
The Annual Report of Her
Majesty's Chief Inspector of
Education and Training in
Wales

2020-2021

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This year's report is the 29th consecutive annual report published in Wales since the Education (Schools) Act 1992 required its production.

This report is also available in Welsh

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HMCI foreword 2020-2021

The 2020-2021 academic year was another challenging one for education and training providers in Wales and across the world. The COVID-19 pandemic brought further disruption across the system. This annual report reviews how schools and other education and training providers responded to the challenges they faced this year. It considers how education providers supported learners' wellbeing and education during periods of remote learning and partial opening. It highlights how they adapted their practices to meet the needs of learners on their return to face-to-face learning. This foreword reflects on what has been learnt from the crisis and on some implications for the future.

Prior to the pandemic, we had already announced that during 2020-2021 we would pause our inspection work in maintained schools and pupil referral units (PRUs). Instead, we planned to visit providers in these sectors to find out how well they were planning and preparing for the rollout of the Curriculum for Wales and additional learning needs (ALN) reform. These engagement visits were designed to be flexible, with the intention of encouraging and supporting providers on their journey to fulfilling the aims of the new curriculum and ALN reform. The pandemic meant that we could only visit a few providers during the year, mainly in the summer term. Instead, we kept in touch remotely, using video and telephone calls to engage with providers across all the education and training sectors. During these calls, inspectors focused on the response of providers to the pandemic, mostly in relation to the wellbeing of learners and the workforce, teaching and learning, and leadership. We carried out a small number of inspection activities, including three focused inspections in independent schools to look at the welfare, health and safety of pupils, and an inspection of the National Centre for Learning Welsh. We also worked with partners to inspect the provision for adults and young people in a few offender institutions.

We kept in regular contact with providers that had been identified as causing concern before the pandemic, for example schools in statutory categories. An inspector was linked to each of these providers to offer pastoral support and guidance throughout the year. As COVID-19 restrictions lifted, we resumed face-to-face visits to a small number of providers slowly and sensitively. This included some engagement activity, pastoral visits to schools in statutory category, and a very few inspections and monitoring visits.

Throughout the year, we continued to provide a wide range of professional learning for inspectors to build on their knowledge of curriculum design and delivery. This professional learning was delivered by our own staff and external experts. Our involvement with the development of Curriculum for Wales from the very early stages placed us in a strong position.



We built on this knowledge to support us with our engagement visits and inspections. We focused specifically on the curriculum design process and considered how schools in Wales may approach their design and delivery, in line with their vision and context. In addition, we built on our strong belief that high-quality teaching is key to successful curriculum delivery and will continue to support schools to improve this aspect of their work.

During the next academic year, we will continue to engage with education and training providers. We will pilot our inspection approaches in maintained schools and PRUs to ensure that they support the development of Curriculum for Wales and encourage improvement. We will continue with our detailed professional learning programme for inspectors to ensure that we are prepared to engage with schools about Curriculum for Wales.

This year, all providers prioritised the wellbeing of their learners. Following last year's positive moves to strengthen communication between learners and their families, most providers continued with this work. They set up comprehensive systems to keep in contact with their learners so that they could identify issues quickly and address them when they arose. This was important for all learners, but especially so for vulnerable learners, who often struggled most with the challenges of lockdown and losing the daily structure of their lives. In many cases, the increased involvement providers had with learners and their families led to them becoming vital sources of support and guidance for their communities. These positive developments strengthened relationships and improved engagement between home and providers. Schools and settings gained a fuller understanding of the communities in which they work, and this benefited learners and their families as they developed confidence in providers. These constructive relationships are likely to contribute helpfully to schools' vision and aspirations for Curriculum for Wales, as contributions from families and the wider community help them to understand the needs of their learners and how they can realise the four purposes of the curriculum. This emphasises the importance of realising the vision for effective community schools in Wales, as highlighted in our report on [Community Schools](#).

The challenges that education professionals faced from day to day in the last academic year were considerable, and we should not underestimate their impact on the workforce. There was an unprecedented degree of pressure on staff as they managed challenging situations and made themselves increasingly accessible to learners and their families. This often resulted in raised levels of anxiety in staff. As well as prioritising the wellbeing of their learners and families, nearly all leaders carried considerable responsibility for the health, welfare and safety of their staff, often placing this above their own wellbeing. They worked diligently to follow rapidly changing guidance, making frequent modifications to learning environments and working practices to keep people safe. Supporting colleagues through anxiety, illness and bereavement became commonplace, and this took its toll on leaders. Some felt isolated and exhausted, and it was not always clear who was providing emotional support for them.

The disruption caused by the pandemic led to particular challenges for those learners with additional learning needs. Many were used to receiving support from a teacher or teaching assistant in the classroom, and this was often not available due to a shortage of adult support or was not possible in the same way when learners worked from home. Providers continued to look for different and often innovative ways to help these learners continue with their learning, although learners with ALN often found it difficult to engage in online, remote learning. Disruptions also led to delays in some learners being assessed for their additional learning needs. While nearly all special schools and PRUs remained open throughout the pandemic, continuing support for these vulnerable learners' emotional, physical and education needs will form an important element of addressing the long-term impact of the pandemic on learners in Wales.

Despite the wide range of challenges faced by providers this year, many continued to prepare for the planned ALN reforms. This work will need to continue and include effective professional learning for staff to meet the goal of providing a fully inclusive education system in Wales.

One of the most striking effects of the pandemic was the way in which practitioners in all sectors continually adapted their practice. They demonstrated their flexibility, their creativity and their ability to innovate in schools, colleges and settings across Wales. As we move towards the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales, this same mindset and energy will be vital in helping schools and settings to think anew about not just what we teach, but how and why we teach it.

Practitioners worked thoughtfully to provide for learners under difficult circumstances throughout the year. Their work included developing a range of different approaches to help them support learners to make progress when working at home and on their return to on-site education and training. When learners returned to their schools and settings, restrictions often meant that staff had to develop new ways of interacting with them and reconsider their provision in the light of the limitations in place.

It is difficult to identify the full impact of the disruptions on learners, and to understand the longer-term effects in areas such as learners' communication, independence, and social skills. Continuing to monitor and support these areas will remain a vital element of practitioners' work into the future.

The importance of digital learning has never been as apparent as during the disruptions of the last two years. In last year's annual report, we said that most learners and teachers had improved their own digital skills significantly to benefit from online teaching and learning during the first national lockdown. With the repeated disruption to education and training this year, the development of digital strategies to enable learners in all sectors to access learning continued and strengthened. Schools recognised the considerable benefits of Hwb, Wales's online learning platform, in supporting their work. Alongside this increased use of Hwb in schools, many leaders across all sectors prioritised professional learning to support staff to refine their skills. This led to far better online learning offers

in many sectors for the second national lockdown. In anticipation of further lockdowns, many teachers used the autumn term to establish or strengthen their learners' digital and independent learning skills. During the second national lockdown in the spring of 2021, many providers established safe and successful ways to provide 'live' lessons that could be delivered to learners in real time (synchronously) or were recorded, so that learners could access them at a time that suited their situation. By the end of the year, the most successful providers developed effective ways of integrating online and face-to-face teaching and learning. This helped to overcome the difficulties presented by self-isolation of individuals, groups, and whole classes. In some cases, it also accelerated the pace of progress towards a more digital approach to learning and the curriculum, in line with the four purposes of a Curriculum for Wales, and the objectives of [Digital 2030, a strategic framework for post-16 digital learning in Wales](#).

As the year progressed, maintained schools and PRUs became more confident to talk about their planning and preparation for Curriculum for Wales during their engagement calls and visits, although many secondary schools were still focusing their attention on the centre-determined-grade model. While some acknowledged that COVID-19 had disrupted their progress in thinking about their curriculum, many intend to hold onto some of the adaptations the pandemic forced them to make to their curriculum. For many, the increased importance of pupils' wellbeing, for instance, kickstarted or accelerated work on the health and wellbeing area of learning. Many teachers recognised the growing need to develop pupils' independent learning skills in readiness for the challenges of a more dynamic and experiential approach to learning. The considerable benefits of learning in the outdoor environment became clear to schools trying to adhere to social distancing rules. Nearly all providers had experiences that emphasised the importance of strengthening pupils' attitudes to learning and encouraging their resilience in adversity. The positive learning that many senior leaders took from their experiences this year seems likely to influence their approach to the opportunities Curriculum for Wales has to offer, and their willingness to allow staff to try new things and take calculated risks.

Last year, we reported on the non-maintained sector's financial fragility in the light of the pandemic and the concerns about the viability of some of these settings. Happily, we have seen that, as this year has progressed, the number of children accessing provision in this sector has continued to grow and leaders note that it is now similar to that seen before the pandemic. While practitioners have worked diligently to help children settle back into learning, they have seen an increase in the number of children with speech and language difficulties. This is another outcome of the pandemic that settings and schools will need to monitor carefully as children transfer to statutory education.

Although assessing learners' standards and progress throughout periods of distance and blended learning was a challenge for all schools and settings, practitioners became more skilled at evaluating learners' progress over time. As schools move towards the implementation stage of the Curriculum for Wales, these practices can have long-term benefits as schools build assessment practices that are integral to teaching and learning, and support learners to make better progress.

For a second year, providers needed to implement new systems to be able to assign grades to learners studying external qualifications, such as AS, A level, GCSE and vocational qualifications. The 'centre determined grades' model provided a framework for determining learners' grades following a year of continued disruption. School and college leaders and teachers worked hard to support their learners and implement the revised arrangements, even though the arrangements had a significant impact on workload and affected provision for younger pupils.

In the further education and work-based learning sectors, assessment for the purpose of qualifications and accreditation remained a priority, although this posed significant challenges particularly where learners needed to undertake practical assessments. While providers in many areas are building on practices that allow them to give learners continuous feedback while learning, the reduction in the number of learners able to take end-of-course assessments in important sectors could have implications for the number of trained and qualified staff in the workforce over the next few years.

The impact of the pandemic on learners in post-16 learning varied considerably depending on the type of learning being taken. For example, while some apprenticeships continued throughout the pandemic, others were affected by furlough and redundancies. Adult learning took place where possible but, often, learning was moved online rather than in community venues. This meant that outcomes for these different groups of learners differed substantially. It is no surprise that, during our engagement with providers, learners identified their worries about end of course assessments and their move to the next stage of their education, training or the world of work. Frustration at changes and delays in assessment arrangements for vocational qualifications heightened feelings across the sector of a continued lack of parity in esteem with academic qualifications.

