2019)



\*There was no question about pupil voice in 2016-2017 for key stage 2

### Questions



#### Key stage 2

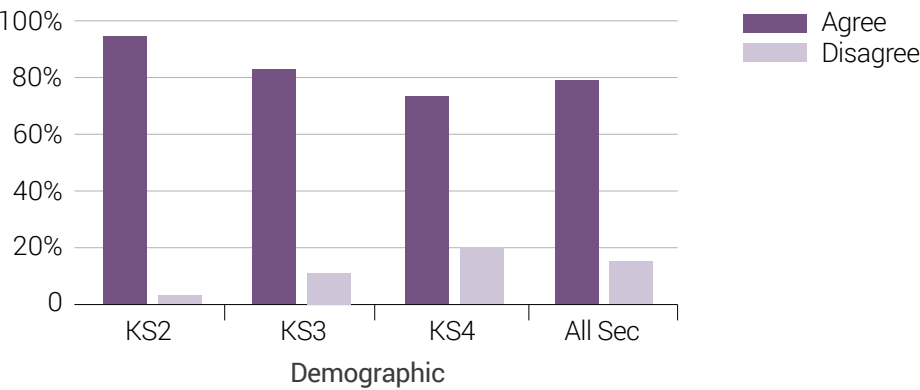
Teachers and other adults in school listen to me and care about what I think about the school

#### Key stages 3 and 4

Teachers and other adults in school listen to me and care about what I think about the school

# Excellence, equity and wellbeing

Figure 8: Have someone to talk to (2016-2019)



Questions



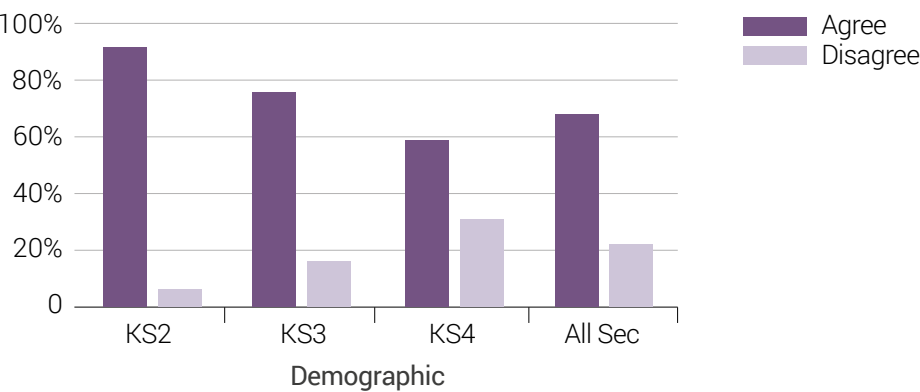
Key stage 2

I know who to talk to if I am worried or upset at school

Key stages 3 and 4

If I am worried or upset at school, I know there is a member of staff I can talk to

Figure 9: School deals well with bullying (2016-2019)



Questions



Key stage 2

If any bullying happens, the school will deal with it well

Key stages 3 and 4

If any bullying, harassment or discrimination occurs, the school will deal with it well

# Excellence, equity and wellbeing

## Promoting excellence

Over the past two years, there has been an improvement in the attainment of more able learners in Wales in external examinations (StatsWales, 2019h). The most recent PISA results have also shown that the proportion of pupils in Wales achieving the highest levels has generally improved, though still lower than the other countries of the UK and the OECD average. In around a third of schools, more able pupils do not achieve as well as they should or use their skills to a level that matches their ability. In primary and secondary schools, more able girls perform better than boys at the higher levels. More able pupils eligible for free school meals do not perform as well as other pupils who are more able (Estyn, 2018f, pp.3,17).

Schools that are effective in supporting more able learners have a clear strategic approach. They focus strongly on providing consistent challenge for these pupils through their daily lessons and having very high expectations of all learners. This is augmented by a programme of enrichment activities and underpinned by careful monitoring of the progress of more able learners. These schools understand the need for primary and secondary schools to work together to ensure that pupils who achieve highly in primary school do not repeat work and regress at the start of secondary school. In these schools, teachers understand what constitutes effective pedagogy for more able learners. They use this expertise, combined with their detailed knowledge of each learner's abilities, to match activities to meet the needs of each individual. They question learners skillfully, probing and extending their understanding.