We have seen local authorities provide valuable support to their schools and PRUs throughout a turbulent academic year, including supporting them with implementing guidance from the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales. Where there were effective arrangements in place for working across local government services and with outside agencies, responses were generally quicker and more effective. One of the outcomes of the pandemic is that it has identified the need to further strengthen joint working between these services. Both local authorities and regional consortia have found it challenging to support improvement in the quality of provision under current conditions. We have provided more detail on these matters in our thematic report, '[Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19](#)'.

The pandemic has raised the profile and benefits of youth work through highlighting the broad and adaptive skillset of youth workers. The need to recognise the professional status of youth work as an essential key service for young people aged 11-25 was highlighted in our thematic report published this year [‘The Value of Youth Working Training: A sustainable model for Wales 2020’](#) and discussed in our blog [‘Understanding the value of youth work and youth workers’](#).

During periods of lockdown and home learning, Welsh medium schools and settings identified concerns about the progress of pupils’ Welsh language skills, particularly for those who do not speak Welsh at home. Many providers made particular efforts to help pupils maintain their skills and their confidence in using the Welsh language while accessing distance learning and when they returned to their school or setting. In many cases, these efforts were fruitful, and we have seen young children and many primary aged pupils regaining their Welsh language skills rapidly on return. Building successfully on last year’s work, Learn Welsh providers offered adult learners a wide range of learning opportunities, mostly digitally. The increase in the number of adults learning the Welsh language fits well with the Welsh Government’s long-term goals.

This year has brought considerable challenge to the whole of the education and training system in Wales, but the workforce has once again risen to these challenges. It is important that we recognise and appreciate the teachers, trainers, support staff and leaders who found innovative ways to provide for their learners’ educational and wellbeing needs and supported one another through difficult times. Individuals demonstrated resilience and professionalism to support learners who were affected acutely by the disruption throughout the year. Despite the inevitable setbacks that many providers encountered, they persevered with professional learning for their staff and continued to make progress on their education and training reform journey. Many providers in all sectors acknowledge that the pandemic forced them to think differently about their approaches and their provision. This encouraged them to make changes that have proved successful, which they intend to carry forward into the future. It will be important to capture and share the collective learning that has taken place to ensure that our education and training sectors in Wales continue to build on the positive progress that has been made over the last year. During the next academic year, we will continue to engage with providers and to publish our findings in a series of reports on our website.

Claire Morgan

Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales

Section 1

Sector summaries: Non-school settings for children under five

Context

All local authorities in Wales fund part-time early education for three-year-olds, and occasionally for four-year-olds. Nineteen out of the twenty-two local authorities offer early education in maintained schools and non-maintained settings, which include full day care and sessional care providers. Swansea and Neath Port Talbot local authorities provide early education in schools only, while Powys provides nursery education exclusively in non-maintained settings. Although local authorities who provide early education in non-maintained settings do not maintain the setting, they are responsible for funding early education entitlement and providing support to ensure that the settings provide good quality foundation phase education.

Sector summaries: Non-school settings for children under five

In January 2019, Estyn and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) began to inspect non-school education settings for children under five together, using a joint inspection framework. We are required to inspect early education, and CIW has the duty to inspect the quality of care at these settings. These joint inspections consider the quality of care provided for all children up to the age of 12 and the education of three and four-year-old children who do not receive education in a maintained school.

The number of settings offering part-time education continues to reduce each year from a high of over 700 in 2010 to 537 by July 2021. This can be attributed to several factors which have had an impact on settings over the past decade. These include local authorities extending the age range of a few maintained primary schools to incorporate nursery pupils or establishing new schools with capacity for these pupils. In some cases, settings have become unsustainable due to a reduced demand for places or, in a few areas, leaders not being able to employ suitably qualified staff.

Most settings that closed temporarily from March 2020 because of the pandemic re-opened for the beginning of the autumn term 2020. A minority did not re-open immediately after the Christmas holidays for a variety of reasons linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As part of our engagement work with the sector, we spoke to leaders in all settings and visited eight providers this year. The focus for each discussion was the wellbeing of children and staff, how settings have supported learning and re-established provision following lockdown, and leadership and management throughout the pandemic.

Wellbeing

Throughout the year, settings worked hard to create a warm, welcoming and safe environment for young children. Leaders identified that the number of children attending sessions returned to pre-pandemic levels, with a few settings having increased their capacity. For example, more parents and carers wanted their child to attend to socialise with other children following lockdown. Most children settled well on return to their setting following an extended period at home and adapted quickly to new procedures and routines. A few leaders identified that the impact of the pandemic on children had varied widely, with some having benefited from time spent at home. These children returned more confident, inquisitive and happy to learn. However, children also suffered adverse effects of being at home during lockdowns, such as a decline in standards of behaviour or physical skills. In addition, a minority of settings noted an increase in the number of children with speech and language difficulties, resulting in them making a greater number of referrals for support. This often had a negative impact on children's wellbeing and behaviour, as they became frustrated with not being able to communicate successfully. Throughout the pandemic, leaders and practitioners continued to work with external agencies and the families of vulnerable children or those requiring additional support. In most cases, specialist support took place remotely, which was not as effective as face-to-face sessions.

Engaging with external services to support children with additional learning needs ALN

The staff at Little Rascals Pre-school, Merthyr Tydfil created a fully inclusive learning environment to support children with ALN from across the local authority. They supported a number of children with a range of needs including those with physical and communication difficulties as well as those with complex learning needs. The setting re-opened in September 2020, but staff continued to support a few children who had to continue to self-isolate or 'shield' during this time. Leaders used Welsh Government Grants to allow the setting's ALN Co-ordinator time to produce individual learning packs for parents to use at home for this group of children. This had a positive effect on parents' and carers' engagement in their child's learning as well as providing important learning opportunities and experiences for the children.

By engaging in ALN early years training modules and bespoke training, leaders and practitioners were able to identify needs early and provide appropriate support. For example, they screened all the children for possible speech and language problems and then liaised with professionals through virtual meetings to provide appropriate intervention programmes and strategies. In addition, they worked with professionals including health visitors, educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists to provide early support for those children who have been identified as having ALN and who continue to self-isolate or shield at home.

Sector summaries: Non-school settings for children under five

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Following re-opening after national lockdowns, most settings adapted their provision to continue to provide worthwhile learning experiences and activities as part of children's entitlement to early education. Most continued to provide a range of hands-on, play-based experiences that develop children's skills while still conforming with Welsh Government health and safety guidance. They adapted their indoor and outdoor learning environments to improve infection control measures. For example, they often removed soft furnishings from their setting and limited the range of equipment available for the children at any one time. By the end of the spring term, a majority of settings had started reintroducing equipment and furnishings, in line with the guidelines and their own infection control measures. The pace of reintroduction varied considerably across Wales, as each local authority developed its own local guidelines and expectations. Leaders reintroduced these areas as soon as it was safe to do so because they are important for children's learning experiences and the development of their skills. Overall, settings focused less on developing teaching and learning than during usual times because their focus changed to making sure that they were implementing the protective measures. Having reverted to more adult-controlled 'snack time' during lockdowns, settings began to allow children to play a more active role in preparing food from the end of the spring term onwards as it was important to nurture children's independent and social skills as much as possible during these sessions.

Providing learning experiences and challenges for children to do at home

Throughout the year, Little Lambs@Emmanuel, Denbighshire, continued to provide useful activities and challenges for children to do at home, which supported their learning development. These included age-appropriate experiences for children to do with their parents, such as helping them to find a flower or to experience what it feels like to wriggle your toes on wet grass. Many activities focused on getting children out and about in the local environment. For example, practitioners shared pictures of local landmarks, such as 'the blue bridge' and asked parents to hunt for them with their child. Families took pictures of the landmarks they found and sent them to the setting to be included in a book. The children enjoyed looking at the pictures and this encouraged them to talk about their experiences. Practitioners used the home challenges to support specific areas of development, for example children's personal and social skills, which they had identified as having regressed over the lockdown period. The activities included a task to complete five 'kindness challenges' during the week, for example drawing a picture for their neighbour, making a card for someone they love and sharing a toy with a friend. Practitioners then made a wall display to celebrate all the kind things that children had been doing. They believe that the home challenges and activities improved parents' engagement in children's learning significantly, which has had a positive impact on attendance.

Helping children to understand the rich diversity of people and families within their local community

Staff at Cylch Meithrin Yr Eglwys Newydd, Cardiff, wanted to make children more aware of the diverse range of families and people within their community. Staff were aware that the children had little experience of life outside their own home during the national lockdown periods. They wanted them to understand that families attending the setting may differ in their composition. For example, some may live with their grandparents or foster parents, and many will live in households with a rich variety of people from different cultures or ethnic backgrounds. To promote these ideas, the leader bought a very large doll's house, which they named 'Tŷ Enfys' (Rainbow House). Every room in the house has a different family in it to match the make-up of the families that attend the setting. This has encouraged the children to understand that everyone can all live happily together 'in the same house'.

Sector summaries: Non-school settings for children under five

Nearly all settings made increased use of the outdoor learning environment to ensure that children had access to learning experiences in the relative safety of the open air. They made adaptations to this provision to allow more children to use these areas throughout the year, for example by installing canopies and by making better use of the natural environment. Practitioners in a few settings adopted strategies for planning learning experiences that were very much 'in the moment' and responded quickly to children's interests. For example, practitioners adapted their planning to allow children to explore and create their own spider webs in the branches of trees after observing dew covered webs in the grass. Following the changes to national guidelines, during the first half of the summer term, a few settings began planning more visits to the local area to enrich their learning experiences, but only a very few allowed visitors to attend the site. Most leaders reported that the lack of visits and visitors had a negative impact on the quality of their provision.

Using the outdoor learning environment

Leaders at Homestead Day Nursery, Wrexham, have developed a vision for their setting where children are encouraged to explore and discover the outdoors as much as possible. During a period of closure due to the pandemic, leaders took time to refresh parts of the outdoor environment so that, when it re-opened, it was 'business as usual' in the outdoors. Leaders ensured that the outdoor learning environment was more extensive, attractive, and engaging. Large parts of it have been left 'wild' to provide children with opportunities to interact with and learn from the natural world, for example to observe living things and to practise mark making skills by drawing their observations independently. Other parts of the setting have been adapted deliberately to support children's development. These include digging areas, obstacle courses and climbing areas and large outdoor block building areas.

Practitioners used assessment information carefully to shape and guide learning experiences in the outdoors to match the developmental needs of children, for example by selecting additional resources carefully to match their physical needs and, perhaps more importantly, improving their approaches to engaging with children while learning is taking place. Practitioners ensure that they plan learning activities that support the development of a wide range of skills, and that they do not use resources to develop skills in isolation. For example, children develop their communication, problem solving and creative skills in all learning experiences. Leaders have invested considerable time and energy in supporting staff to work in this way so that they maximise children's learning and enjoyment of the outdoors.



Sector summaries: Non-school settings for children under five

In most settings, practitioners continued to observe and record children's progress appropriately, to plan the next steps in their learning and to share progress with parents through virtual platforms. The use of video conferencing technology to arrange virtual parents' evenings to discuss the children's progress became a useful alternative to face-to-face sessions.

In Welsh-medium settings, where many of the children speak Welsh at home, leaders identified that lockdowns had made little or no difference to children's language skills. Although the Welsh language skills of those from non-Welsh speaking homes regressed when they were away from the setting for sustained periods, most still had a reasonable understanding of the language on return. With use of immersion techniques, songs, rhymes and repetition of sentences during activities, nearly all children regained their confidence to speak in Welsh quickly.

Leadership

The wellbeing of children and staff has been a high priority for leaders throughout the pandemic. On re-opening in September, a number of staff were anxious about returning to work, although many were glad to be back once they had settled into a routine. Leaders in a minority of settings recognised that morale was particularly low at the beginning of the spring term at the time of the second national lockdown. In these settings, staff were mainly concerned about the safety of the children and themselves as schools had to close to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19. The availability of lateral flow tests and the success of the vaccine programme helped to allay staff's fears during the summer term. However, many leaders and practitioners were concerned about the added pressure in preparing for ALN reform and the Curriculum for Wales.

Leaders worked diligently to ensure that their settings remained safe for their children and staff. Leaders used guidance and advice from the Welsh Government, local authorities and umbrella organisations that support their work, which allowed them to re-open and operate safely. In addition, the increased use of virtual technology enabled leaders to communicate more effectively with stakeholders as well as with other leaders in their area or local authority. This allowed them to seek advice or clarity on issues such as how to re-open safely and to share practice with others, and helped them to feel less isolated. The number of settings accepting visitors varied considerably during the summer term, as did the number of local authorities engaging in face-to-face visits with leaders. Working virtually sometimes made it difficult for Early Years Advisory Teachers to identify the concerns and meet the needs of practitioners.

A report by the Education Policy Institute and the Nuffield Foundation (Sibieta and Cottell, 2021) noted that the proportion of settings open for business after the announcement that settings could re-open to all children in June and July 2020 rose fastest in Wales out of the four UK home nations. However, nearly all leaders found that managing the financial impact of the pandemic had been challenging, due to the loss of revenue and increased expenditure. For example, costs associated with personal protection equipment and cleaning materials increased.

Working with other settings to discuss and share good provision and practice

The manager at Stepping Stones Pre-School, Monmouthshire, engaged in regular virtual meetings with colleagues from around 20 settings across the local authority. This well-established network of settings met throughout the pandemic to discuss common issues, such as how to make necessary adjustments to provision and practice to keep staff and children safe. The leader also met regularly with other groups organised by the Early Years Advisory Teacher and umbrella organisations. They found these meetings to be helpful, especially when trying to implement local and national guidance for keeping children and staff safe. This helped her to replicate good practice from other settings, as well as providing reassurance that everyone was following appropriate protocols and practices.

Sector summaries: Non-school settings for children under five

The reduced revenue from annual fundraising campaigns, due to cancelled events, also added to the financial pressure on settings. For a few settings, their financial position was affected negatively as a result of providing childcare under the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS) during the first lockdown. This was highlighted in an independent evaluation commissioned by the Welsh Government of C-CAS that was delivered between April and August 2020, in response to COVID-19 (Glyn *et al.*, 2021).

Many leaders made use of the wide range of extra funding arrangements to support the sustainability of their setting. Nearly all found that the furlough scheme, and the range of Welsh Government grants that were made available to them during the pandemic, helped to manage the financial pressures they experienced. In particular, the flexibility of the furlough scheme allowed them to organise their staffing in response to the number of children attending. The Welsh Government's decision to bring the funding for early education entitlement in line with that for childcare in January 2021 also helped to improve the stability of many settings. Throughout the pandemic, many settings used funding from grants such as the Welsh Government Capital Grant, local authority support grants and funding from national companies and charities to help support the setting as well as making necessary adaptations to their premises. Leaders in a few smaller settings did not apply for these grants for a variety of reasons, including a lack of time or expertise to complete the application forms. A few leaders found the complexity of allocating grant money challenging.

Leaders ensured that practitioners had access to a wide range of professional learning activities during the pandemic, including training on developing outdoor provision, moving towards a new curriculum, ALN and mental health training. Nearly all training opportunities moved to a virtual platform, which was more accessible to practitioners. This new approach allowed practitioners to make better use of their time and enabled them to access support and training when it suited them. However, provision for professional learning varied across local authorities and leaders reported that, although they had accessed training, there had not always been enough time to reflect on its implications or to embed new practices, especially in relation to ALN and the Curriculum for Wales. The 'Research to inform future support needs for delivering early education in the non-maintained sector' (Pritchard *et al.*, 2019) report highlighted the need for a more flexible and coherent approach to support, training and professional development for practitioners.

Most settings did not accept college students or apprentices this year, as leaders were worried about transmission of the virus. This meant that many students did not get the practical experience they need to complete their training. Leaders experienced difficulty recruiting suitably qualified practitioners, particularly in the Welsh-medium sector. As the demand for early education and childcare increased again at the end of the summer term, leaders reported that they were concerned with the lack of suitably trained and qualified workers in the sector.

Effective use of the Early Years Development Grant (EYDG) to support children's wellbeing and language skills

Leaders at Croco-Doco-Dile Playgroup, Llanidloes, Powys used the Early Years Development Grant (EYDG) during the pandemic to meet the needs of the children. The setting identified the need to focus on children's wellbeing and language skills, including the use of the outdoors. Initially, leaders provided home learning packs, which included books to help develop children's literacy and communication skills, and to promote the joy of reading. Leaders invested in their outdoor provision to support language skills, for example purchasing a wooden tepee for reading and fire-pit for outdoor cooking activities. Staff received appropriate support and training to assess and develop children's communication skills, as well as time to share information with parents on how they could help their children to practise their oracy skills at home. In addition, leaders employed additional staff to focus more on children's wellbeing and helping them to settle in and to talk about feelings and emotions. Leaders have shared these initiatives with other leaders and practitioners throughout Powys using virtual technology. The use of the EYDG grant by the setting leaders has had a positive impact to support children's literacy skills and wellbeing, as well as providing parents with useful opportunities and help to support their children at home.

Context

In April 2021, there were 1,228 primary schools in Wales. This is six fewer than in January 2020, when there were 1,234. The number of primary schools working as federations increased again, with 101 schools now working within 47 federations. The number of primary school pupils has increased from 272,000 in January 2020 to 273,000 in April 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021o).

As part of our engagement and pastoral work, we had spoken with all schools in the sector by the end of the academic year. Discussions with headteachers and senior leaders focused on the implications of the pandemic for the wellbeing of pupils and staff, how schools supported teaching and learning, leadership throughout the pandemic, and preparations for the Curriculum for Wales, where appropriate. We also made pastoral visits to schools in a statutory category.

Sector summaries:

Primary schools

Wellbeing

For all schools, supporting pupils' wellbeing was the priority as they returned in September 2020. Most pupils were happy to return to school and showed a desire for learning and an eagerness for a taste of 'normal' school life. This was also the case when schools re-opened in the spring term after the second national lockdown, although the physical and emotional effects of lockdown and a lack of engagement with friends had made this time more challenging for pupils than the initial lockdown period. Most schools built on their existing procedures to identify and support pupils' wellbeing needs.

When pupils returned to school, teachers often focused on providing pupils with opportunities to talk, to rebuild relationships, and to engage in physical activities, creative tasks and outdoor learning. As time went on, teachers became more innovative in adapting and refining ways to support pupils' wellbeing. In a UK-wide study, the Child Poverty Action Group (2021, p.13), found that: *'young people talked enthusiastically about how their teachers had found creative ways to help them stay in touch with their friends and classmates... allocated time for online socialising separate from their learning, such as online quizzes or games, or messaging functions to speak regularly with their friends and classmates'*.



Supporting pupil wellbeing on their return to school

Ysgol Llangwryfon, Ceredigion, added a number of daily wellbeing activities to the curriculum, including frequent exercise periods outside, additional circle times and opportunities for pupils to create class murals that reflected their impressions and feelings during this period. All pupils in Years 5 and 6 received a book to use as a feelings' diary. Each page had been cut into four parts – things that concerned the pupils the previous evening, things that were a concern for the pupils that morning, things that made pupils happy today and things that the pupils are excited about. There was an opportunity for the pupils to complete the diary first thing each morning and one member of the staff in the class monitored the contents of the diaries before playtime. In the event of a concern, staff intervened purposefully as necessary.

Informal wellbeing sessions held remotely

At Ysgol Llanfairpwll, Anglesey, in addition to the academic provision, the school offered virtual 'cuppa and a biscuit' sessions to Year 5 and Year 6 pupils during the spring lockdown period. In these sessions, pupils were divided into small groups and given the opportunity to chat with their friends under the guidance of a teacher to support their emotional wellbeing. Each session included an opportunity to have fun in the form of a quiz or a game, and to discuss feelings and any concerns. Each session had a different focus, such as relaxing the mind, or motivating pupils to engage and complete tasks.