Only a few schools arrange for teaching assistants to address the specific needs of more able pupils, for instance by deploying teaching assistants to develop pupils' thinking skills through challenging literacy and numeracy tasks. In the best cases, leaders consider the deployment of teaching assistants to address the specific needs of pupils and the local context of their school. For example, in Alltwen Primary School, teaching assistants run a reading intervention project that encourages parents to attend a 'reading café' with their children and learn how to support pupils' literacy skills at home.

A majority of schools provide enrichment opportunities which target particular abilities or talents and which broaden the horizons of more able learners. These opportunities are particularly valuable in schools that serve areas of high deprivation. In many cases, these extra experiences are offered in partnership with external agencies. For example, young people may attend masterclasses at a local university, or special interest clubs, such as astronomy, or study trips to leading universities.

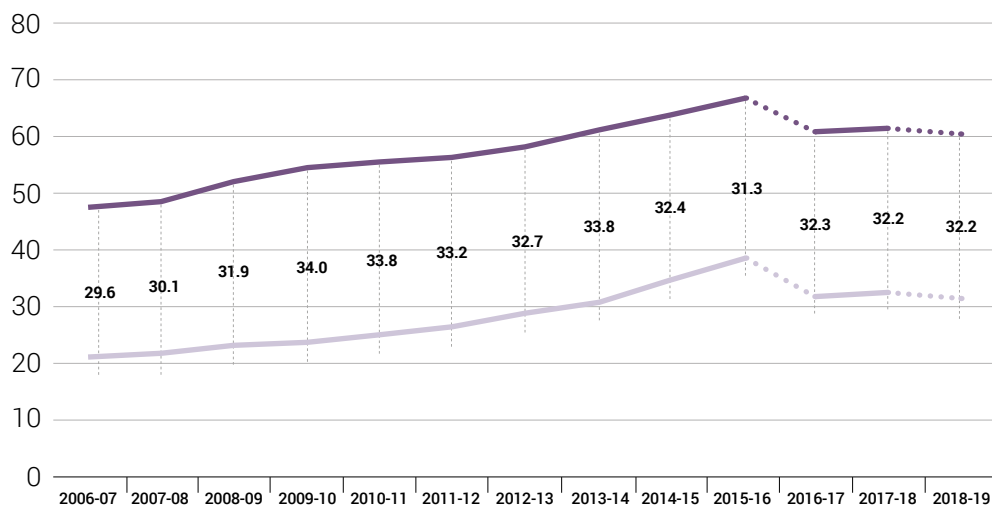
## Promoting equity and wellbeing

The Welsh Government's 'Education in Wales: Our national mission' states that "each learner must be respected and challenged to achieve the best they are capable of ... while being supported to overcome barriers that inhibit their learning" (Welsh Government, 2017b, p.31). There are specific groups of pupils in Wales who historically have underachieved or struggled with their wellbeing. We refer to some of these vulnerable groups in the following pages to highlight strengths and areas for improvement.

## Pupils disadvantaged by poverty

PISA results for 2018 suggest that, internationally, pupils disadvantaged by poverty achieve less well than their peers at school. However, the size of this effect is relatively smaller in Wales. For example, pupils’ reading scores are not as closely related to their socio-economic background as in most other OECD countries (Sizmur *et al.*, 2019). Even so, mitigating the impact of poverty on pupils’ educational attainment remains a major challenge for schools in Wales.

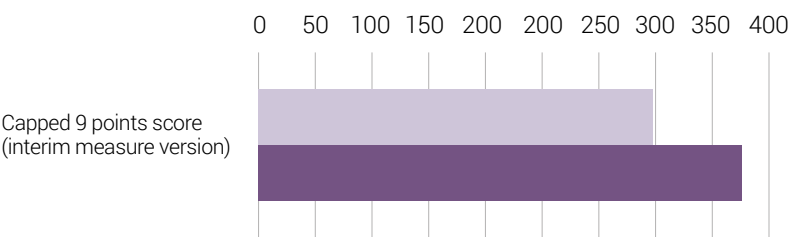
In Wales, we use the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals as an indicator of how well pupils disadvantaged by poverty perform. Around 69,000 statutory school age pupils in Wales are eligible for free school meals, which is around 18% of pupils (Welsh Government, 2019m). Although the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals improved between 2007 and 2016, the performance of pupils not eligible for free school meals has also improved at a similar rate (see figure 10). Making comparisons between recent years and performance up to 2016 is difficult due to major changes in performance indicators at key stage 4, and further changes were introduced in 2018. Irrespective of these changes, the gap in performance between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers has remained broadly the same for more than a decade.