Following lockdowns, many schools noted a deterioration in pupils' social skills, such as in their ability to listen to others or to take turns. Nearly all schools found that the lockdowns had affected the wellbeing of pupils adversely to some extent. Pupils found it difficult to focus, to pay attention for extended periods and to persevere with tasks. A few pupils were more anxious than usual, for example around incidents that had happened at home or regarding schoolwork or renewing friendships. This reflects the findings of Loades *et al.* (2021, p.1218) that *'children and adolescents are probably more likely to experience high rates of depression and most likely anxiety during and after enforced isolation ends'*.

Sector summaries:

Primary schools

There was a reduction in the physical fitness of a minority of pupils, mainly due to inactivity during periods of remote learning. In response, staff introduced activities to improve pupils' physical fitness and general wellbeing. Teachers made greater use of outdoor areas for all pupils to participate in physical activities to encourage them to lead a healthier lifestyle.

Many leaders identified a deterioration in a minority of pupils' behaviour after a short period back in school. In these schools, staff continued to place a strong emphasis on strategies such as circle time to find ways of resolving disagreements.

From September 2020 onwards, schools continued to identify pupils who were vulnerable, for example due to concerns about their welfare. They also identified pupils whose learning had been disproportionately affected during the pandemic. During the second national lockdown, schools increasingly offered on-site support in their hub provision for wider groups of pupils whom they considered to be vulnerable.

Safeguarding referrals often increased during lockdown. In general, meetings to support pupils who had been identified as needing support from specialist services continued remotely. Schools were increasingly supporting families' wider needs, such as distributing food parcels, assisting parents with applications for financial support and providing 'a listening ear' to those who were anxious.

Staff in many schools provided vulnerable families with considerable additional support to encourage them to ensure that their children attended school. This included doorstep visits by staff or education welfare officers to engage with families and to explain the importance of attending school. When schools reopened to pupils after the second national lockdown, many leaders identified that attendance levels were beginning to approach pre-pandemic levels. Pupil attendance was consistently between 90% and 95% for most weeks of the summer term. Average attendance during the last full year of schooling, in 2018-2019, was just below 95% (Welsh Government, 2019a).

In the autumn term, nearly all schools provided additional intervention programmes for those pupils in need of extra literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional support. In general, pupils responded positively to the support provided and made beneficial progress during the term.

During the second lockdown, staff continued to work with pupils who required additional support, either via remote learning or in the hub provision, although teachers often found it more challenging to meet pupils' individual needs remotely. In a minority of schools, pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) continued to find it difficult to engage with remote learning activities. In response, schools often provided small group sessions to meet pupils' specific needs remotely and following their return to face-to-face learning.

Where schools had a significant number of pupils with English as an additional language (EAL), staff often found that supporting the wellbeing of these pupils presented them with specific challenges when their families had limited understanding of English or Welsh. In instances where families felt particularly isolated due to their limited understanding of English, schools offered them continual support.

Adapting to meet the needs of the school community

Mount Street Infant and Nursery School, Powys, had to deal with unusual circumstances during the pandemic – including many pupils with EAL and a school population that changes often due to the proximity to the Infantry Battle School Brecon where many Gurkha soldiers serve. During the pandemic, new pupils continued to arrive, often with little or no English. Families often felt isolated during the pandemic. As a result, staff identified the need to take extra measures to support them. The school used a grant from the Ministry of Defence Education Support Fund to employ a Nepalese teaching assistant who was able to help with communication. For example, she created videos for pupils and parents about how to access remote learning, supported pupils at school and in the hub provision, and conducted regular check-in phone calls with families.

Sector summaries:

Primary schools

For example, they provided pupils with classes to improve their English or Welsh language, working closely with the local authority's EAL support service. Often, staff made use of translation services to support pupil engagement.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

In nearly all schools, leaders and teachers noted concerns over pupils' progress due to the impact of the pandemic. Disruption to learning through periods of lockdown and self-isolation led to poorer progress in the literacy and numeracy skills of many pupils. For example, although schools provided pupils with reading activities online and suggestions for practising their reading at home, pupils' engagement in these opportunities varied considerably. Those who did not read regularly during lockdown made little progress. This meant that, when they returned to school, older pupils sometimes found it difficult to read beyond the literal meaning of a text, and younger pupils often struggled to decode unfamiliar words and make sense of what they were reading. The Education Policy Institute (2021b) estimated that, on average, pupils in primary schools experienced a learning loss of over three months in mathematics. These concerns were repeated, but to a lesser extent, following the second national lockdown. Teachers noted a deterioration in pupils' listening, speaking and social skills, particularly for vulnerable pupils and those in the foundation phase. In the foundation phase, the greatest concern was about pupils missing key child developmental milestones that may affect their emotional wellbeing, communication and learning development.

Most schools that teach through the medium of Welsh identified regression in the confidence of many pupils from non-Welsh speaking homes to speak in Welsh. This was often more evident in younger pupils. In all schools, where pupils attended hub provision or where they had engaged well with distance learning the impact on their progress overall was reduced. During the second half of the autumn term, most pupils' skills recovered steadily following their return to school. This trend was repeated following the second national lockdown.

On returning to school after lockdown, teachers adapted their teaching strategies to reflect the limitations imposed by COVID-19 restrictions and to attempt to lessen the effects of periods of remote learning and time away from peers and staff. Most teachers provided pupils with more opportunities for physical exercise and learning in the outdoor environment, aligning well with Welsh Government (2021h, p.36) guidance that *'recognises the unique value of outdoor learning and the many benefits it brings for learners, including supporting the development of healthy and active lifestyles, developing problem-solving skills, and developing understanding and respect for nature and the environment in which they live'*.

In many schools, teachers devised activities that encouraged pupils to strengthen or regain skills in collaborative and in independent working. For example, one school provided pupils with 'big' open questions based on recent news stories. Teachers encouraged pupils to form their own opinions about current affairs and to present their views in a variety of ways. In many cases, they prioritised activities that allowed opportunities for pupils to play and socialise as part of their learning.

Using digital tools and online learning to progress pupils' skills in listening and speaking

On return to school in September, staff at Stacey Primary School, Cardiff, identified that pupils required support to improve their oracy skills, particularly those pupils with EAL who had only heard their home language during this time. During the second national lockdown, teachers integrated regular opportunities for pupils to use and develop their listening and speaking skills through their distance learning model. Teachers threaded whole-school approaches to developing spoken language through learning activities, and they encouraged pupils to provide verbal responses, such as posting audios and videos of their talk. For instance, Year 2 pupils studied 'The Owl and the Pussycat', and made puppets to help them retell the poem, sharing their performances with their teachers and peers. Approaches such as this helped pupils to use the language of narrative and description while learning at home.

Sector summaries:

Primary schools

During the pandemic, many schools continued to adapt their curriculum to incorporate the areas of learning and experience (AoLE) outlined in the Curriculum for Wales. In particular, they placed an emphasis on including elements of the health and wellbeing AoLE to support pupils' physical and mental health. Many schools continued to consider ways to embed the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales into their provision, often focusing on how these can help pupils to develop their resilience through challenging times. In a few cases, teachers designed tasks that specifically developed pupils' skills as learners, for example considering how tasks could be adapted to include opportunities to develop pupils' resilience. Nevertheless, schools often apply the four purposes at too superficial a level. For example, teachers ask pupils to consider at the end of a lesson which of the four purposes may be relevant to tasks they have completed.

On the return to school in September, most schools identified a need to assess the progress pupils had made during the previous, disrupted year. Nearly all approached assessment arrangements with sensitivity. They used a variety of different methods, including informal teacher observations, standardised tests and the Welsh Government's personalised assessments. Often, schools placed a greater reliance on teachers using their professional judgement to ascertain pupils' learning needs, rather than tests that often assess a narrow range of skills. In a few cases, schools moved away from the use of formal tracking systems as they felt that these relied on a limited set of measures and did not help them identify well enough the breadth of the impact of the pandemic on pupils' learning and wellbeing. In many schools, teachers understood the importance of maintaining a dialogue with pupils about their learning during periods of remote learning and during in-school teaching. By the second national lockdown in spring 2021, most schools had developed systems that enabled teachers to provide pupils with helpful feedback on the tasks they completed at home.

From September 2020, schools continued to develop and refine their approaches to remote learning. Due to improved skills and confidence among staff, pupils and parents in the use of remote learning technologies and techniques, the second national lockdown had less of a detrimental impact on pupils' learning than the initial one. The improved quality of schools' remote learning offer resulted in increased engagement levels for most pupils. Frequent check-in sessions to answer pupils' questions and address misconceptions in their learning, as well as the selective use of live sessions, were valuable in engaging pupils. Many schools recognised that this approach was best balanced with other means of delivering learning, although 'Getting online: barriers and successes for the provision of online learning during the January 2021 Tier 4 lockdown' (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021b, p.12) found that many schools felt pressure to provide 'live' online lessons when '*...this may not be the right method for engaging learners, unless part of a mixed approach*'.

Adapting approaches to remote learning

The headteacher at Ysgol Dolafon, Powys, worked with staff to devise effective ways to improve pupil engagement. During the first national lockdown, only a very few pupils regularly engaged with the tasks set for them. The headteacher understood that several factors contributed to this, including the school's rural location with many pupils living and helping out on their family farm or having parents who were busy with their own work.

During the autumn term, the school had to close for a short period due to an outbreak of COVID-19. During this time, the headteacher introduced regular, live wellbeing sessions that gave the staff confidence in the use of remote learning technology. As a result, staff were ready to include live sessions in the provision offered to all pupils during the second national lockdown period in spring 2021. The headteacher devised a weekly tracking form for each class where staff recorded pupil engagement and intervened as necessary. This allowed teachers and the headteacher to identify which pupils needed further encouragement and support. The headteacher introduced a staff evaluation form where staff recorded weekly what went well and what could have gone better. These notes were then used during a discussion between the staff to identify solutions and support. These changes helped improve pupil engagement from 10% during the first lockdown to 90% during the second lockdown.

Sector summaries:

Primary schools

Frequently, staff dedicated considerable time in developing online resources to support parents to help their children with learning at home. For example, staff created short videos that demonstrated specific approaches to mathematics. In Welsh-medium schools, live sessions enabled pupils who do not speak Welsh at home opportunities to practise the language regularly.

Through the periods of lockdown, many schools attempted to provide foundation phase pupils with a range of activities that they could complete at home that reflected an experiential learning approach. Most teachers found it challenging to deliver learning experiences remotely that align well with effective foundation phase practice. In these cases, the success of pupils' learning often relied heavily on the skills of parents, and their availability, to support their children. While engagement levels for remote learning improved during the second national lockdown, younger pupils were still less likely to engage consistently in remote learning than those in key stage 2.

On return to in-school learning, measures associated with controlling the spread of COVID-19 limited foundation phase practices. For example, opportunities for staff and pupils to work collaboratively were limited because of the need to ensure social distancing. As time progressed, and particularly after the second national lockdown, foundation phase practitioners became more adept at thinking creatively to minimise limitations to pupils' learning. For example, staff increased the proportion of outdoor learning and used 'bubbles' more effectively to allow pupils and staff to work together more closely.

Leadership

Leaders found it challenging to simultaneously develop their schools, support staff and ensure that pupils received effective education during the pandemic. Focusing on operational matters and supporting the wellbeing of staff and pupils have been priorities throughout the year. Often, staff worked diligently to implement new safety practices while supporting the needs of pupils, either remotely or face-to-face. There was an unprecedented degree of pressure on the wellbeing of staff as they managed rapidly changing situations within school and made themselves increasingly accessible to pupils and their families over time. Many leaders reported raised levels of anxiety in staff as they did this. Nearly all leaders prioritised the wellbeing of their staff and pupils over their own. They recognised that the wellbeing of staff has had a direct impact on that of pupils. This was highlighted in the *Framework on embedding a whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing*, Welsh Government (2021h).

Managing staff wellbeing via web-free sessions

At Archbishop Rowan Williams School, in Monmouthshire, leaders took account of staff feedback that constantly being on-call online was having an adverse effect on their own wellbeing. In addition, there were concerns from parents about the amount of time their children were spending on screen. Leaders decided to use Wednesdays for staff planning, preparation and assessment time. While tasks were still set, there were no live-streamed lessons or ICT dependent learning on that day and teachers did not monitor messages. There was always a dedicated member of staff 'on duty' for each class to pick up wellbeing or safeguarding issues that occurred on a Wednesday. This provided staff with protected time to consider their pupils' learning for the following week and to analyse patterns of engagement during the previous week. There was immediate positive feedback from pupils and families, and staff wellbeing improved greatly.

Sector summaries:

Primary schools

The wellbeing of headteachers was a cause for concern throughout the year. Most felt an unrelenting weight of responsibility for the wellbeing of their learners and staff. They felt worn-out as they had not had a substantial break since before the initial national lockdown. They pointed to 'increasing levels of stress and anxiety' and 'negatively affecting personal relationships and daily life' as the two principal ways that they were affected. Many raised concerns that receiving updates from the Welsh Government on changes to practice at the same time as the public was difficult to manage and made them anxious. Support from local authorities for the wellbeing of leaders strengthened as the year went on. Nonetheless, many felt that it was not clear who was responsible for providing emotional support for them.

As the year went on, leaders consulted regularly with families and gathered their views on the school's provision, particularly during periods of remote learning. In almost all primary schools, leaders reflected constantly on their approaches to remote and face-to-face learning and reviewed, refined, and adapted them where necessary.

Nearly all leaders recognised the importance of keeping families updated about their plans and processes in a clear and timely manner. This communication helped them to understand what support families needed and enabled them and their staff to provide it. This often included providing families with support in dealing with the behaviour of their children, providing them with technical support or delivering work packs or food parcels to them.

Schools received several grants and additional funding throughout the year. Leaders welcomed these, particularly the Welsh Government's (2020e) funding for the '[Recruit, recover, raise standards' accelerating learning programme](#). Most schools used this additional funding to employ extra members of staff or increase the hours of existing staff. Many deployed them to improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills or to increase emotional support for them. A few schools prioritised the development of independent learning skills for vulnerable pupils. As pupils experienced many months of remote learning, it was difficult for leaders to evaluate the impact of grants on pupils' progress within a short period. Many leaders received other funding late in the financial year and they found it challenging to spend this meaningfully and in time.

Leaders continued to focus on providing staff with a range of professional learning opportunities throughout the year. Developing the digital skills of staff further and deepening their understanding of different teaching and learning approaches were integral to their professional learning offer.

Evaluating remote learning

At Ysgol Eifion Wyn, Gwynedd, leaders and staff evaluated their delivery of remote learning regularly, but informally. They discussed their methods and identified approaches that were most effective. Leaders liaised with parents to seek their views of their children's learning experiences and considered their responses. As a result, staff used live learning sessions that were short and stimulating to keep pupils interested and encourage them to engage consistently with their learning. The school contacted the families of those pupils who needed additional guidance to complete tasks and offered them advice and assistance.

Starting conversations about professional learning

A middle leader at Llandrillo yn Rhos Primary School, Conwy, established a professional learning chat group so that colleagues could keep in touch when the school was closed. In the group messages, staff shared aspects of professional learning and resources that interested them, such as professional journals, podcasts, or video clips of experts delivering lectures. They reviewed these materials and discussed implications for their practice, signposting colleagues to relevant resources. This approach gave staff ownership of their own professional learning and enabled them to focus on things that mattered to them and interested them.

Sector summaries: Primary schools

As the year went on, leaders encouraged staff to engage in webinars to enhance their understanding of developments in education, such as the Curriculum for Wales and ALN reform.

By the spring term, a majority of leaders considered that they were on-track to implement the Curriculum for Wales in 2022 and that retaining the planned timeline was important to maintaining momentum. At this time, a minority of leaders articulated a clear understanding of the process of curriculum design or were able to place their school in the context of the Welsh Government (2021d) guidance document '[Curriculum for Wales: The journey to 2022](#)' to facilitate such conversations. In these cases, the school's vision was clear and included plans for evolving teaching in line with the 12 pedagogical principles set out in [Successful Futures](#). By the summer term, more leaders had refocused their attention on developing their plans to incorporate the principles of the Curriculum for Wales. As a result of the additional pressures brought by the pandemic, many leaders felt that their school would benefit from a prolonged, uninterrupted period to work further on developing their curricular approaches.

A further area of professional learning that nearly all schools focused on as the year progressed was the implementation of ALN reform. Leaders often sourced opportunities for staff to develop their skills and knowledge in areas such as safeguarding, attachment disorder, autism spectrum disorder, dealing with trauma in children and communicating through sign language. A minority of leaders were concerned about their school's readiness to implement ALN changes on time, and the workload pressures on staff who lead on this aspect of the school's work. A few headteachers re-structured staff responsibilities to support this reform. In most schools, staff received professional learning opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of the impending changes, with a few working in partnership with their clusters to achieve this.



Context

In April 2021, there were 182 secondary schools in Wales. This is one fewer than in January 2020, when there were 183. In April 2021 there were over 174,100 learners in secondary schools in Wales, around 3,000 more than in January 2020 (Welsh Government, 2021 o).

As part of our engagement work with the sector, we conducted 172 engagement meetings held remotely and visited 29 schools this year. Discussions with headteachers and senior leaders focused on the implications of the pandemic for the wellbeing of pupils and staff, how schools supported teaching and learning, leadership throughout the pandemic, and preparations for the Curriculum for Wales, where appropriate. We also made pastoral visits to schools in a statutory category.

Sector summaries: Secondary schools

Wellbeing

When schools opened in September 2020, most pupils were happy to be back in school and behaviour was generally good, although a few pupils found it difficult to readjust to the routines of school life. Following the return of all pupils after Easter 2021, behaviour was still mainly positive, although there was a deterioration in the behaviour of a few. The attendance of many pupils was good overall. Nevertheless, pupil attendance remained consistently below 90% for the summer term, compared with average attendance of just below 94% for the last full year of education in 2018-2019 (Welsh Government, 2019b). The attendance of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds was notably below that of other pupils. Headteachers reported a rise in persistent absence amongst specific groups of pupils, such as those eligible for free school meals. In a few cases, Year 11 pupils did not return to school after the second national lockdown, which left them at risk of leaving school without any qualifications.

Schools were especially concerned about the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing and anxiety among pupils. This was highlighted in 'Coronavirus and Me' (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020, p.20), which found that only 11% of 12 to 18-year-olds did not feel worried about their education. Many schools reported an increase in child protection referrals and demand for counselling services, particularly following the second lockdown.



Botwm Becso (Concern Button)

Ysgol Gyfun Y Strade added a 'Botwm Becso' (Concern Button) to its website. Pupils can use this button at any time of day or night to report any concerns or worries they may have. The information is confidential and goes straight to the assistant headteacher responsible for wellbeing, who then contacts the pupil and decides how best to support them.

Although pupil engagement with online learning was better during the second national lockdown, the impact on their mental health and wellbeing was more acute. This time, pupils generally spent more time learning online, and poor weather and dark evenings had a negative impact on their wellbeing. Increasingly, schools introduced 'no screen time' days or periods to support pupils' wellbeing.

Sector summaries:

Secondary schools

The impact of the pandemic on specific groups of learners has been considerable. Those with additional learning needs (ALN) tended to engage less than other pupils with online learning, although schools offered them support. For example, they involved teaching assistants in online classes and invited pupils into school so that staff could help them to complete their work and support them with any other issues. Overall, more able pupils engaged well with learning from home. Pupils with English as an additional language found online learning particularly challenging, especially if their parents did not speak English. Pupils who usually had alternative curriculum provision, such as work experience or outdoor learning courses, could not access their usual learning experiences, and this had a negative impact on their motivation and engagement. There were specific concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of pupils in examination year groups, who were at risk of significant stress when taking many assessments over a short period of time.

The divide between pupils from disadvantaged and more privileged backgrounds became more pronounced over the course of the pandemic. The former group were less likely to have access to Wi-Fi, digital devices and support with their schoolwork at home. Their families were more likely to be impacted financially by the pandemic and larger families needed to self-isolate more frequently. These findings are also reflected in the Child Poverty Action Group's (2021) report 'The Cost of Learning in Lockdown', published in March 2021.