**Figure 10: Percentage of pupils achieving the level 2 including English/Welsh and mathematics, by free school meal (FSM) eligibility, 2006-2007 to 2018-2019**

Eligible for FSM  
Not Eligible for FSM

(StatsWales, 2018; Welsh Government, 2019h)

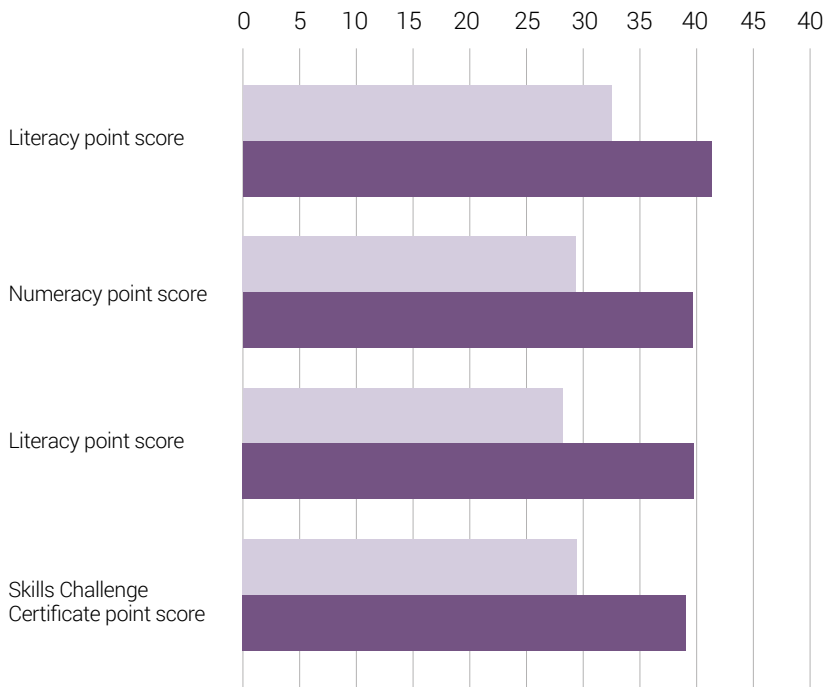


**Figure 11: Average capped 9 points score (interim measure version), by free school meal eligibility, 2018-2019**

Eligible for FSM  
Not Eligible for FSM

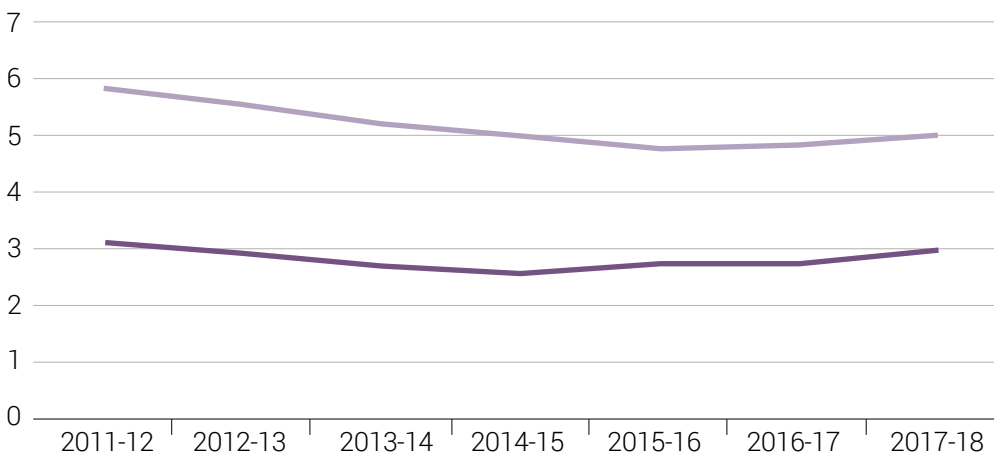
(StatsWales, 2019h)

# Excellence, equity and wellbeing



(StatsWales, 2018, 2019g)

The picture is similar with school attendance. In recent years, the difference in attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals in comparison with their peers has remained broadly the same (Welsh Government, 2019a). This difference is typically three percentage points in primary schools and five percentage points in secondary schools (Welsh Government, 2019a).