Partnership to support vulnerable families

Coedcae Comprehensive School established a successful partnership with the local authority to support vulnerable families. The school identified vulnerable families, who were not on the free school meals register but were facing increasing financial pressures due to job losses or because of the furlough scheme. With a weekly grant of £250, the school delivered hygiene packs to those families to relieve them of financial pressures where money had to be spent mostly on essentials like food rather than hygiene products. As a result, the school built solid relationships with pupils and their families and helped with the issues and struggles of their school community.

Providing mini learning zones to support pupils to access support

In September, Bassaleg School restructured its Progress Centre provision to provide mini learning zones for each year group. This enabled pupils with ALN to access specialist support safely, gain respite and, if necessary, facilitate a gradual transition to school whilst remaining in their bubble. Support staff were deployed to provide consistent support to pupils and were provided with specific guidance on how they could support pupils in a COVID-19 safe way.

Sector summaries: Secondary schools

Throughout the pandemic, schools invested substantial resources and time into monitoring and supporting pupils' wellbeing, particularly the most vulnerable. During periods of lockdown, most schools contacted pupils regularly to check on their wellbeing. Leaders used additional funding to provide pastoral support and intervention programmes. Many schools focused strongly on wellbeing in their general provision and offered childcare and hub provision for specific pupils.

Schools continued to work closely with outside agencies, such as social services and the educational psychology service. A few of the changes brought about by the pandemic, such as remote meetings, benefited this work. However, restrictions on visitors to schools posed challenges, for example, when educational psychologists needed to carry out assessments of pupils.

This year, schools continued to lend digital equipment to pupils who did not have it at home or to pupils who had to share with other family members. However, schools sometimes struggled to buy equipment because of increased demand. As equipment was returned to school, leaders considered how they could improve their provision of equipment to tackle the digital divide that was highlighted during the pandemic, such as those described in 'Getting Online, a briefing by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021b).

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Across Wales, there was considerable variation in the amount of school time secondary school pupils lost due to having to self-isolate. In some schools, whole year groups missed up to 12 weeks of face-to-face provision in the autumn term.

During the first national lockdown, there was considerable variation in the online provision offered by schools. In particular, the number of live lessons that schools provided varied greatly. From January 2021, the proportion of online lessons that were delivered live increased notably in most schools. As staff and pupils were more confident in working online by January, schools were able to focus more strongly on the quality of teaching and learning. Most schools plan to retain some aspects of their distance and blended learning provision in the future. For example, they plan to use pre-recorded lessons for revision purposes and when teachers are absent.

Supporting pupils' mental health

Since the return of pupils to school, leaders in Ysgol Syr Hugh Owen identified increased anxiety, self-injury and low mood through their internal systems to monitor pupil wellbeing and welfare. The school created an online classroom for mental health so that pupils could access information and activities to support them. In addition, the school adapted PSE lessons to respond to pupils' needs, such as lessons on building mental resilience, improving personal hygiene and promoting the NHS 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' model.

Sector summaries:

Secondary schools

Making distance learning engaging and manageable

Leaders and teachers at Cardiff High School worked together to make distance learning engaging and manageable for pupils and staff. Staff were often over-planning online sessions, so they encouraged teachers to strip back the content of the lessons to ensure that effective learning was taking place. They were concerned that too many learning activities were digital, so leaders encouraged teachers to set non-digital tasks like writing in a physical journal or reading a 'real' book. Teachers had regular conversations about pedagogy and took a 'less is more' approach: 'chunking' work, consolidating learning, and ensuring that content was not covered at too fast a pace.

Through meetings and professional learning activities, staff identified that teachers' communication skills were of vital importance, particularly their proficiency in initiating and developing discussion. Teachers also discovered that pupils needed to be guided more systematically through their learning than they would in the classroom where a teacher could easily support individuals or pupils may have picked up cues from their peers. Teachers made expectations clearer and signposted pupils throughout the learning.

Pupils worked to a fixed timetable that mirrored the normal timetable. This included a mixture of live lessons, webinars (where teachers introduced a session, and pupils spent most of the time working individually, coming back at the end of the session to discuss their work) and self-study periods. The strict timetable enabled families to plan their time and access to devices. The school insisted that teachers followed the timetable for this reason. The self-study periods allowed time for staff to plan.



When schools closed in December, those that had experienced a high number of cases in the autumn term were well placed to deliver online learning as they had been able to practise and experiment. Pupil engagement with online learning varied widely, although it generally improved with the increase in live lessons from January 2021. In nearly all schools, a proportion of pupils failed to engage at all with learning from home, and this was a particular issue for schools serving more disadvantaged communities. Schools used a variety of methods to try to engage these pupils. They made regular phone calls to them and their families, made socially distanced home visits, arranged support such as counselling or mentoring and invited them to come into school to complete their work with the support of staff. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) identified that senior leaders believe that up to a third of pupils did not engage with set work (Lucas *et al.*, 2020). Staff were especially concerned about the low engagement of pupils with ALN and those eligible for free school meals. Despite improved systems to monitor pupil engagement, precise evaluation of their engagement remained a challenge, with definitions of what constituted engagement varying between schools.

Sector summaries: Secondary schools

When all pupils returned to schools after Easter, restrictions continued to affect face-to-face teaching. For example, teachers were unable to move freely around classrooms and interaction with and between pupils was difficult as they had to wear masks. Extra-curricular activities and wider learning opportunities were very limited throughout the academic year, resulting in a less varied range of provision than usual. Despite the limitations, most pupils said that face-to-face teaching is more effective for them and they prefer learning in school.

When pupils returned in September, schools worked to establish the current level of their knowledge, skills and understanding without overwhelming them with tests. Frequent disruptions to schooling because of cases of the virus made this difficult. As the year progressed, staff became more skilled at assessing pupils' work online using a variety of methods, including recordings of spoken feedback and live written feedback. Overall, assessing pupils' progress and providing meaningful feedback from a distance continued to be a challenge.

Most schools had concerns about pupils' progress in basic literacy and numeracy skills, particularly their reading, extended writing and oracy skills, although they noted improvements in their digital skills. Overall, general gaps in pupils' learning correlated with gaps in provision. For instance, the lack of opportunities for group and paired work and pupils' reluctance to engage in verbal discussions online led to a deterioration in their oracy skills. Despite some common issues, 'gaps' in pupils' learning varied widely within and between schools. Pupils who did not engage well with online learning made less progress than those who did. These pupils were more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and therefore schools are particularly concerned about the growth in the divide between these pupils and those from more privileged backgrounds. The Education Policy Institute's 'Analysis paper: preliminary research findings on education recovery' published in April 2021 notes uncertainty around the exact nature of 'learning loss' for older pupils but 'found that schools with high levels of disadvantage experienced higher levels of learning loss than other schools, particularly in secondary' (Education Policy Institute, 2021b, p.3). In response to the 'gaps' they identified, many schools focused on specific skills, for example through whole-school reading approaches or numeracy intervention programmes for individual pupils. Some schools adopted an 'interested adult' approach, which involved a member of staff acting as a mentor to pupils who were experiencing difficulties.

Key stage 3 pupils were particularly affected by the pandemic. When pupils returned following the second lockdown, schools prioritised examination year groups, meaning that younger pupils often missed more schooling than older year groups. Year 8 pupils were particularly affected as they only experienced a few months in Year 7 before the pandemic. In most cases, when planning curricular provision under COVID-19 regulations, schools worked hard to ensure that key stage 4 and sixth form pupils had access to their usual range of subjects, including those requiring specialist facilities. As a result, younger pupils often experienced a far narrower curriculum and a more limited diet of stimulating tasks. They were often taught in one classroom and could not access specialist rooms or equipment. Practical subjects tended to focus on theory, so pupils missed out the usual range of activities such as cooking, singing, playing instruments or sports.

Approaches to online formative assessment

In Ysgol y Creuddyn, the mathematics department experimented with approaches to online formative assessment. During live teaching sessions, they used various pieces of software, such as virtual mini whiteboards, to test pupils' understanding of concepts and inform the next steps in teaching. They also used multiple choice diagnostic questioning to gauge pupils' understanding and identify misconceptions early on in teaching so that the misconceptions did not become embedded.

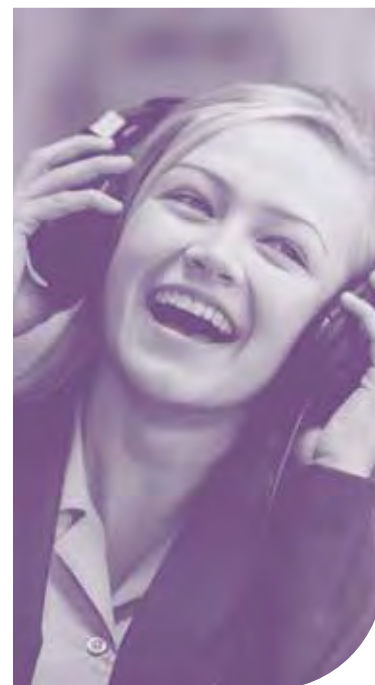
Sector summaries: Secondary schools

To create small 'bubbles', in many schools, younger pupils were taught in the same mixed ability class for all subjects and not in their usual sets or bands. Where teachers did not plan effectively enough to meet the needs of all pupils, work was sometimes too difficult for some and too easy for others. Under the arrangements for Centre Determined Grades, a majority of schools used supply teachers or cover supervisors for key stage 3 classes to release time for teachers to mark and administer assessments. This meant that these pupils continued to miss their usual lessons even when back in school. Schools report concerns about the concentration skills and readiness to learn of younger pupils.

In general, schools increased their intervention provision for pupils in need of additional support in September. They tried to maintain this provision when pupils were learning from home, but this proved challenging. During the second lockdown, schools increasingly invited pupils with ALN or who struggled to engage with schoolwork to attend school so that they could be supported by staff. When all pupils returned to school after Easter, teachers wanted to avoid going over work that some pupils had completed, but also recognised the need to support those pupils who did not engage well with learning from home. The Education Policy Institute's (2021c) report, 'Education Reopening and Catch-up Support Across the UK', provides information about the range of government programmes designed to help schools support these pupils, including those in Wales.

Progress with planning for the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales varies widely across the sector. Many schools paused their plans, others continued to develop their plans and those who already had well-developed plans continued to refine their provision. Many schools identified advantages brought about by the pandemic that could support the development of the Curriculum for Wales. Most leaders cited the improvement in staff and pupils' digital skills as a major benefit that could support the roll out of the new curriculum. They also welcomed the renewed focus on supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing. Many secondary schools have arranged INSET days about Curriculum for Wales. The focus of these has varied considerably from school to school.