(Welsh Government, 2019a)

**Figure 12: Average point scores in interim key stage 4 performance measures, by free school meal eligibility, 2018-2019**

Eligible for FSM  
Not Eligible for FSM

**Figure 13: Percentage point gap in attendance rates between pupils eligible for free school meals and pupils not eligible for free school meals, 2011-2012 to 2017-2018**

Primary attendance gap  
Secondary attendance gap

Pupils eligible for free school meals are far less likely to have an overall attendance of 95% or above (Welsh Government, 2019a). School attendance and educational outcomes are closely correlated, so improving attendance for pupils eligible for free school meals remains an important issue. Although rewards for good attendance can help, the best schools focus on inspiring teachers to build strong relationships with pupils and provide engaging activities to meet their needs. In these schools, pupils value learning and want to be in school regularly.

Over the last three years, around two-thirds of primary and secondary schools use targeted funding, such as the Pupil Development Grant, appropriately to mitigate the impact of poverty. For instance, they introduce effective strategies to improve the wellbeing of pupils disadvantaged by poverty or support individual pupils with interventions to help them with aspects of their learning. In schools where disadvantaged pupils achieve well, leaders are highly committed to improving the educational and life chances of pupils disadvantaged by poverty.

Strong schools recognise that they cannot address disadvantage caused by poverty alone. They work with families, communities and a range of partners to reduce the impact of poverty on vulnerable pupils. For instance, they run food banks for families and offer advice and counselling for parents in difficult circumstances. One of the many strengths of Pencaerau Primary School's work with parents is a successful partnership with Cardiff University whereby parents can take selected access courses that enable them to take courses at foundation stage<sup>8</sup>. Ysgol Maes Hyfryd special school has links with over 20 local work providers<sup>9</sup>. This provision has enabled pupils to attend work experience placements and has also resulted in a number of them achieving part-time jobs at these placements. All placements are in the local area and many support community initiatives such as Buzz community cafe, Sidewalk independence project and Age connects cafe. All pupils benefit from a school having strong relationships with parents and the local community. In 2020, we will publish a thematic report on community-focused schools. In these schools, leaders employ staff to co-ordinate provision and evaluate the impact of the work. They do not rely on short term 'catch up' approaches to support pupils in key stage 4, but aim to develop critical thinking skills that will benefit pupils throughout school and remain with them for the future. In a few schools, a successful approach to addressing the impact of poverty is based on understanding their local context, including knowledge of individual families, and an awareness of effective practice and research. They use this information to tailor strategies that support sustainable improvements for their pupils. For example, Bishop Hedley Catholic High School created an enrichment programme called 'Opening Minds'<sup>10</sup>. The programme helps pupils to develop important life skills and supports the introduction of the new curriculum. Pupils are encouraged to engage in activities that they have not done before that challenge their thinking. The programme has allowed learners to take ownership of their development and has improved wellbeing and attitudes to learning.

<sup>8</sup> Read more in our effective practice case study: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/effective-practice/supporting-pupil-wellbeing>.

<sup>9</sup> Read more in our effective practice case study: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/effective-practice/creating-family-links-between-home-and-school>

<sup>10</sup> Read more in our effective practice case study: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/effective-practice/using-enrichment-programme-improve-skills>

# Excellence, equity and wellbeing

## Pupils with special educational needs

About 100,000 pupils have special educational needs (SEN) in Wales, which is around 22% of pupils (Welsh Government, 2019m). Many of these pupils have their needs met within mainstream nursery, primary, secondary or all-age schools. A few pupils with SEN have their needs met in specialist classes within a mainstream school, maintained special schools or independent schools<sup>11</sup>.

In nearly all mainstream schools, systems to track the progress of pupils with SEN are based largely on national frameworks such as the foundation phase, national curriculum or examinations such as GCSEs. End of key stage assessments based on these frameworks show that outcomes for many pupils with SEN are below those of their peers and lower than expected from their starting points. At the end of the foundation phase, typically only around half of pupils with SEN achieve the expected outcome compared with over nine-in-ten of their peers (StatsWales, 2019i). By the end of key stage 4, only around two-in-ten pupils with SEN achieve at least five level 2 qualifications including English and mathematics compared with around seven-in-ten of their peers (StatsWales, 2019j).

Issues around attendance and exclusion from school continue to have a negative impact on the ability of pupils with SEN to make progress. Pupils with SEN typically have higher rates of persistent absenteeism and overall absence than other groups of pupils apart from those eligible for free school meals (Welsh Government, 2019a). Similarly, the rate of permanent and fixed-term exclusions is considerably higher for pupils with SEN than for pupils without (Welsh Government, 2019j). For example, a child at School Action+ is 16 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school than a child with no SEN (Welsh Government, 2019j).

For many of these pupils, progress in relation to their individual starting points or the personal goals contained in individual education plans provides more realistic indicators of progress and achievement. Many pupils with SEN make strong progress against these measures, during their time in primary and special schools. As pupils grow up, this picture becomes less positive, with pupils with SEN making good progress in around a third of secondary schools inspected over the last three years.

In schools that are most successful in supporting pupils with SEN, leaders establish an inclusive ethos that sets high aspirations for all pupils, regardless of their level of ability or need. A strong emphasis on promoting the wellbeing of all pupils ensures that pupils with SEN participate equally in all aspects of school life. They take on positions of responsibility within the school that help them to develop their independence and build their confidence in learning. In these schools, the SENCo works closely with teachers and support staff across

<sup>11</sup> Read more in our effective practice case study: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/effective-practice/using-enrichment-programme-improve-skills>

# Excellence, equity and wellbeing

the school to ensure that all staff understand and address the needs of pupils, and leaders provide well-planned professional learning for staff. A strong strategic approach to raising outcomes for these pupils ensures that there are robust processes to evaluate the school's provision for SEN and plan for future improvements.

In most of these schools, rigorous arrangements to identify pupils' needs ensure that they receive timely support through a range of interventions that are closely matched to their needs. Staff track and review progress and wellbeing regularly. They set challenging targets for pupils that relate well to their personal needs and future aspirations, and ensure that learning experiences include meaningful opportunities for pupils to address these. These schools build good working relationships with parents and carers and with a wide range of external agencies that help them plan the provision for their pupils and review their progress. They establish close links to other schools that enable the school to share practice and ensure the transfer of information to support the effective transition of pupils from one phase of their education to another.

In schools where there are shortcomings in the provision for pupils with SEN, this is often because arrangements for the assessment and tracking of individual pupils' progress are not strong enough. In these schools, teachers' understanding of SEN in general and of the specific needs of the pupils they teach in particular is too limited. Too few schools prioritise whole school training on SEN for all staff or do enough to develop inclusive whole-school approaches to pupils with SEN. This means that individual teachers lack the confidence to manage pupils' needs or lack an understanding of the strategies needed to support them. They do not differentiate or adapt their teaching approaches well enough to meet the needs of pupils with SEN or use strategies suggested in individual education plans (IEPs). Good practice is not shared between teachers and they do not have good enough understanding of pupils' needs and progress. This hinders their ability to plan and implement appropriate strategies to support these pupils.

## Promoting wellbeing

Our report 'Healthy and Happy: School impact on pupils' health and Wellbeing' (Estyn, 2019b) found that around two-thirds of primary schools and a third of secondary schools in Wales have an inclusive whole-school approach to supporting pupils' health and wellbeing. These schools aim to make sure that the everyday school experience of pupils is consistent with messages given about health and wellbeing in lessons, assemblies and school policies. They develop pupils as healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society – one of the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales. They have:



# Excellence, equity and wellbeing

Please see figures 7 to 9 on pages 33-34 for more information



policies and practices to ensure that pupils make good progress in their learning



leaders who 'walk the talk' about supporting pupils' health and wellbeing



a nurturing culture, where positive relationships enable pupils to thrive



an inclusive community and ethos



detailed knowledge about pupils' health and wellbeing that influences policies and actions and policy



a broad and balanced curriculum, including discrete, evidence-based learning experiences that promote health and wellbeing



supportive pastoral care and targeted interventions for pupils that need additional support



environment and facilities that promote good health and wellbeing, such as space to play, socialise and relax at break times



close partnerships with parents and carers



continuing professional learning for all staff that enables them to support pupils' health and wellbeing



effective links with external agencies

Questionnaire responses from pupils in schools inspected in the current cycle show that almost all pupils in primary schools have someone they could talk to if they are worried or upset at school. However, pupils in secondary schools are five times more likely than pupils in primary schools to disagree or strongly disagree that they “have someone to talk to if they are worried or upset at school”. Most pupils in primary schools think that “if any bullying happens, the school will deal with it well”, but by key stage 4 around a third of pupils disagree or strongly disagree with this.