Overall, schools have continued to prepare for ALN reform. In many cases, schools have worked with their partner primary schools to plan for the implementation and to provide professional learning, with some clusters of schools sharing an additional needs co-ordinator. Schools welcomed the phased introduction, although are concerned about having to run two systems simultaneously.



Sector summaries: Secondary schools

Welsh-medium schools faced particular challenges during the academic year. Nearly all Welsh-medium schools reported a decline in pupils' range of Welsh vocabulary and their use of spoken Welsh as they had limited opportunities to hear and practise the language. This was especially the case for pupils who do not speak Welsh at home. Many pupils lost confidence in their ability to speak Welsh and were therefore reluctant to speak Welsh when they returned to school. In response, many of these schools focused heavily on oracy skills when pupils returned. For example, one school held a speaking and listening week, another appointed a full-time language support teacher and another reintroduced drama lessons. Welsh-medium schools also experienced significant challenges when trying to recruit new staff.

In 2021, the number of entries for examinations for Year 10 pupils increased by 70% in comparison with 2020 (Qualifications Wales, 2021b). Year 10 entries for mathematics-numeracy more than doubled and entries for English literature increased substantially by 60%, despite the disruption to schooling over the course of the year. One of the reasons for this was that the assessment arrangements for English literature changed and many schools felt that pupils were able to sit the qualification in Year 10.

Leadership

Throughout the academic year, leaders in secondary schools demonstrated significant flexibility and agility in their response to the pandemic and the increased demands on their time and skills. In addition to their usual duties, from September 2020, senior leaders had to manage COVID-19 safe operational arrangements, the logistical planning of bubbles and outbreaks of the virus, plan for a variety of learning models and implement Test, Trace, Protect procedures. Pressure increased with the introduction of lateral flow testing and the requirements for Centre Determined Grades and associated appeals.

Staff showed high levels of commitment to their roles during the crisis. Despite this, they faced many challenges and headteachers were concerned about staff wellbeing. Nearly all schools offered wellbeing support to staff and were aware of the pressures on them, particularly in relation to Centre Determined Grades. Headteachers often prioritised pupil and staff wellbeing at the expense of their own, with many having minimal respite or holiday. In a survey for the National Academy of Educational Leadership (2021), three quarters of leaders who responded identified 'workload' as having the biggest impact on their wellbeing.

Successful communication has been a key aspect of managing the COVID-19 crisis. Leaders found that regular, clear communication with pupils, parents and staff was vital and most used a range of communication strategies, including increased use of social media. Many schools report improved relationships with parents, staff, and the local community. However, headteachers expressed frustration at the fact that they were given little or no warning of announcements about education and that guidance changed frequently, which posed communication challenges.

Online parental involvement group

Ysgol Dyffryn Aman had an online parental involvement programme. The programme focused on working with parents to identify strengths and gaps in provision and to plan improvement priorities to support parents. For example, workshops were held on topics such as the use of Hwb and online classrooms, pastoral support and wellbeing, support for pupils with ALN and attitudes to learning.

Sector summaries:

Secondary schools

A notable feature of the approach to leadership in light of the pandemic was an increased focus on reflection and re-evaluation of practices. The pandemic prompted leaders to think differently, question long-established ways of working and act swiftly to make changes. Despite the significant challenges of the pandemic, many leaders displayed a positive attitude to moving forward and saw the benefits of some of the changes forced upon them. For example, many plan to retain some changes such as online parents' evenings, staggered lunchtimes, use of digital platforms and one-way systems. They also found many benefits to holding virtual meetings, particularly where those meetings involved external partners. For example, it was easier to collaborate and learn from colleagues and other schools as they were able to meet virtually to share ideas. Digital platforms enabled schools to engage beyond regional and geographical boundaries and meet more frequently.

Governors continued with their work over the course of the year, although much of it had to be conducted virtually. In general, attendance at governing body meetings improved when schools held meetings online.

Leaders continued to use a range of processes to evaluate the work of the school but found it difficult to use some strategies under pandemic restrictions, for example lesson observations. During the year, most schools increased opportunities for pupils, staff and parents to share their views through surveys, polls and focus groups. Initially, these focused mainly on wellbeing, but their scope expanded to cover the quality of online provision. Schools' monitoring of pupil engagement and wellbeing improved over time, becoming more sophisticated and giving schools a more precise picture. However, accurate monitoring of engagement and wellbeing remained problematic while pupils were not in school.

As the autumn term progressed, a majority of schools returned tentatively to some forms of evaluation and monitoring of teaching and learning. This became more challenging when schools closed in December, but they adapted their methods to the online environment. For example, middle leaders joined online classes and observed live lessons. When pupils returned after Easter, a few schools carried out socially distanced class observations, but most focused their time on preparing for Centre Determined Grades. The nature, frequency and rigour of monitoring activities varied widely and, in some cases, systems were ad hoc. Overall, schools found it challenging to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning fully.

Monitoring the quality of provision

Cathays High School involved all teachers in the monitoring of provision. Within subject area teams, teachers looked at the books and online learning of sample group of pupils in different year groups. This enabled them to compare the quality of provision. Their findings were moderated by the senior leadership team.

Leaders also introduced one-to-one reviews of online learning. These involved looking at recorded lessons in subject teams. Leaders did not give judgements, but focused on having coaching conversations.

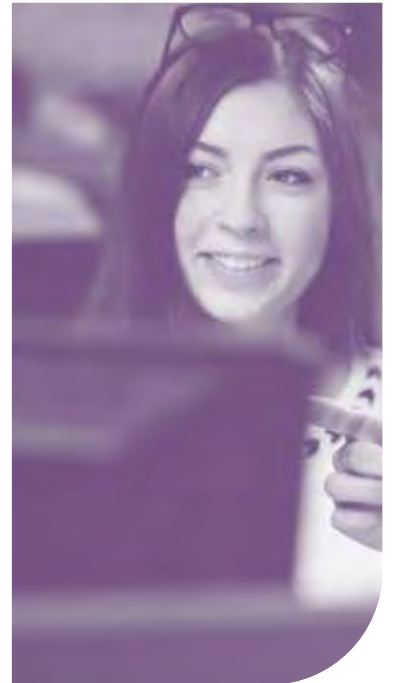
Sector summaries: Secondary schools

In the autumn term, professional learning programmes in secondary schools focused on improving staff's digital skills and preparing them to deliver distance or blended learning. As a result, there was a rapid improvement in these skills. During the late spring and summer terms, the focus moved to supporting staff with the Centre Determined Grades process. To varying degrees, schools also offered professional learning on ALN reform and the Curriculum for Wales.

Due to the move to digital platforms, all staff had access to a wide range of free professional learning opportunities at a time that suited them and without having to travel or be released from their usual duties. While this brought many benefits, it also resulted in a significant increase in the volume of activities. In general, schools had not fully evaluated the impact of all the professional learning taking place and in some cases the programme lacked strategic direction.

Most school leaders identified that their schools had moved forward in some ways and backwards in others. For example, there has been significant progress in pupils' and staff's digital skills and their schools' digital infrastructure. On the other hand, established, effective ways of working, such as whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy, had been diluted during the pandemic and may take a long time to re-establish.

Leaders appreciated the grant funding that schools received. Recruit, recover, raise standards: the accelerated learning programme (RRRS) funding was generally spent on additional provision for examination year groups, particularly in the core subjects, and support for literacy and numeracy skills. They used other grants to pay for additional teaching and support staff and to offset the cost of necessary adaptations, such as increased cleaning. How the RRRS grant and other catch-up grants were used by schools and colleges to support post-16 learners is explored in our [thematic report](#) (Estyn, 2021n). Much of the funding given to schools was time-limited so it proved difficult for leaders to make any sustainable changes or staff appointments. In addition, all grants had different conditions and different expectations. Grant funding often arrived late in the financial year, which made it challenging to spend the money before the next financial year began. It also proved difficult to recruit additional staff at short notice, particularly in certain subject areas and in Welsh-medium schools.



Context

In January 2021, there were 23 all-age schools in Wales. This is one more than in January 2020. The number of pupils in all-age schools has increased from 20,700 in January 2020 to 22,300 in January 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021 o).

This year, we engaged with all the all-age schools in Wales. During periods of lockdown, we made 22 engagement calls and spoke to headteachers and other school leaders. In addition, we conducted 12 visits to schools as part of our thematic survey and made pastoral calls to schools in a statutory category.

Discussions focused on the implications of the pandemic for the wellbeing of pupils and staff, how schools have supported teaching and learning during and after lockdown, and leadership throughout the pandemic. We also discussed preparations for the Curriculum for Wales where appropriate.

Sector summaries:

Maintained all-age schools

Wellbeing

During the pandemic, all schools placed pupil wellbeing at the forefront of their work. Nearly all schools identified their vulnerable pupils early on and maintained regular contact with their families. Headteachers noted concerns about the effect of the pandemic on pupils' mental health, a view supported by the Welsh Youth Parliament (2020).

After both national lockdowns, schools noted that pupils were happy to be back at school, although they required more emotional and mental support than before the pandemic. Schools made more staff available to offer additional support for vulnerable pupils and worked well with external agencies to ensure suitable provision for them. Schools experienced an increase in the number of child protection referrals, many of which have arisen due to their domestic situations.

Transition arrangements for pupils with special educational needs from Year 6 to Year 7 worked well and schools provided support according to pupils' needs throughout the lockdown and period of re-opening. For other pupils, transition within the school was generally effective because of the holistic view of pupils and their families that all-age schools often have. For pupils who transfer from partner primary schools, all-age schools developed programmes to provide experiences of life in their new school, for example virtual tours and live sessions with teachers.



Provision for more able and talented pupils

At Ysgol Idris Davies, provision for more able and talented (MAT) pupils was aligned across the cluster and enhanced with the introduction of the 'Brilliant Club' Year 6 transition programme to develop a MAT network of Year 6 pupils across the cluster. This ensures that pupils have the same opportunities and that staff in all settings are able to support and challenge these pupils. Staff designed a thorough and detailed transition process and developed it to ensure that Year 6 pupils receive good support when they move into the secondary phase of Ysgol Idris Davies. This includes common additional learning needs (ALN) and safeguarding policies and procedures. The process ensures that all pupils quickly feel that they are part of Idris Davies School.