Poor wellbeing is a factor in the underachievement of groups of vulnerable pupils. For example, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils’ attendance has improved over the past few years, but remains too low and contributes to poor attainment for these pupils<sup>12</sup>. A majority of schools and local authorities have pastoral support plans for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils to support them in attending school. Many parents of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils state that one of the main reasons for their children not attending secondary school is the fear of being bullied. However, only around half of schools’ anti-bullying and equality policies take account of the particular needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils, for example in recognising how their culture and traditions may affect their attendance. Cardiff’s Traveller education service provides strong support for pupils and their families during the transition from primary to secondary school, and this has resulted in a notable increase in pupils attending secondary school.

Research has shown that being a young carer can adversely affect school attendance, achievement and mental health<sup>13</sup>. Many education providers do not know which of their learners have a caring role and therefore the provision for young carers varies widely. Providers that are most effective in meeting the needs of young carers have systems to identify these learners and track their wellbeing needs. The most effective schools make good use of pupils’ one-page profiles as part of SEN provision to record what is important to and for children. This is helping to give young carers a voice and enables schools to target the right support to meet their individual needs. There are awards schemes that provide secondary schools, colleges and PRUs with useful resources and toolkits to shape their provision to meet the needs of young carers. For example, Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority funds a Carers Support Project to work in partnership with schools to implement the Young Carers School Award, which has raised awareness of young carers in the area and improved the provision for them<sup>14</sup>. However, overall few education providers make good enough use of the resources available that can help them improve their support for young carers<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Read more in our report ‘Provision for secondary school-aged Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils’, Estyn (2019c)

<sup>13</sup> For example, see <https://carers.org/key-facts-about-carers-and-people-they-care>

<sup>14</sup> A full case study on Rhondda Cynon Taf’s Carers Support Project features in our report: ‘Provision for young carers in secondary schools, further education colleges and pupil referral units across Wales’ (Estyn, 2019d)

<sup>15</sup> Read more in our report ‘Provision for secondary school-aged Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils’, Estyn’s (2019c)

# Excellence, equity and wellbeing

Many lesbian, gay, bi-sexual or transgender (LGBT) pupils, and those questioning their sexual identity or gender, feel vulnerable in school. For example, a Stonewall report (2017) found that around half of these pupils face bullying in school. In a very few schools, pupils act as ambassadors for gender equality. For example, pupils in Basseleg School have formed a Queer and Straight Alliance group to promote individual rights. The group supports pupils to feel safe, confident and passionate about speaking out about their experiences to help others. This has supported the school's vision of developing a culture where equality and diversity are celebrated<sup>16</sup>. We will publish a thematic report in 2020 on how well schools support LGBT pupils.

The Welsh Government sponsored training on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is having a positive impact on the work of schools across Wales. Generally, schools that provide well for pupils with adverse experiences understand the damaging impact of these experiences on pupils' life chances. Many schools have trained key staff to deliver helpful social and emotional intervention programmes for vulnerable pupils, including those with ACEs<sup>17</sup>. In primary schools, there are usually strong arrangements to ensure children with ACEs and other vulnerable pupils have calm, nurturing and supportive spaces to go to when they are feeling anxious or upset. While secondary schools may also provide similar spaces, they are primarily seen as for the youngest pupils or those with special educational needs.

The best schools make the most of external support available to them. All secondary schools host an independent counselling service that is funded by the local authority. Primary schools generally struggle to access counselling or other therapeutic services for their pupils in times of need. In 2020 we will publish a report on how well schools and PRUs build emotional resilience in learners.

<sup>16</sup> Read more in our effective practice '[Using school programmes to support equality and diversity](#)'

<sup>17</sup> Read more in our report '[Knowing your children – supporting pupils with adverse childhood experiences](#)', (Estyn, 2020)