When schools re-opened fully to pupils after Easter, the wellbeing of pupils continued to be a priority. Wellbeing surveys helped to identify which pupils had become vulnerable since the start of the pandemic. Schools worked well with outside agencies to provide counselling and mental health services to support learners. Many schools continued to engage with parents once pupils returned to school as parents appreciated regular contact.

Sector summaries:

Maintained all-age schools

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

The pandemic delayed many initiatives but in general schools used this period to continue to develop their approach to teaching. All-age schools benefited from sharing good practice within their school, across phases and departments.

In the autumn term, schools continued to develop distance learning and adapt their teaching strategies to embrace a more blended approach for when pupils had to spend more time at home. Transition to distance learning was, therefore, easy when pupils had to work from home again during the second national lockdown.

Staff developed their information technology skills significantly during the year. A few schools preferred live streaming lessons when pupils were at home rather than asynchronous activities, especially for primary phase pupils. This allowed teachers to 'check in' with pupils and provide feedback in real time.

In some cases, schools reduced the amount of live input over time in response to parent and teacher feedback. For example, some limited the number of sessions per day, with an introduction and input from the teacher and time for pupils to complete tasks. A few schools delivered a full timetable of lessons during the most recent lockdown with a live element to each session.

Schools concentrated on evaluating how the literacy and numeracy skills of primary aged pupils were affected by the pandemic and remote learning. For secondary aged pupils, teachers focused more on achieving the right balance between introducing new work and revision.

Primary phase pupils were generally taught in their class as usual. Secondary aged pupils were organised into socially distanced bubbles and faced challenges in accessing practical subjects since movement around the school and classrooms was restricted.

A few schools have continued to develop their work on the Curriculum for Wales. For example, working together on the curriculum with partner schools became easier using technology.

Use of funding to provide literacy and numeracy intervention

Christ the Word Catholic School provided targeted intervention for literacy and numeracy by using Recruit, recover and raise standards (RRRS) funding to appoint two new teachers, one for primary and the other for secondary. They appointed an ex-primary headteacher to support Year 3 and Year 4 pupils in small groups and on individual basis. This helped to improve the literacy and numeracy of pupils in these groups and raised the self-esteem of vulnerable pupils. The school set standardised tests for all pupils to establish a baseline and compared outcomes with a pupil attitude survey outcomes to plan targeted interventions.

Sector summaries:

Maintained all-age schools

Planning together to ensure consistency

Ysgol Bro Idris is an all-age school that is situated on five different sites. The distance between the sites ranges from one mile to ten miles from the central secondary site. To ensure consistency and a common approach to the curriculum, staff on the primary sites worked together on their planning. During the pandemic, teachers planned the provision and adapted their curriculum together for their pupils whilst they were learning from home. They shared resources and worked on developing the same aspects of pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding.

Staff became more inventive in setting tasks that were possible at home with resources that were accessible to everyone. In primary phases, schools expanded outdoor learning, especially during the spring and summer terms, in part to mitigate for COVID-19 restrictions.

All-age schools maintained and even expanded curriculum choice for examination classes through distance learning in partnerships with other schools, for example sixth form Welsh-medium courses.

Leadership

School leaders demonstrated resilience and innovation in response to the pandemic. They responded to many changes to guidance and increasing demands for documentation and plans from local authorities and regional consortia over the year. They had little respite from work and at times were frustrated by the short notice of changes. Despite the challenges, headteachers supported each other well through local and national networks.

In all-age schools, the pandemic increased a sense of togetherness across the school. Staff worked across all phases and this created a deeper sense of understanding for one another's work and of being one all-age school. Throughout the pandemic, headteachers prioritised the wellbeing of all staff. Most leaders ensured regular contact with staff and many provided opportunities for staff to socialise with regular catchups. They supported teachers and teaching assistants to adapt their ways of working considerably during the pandemic. This included responding swiftly to extra guidance as it emerged and coping with the pressures of social distancing and hygiene, including wearing personal protective equipment, when working with the most vulnerable pupils.

Planning for the Curriculum for Wales

At Ysgol Llanhari, teachers use creative methods of planning the Year 5 to 8 curriculum to offer learning experiences that meet the requirements of all pupils. They consider the principles and purposes of the Curriculum for Wales during their design and planning. The secondary department works effectively with the primary department to develop experiences and a continuum of learning through joint lesson planning. Through detailed planning, staff provide pupils with a broad range of experiences, and develop pupils' literacy, numeracy, and digital skills well through high quality teaching and learning experiences. They consider pupils' aspirations and interests as well as contemporary welfare topics that affect young people's behaviours. For example, the focus on 'the right to be happy' enabled pupils to develop their understanding of body language, emotions and thinking.

Sector summaries: Maintained all-age schools

Professional learning in all-age schools was tailored to meet staff needs. School leaders provided training for all teaching staff, including weekly professional learning sessions to develop distance learning. They offered training and development opportunities for key staff who support vulnerable learners. Many benefited from the professional learning for wellbeing offer from the local authority and regional consortium. Leaders believe that professional learning during the pandemic has led to staff having a more positive attitude towards personal development.

During the last year, leaders adapted their means of communicating with the school community. This was enhanced by an increased confidence in using digital technology. Many schools found that online parents' evenings were more efficient and private for parents and staff and decided to continue these online in the future.

Schools adapted their plans for monitoring and evaluating their work and reduced activities significantly. They resumed these activities gradually and carefully after lockdown and, in some cases, found alternative ways to evaluate the work of the school, for example scrutinising pupils' work through an online platform.

Schools targeted the RRRS funding to improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills and support Year 11 and Year 13 pupils with their coursework and assessments. This included extending teachers' hours, employing learning support assistants to run literacy and numeracy interventions, and using youth workers to provide disengaged pupils with support sessions during school hours and after-school activities.





Context

In January 2021, there were 40 maintained special schools in Wales that provide education for just over 5,200 pupils (Welsh Government, 2021o). There are two local authorities without a special school. Many special schools provide education for children from 3-19 years.

As part of our engagement work with the sector, we contacted each maintained special school at least once and visited a very few schools. Discussions with headteachers and senior leaders, held remotely, focused on the implications of the pandemic for the wellbeing of pupils and staff, how schools have supported teaching and learning, and leadership throughout the pandemic. We also discussed preparations for the Curriculum for Wales where appropriate.

Sector summaries:

Maintained special schools

Wellbeing

Over the year, the wellbeing of many pupils remained good overall, despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic. School leaders prioritised pupil wellbeing, and, in many cases, the support they provided helped pupils to be more resilient than might have been expected. Many pupils adapted readily to different ways of working. However, in some cases, pupils struggled without the structure and routine they were used to in their normal learning environments. Leaders felt that it was too early to evaluate the long-term impact on pupil wellbeing.

Over time, schools strengthened how they recorded and monitored pupils' wellbeing. They identified key staff to engage with families consistently and regularly. This included phone calls, online meetings, and visits to families, where appropriate. Effective internal communication enabled senior leaders to maintain an oversight of pupil wellbeing and liaise with other agencies when necessary.

The support of school nurses

School nurses at Ysgol Crug Glas have continued to provide a much-valued service to parents as they cared for their children at home. Regular contact with families was made using online platforms where parents were able to see nurses and talk through their concerns. The nurses were able to advise parents and, where appropriate, liaise with other health professionals on behalf of pupils and their parents. The nurses also undertook home visits. In several cases, their input prevented issues from being escalated.

Schools developed a range of assessments, approaches, and interventions to promote pupils' wellbeing. These included trauma informed approaches, developing resilience, and using staff skills in areas such as counselling and mentoring. These were particularly relevant as access to specialist services varied considerably across Wales. A few leaders note that results of wellbeing surveys and their own observations indicate an increased level of anxiety in pupils and a deterioration in pupils' attitudes to their own confidence and self-esteem.

Assessing pupils' wellbeing and encouraging them to express their emotions

At Maesgwyn School, the curriculum has been adapted to consider the results of an assessment of pupils' wellbeing. This revealed that pupils were generally more fearful. The school has adapted routines, modified its curriculum, and increased the number of staff to respond specifically to pupils' wellbeing needs, including twice daily 'regulation and reflection time' with form tutors. Each day, staff used a different approach to support pupils' wellbeing and encouraged them to express their emotions. Pupils set daily and weekly wellbeing targets on 'Manifesto Monday', 'Chill out Tuesday' and 'Wellness Wednesday' provided opportunities for pupils to relax together through activities such as yoga or mindfulness sessions. 'Think about it Thursday' allowed pupils to consider how they might respond to different scenarios and 'Friday Feeling' was a positive way to end the school week.

Sector summaries:

Maintained special schools

All leaders welcomed the re-opening of schools. Pupils and staff responded well. For example, one headteacher noted that younger pupils were 'overjoyed' at returning to school. Pupils returned to school on a phased basis that sometimes included part-time attendance or later start and earlier finish times. These approaches helped staff to establish a richer understanding of pupils' needs. Over time, the overall attendance of pupils improved, although separate national level attendance data for special schools is not available.

Multi-disciplinary meetings between representatives from the school, social care and health services continued throughout the pandemic to support pupils' identified needs.

Many leaders were concerned at the slow pace and limited extent of the return of face-to-face working from colleagues in several partner agencies. Overall, there were inconsistencies within and between local authorities and local health boards. Support from allied health professionals and educational psychologists continued to be provided via online platforms through the spring and summer terms, and there was little change in how services operated since the first national lockdown period. Headteachers continued to express concern at the variation in how child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) deliver services across different health boards. This meant that pupils with the same needs received different levels of support depending on where they lived.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

The focus for teaching during lockdowns, and when pupils returned to school, was pupil wellbeing and encouraging engagement in interesting and meaningful learning activities.

Over the past year, schools have strengthened arrangements for delivering distance and blended learning, including developing staff skills. As contact and relationships with parents deepened, schools adapted their teaching approaches to meet the changing needs of pupils and their families.

Teaching consisted of a mixture of approaches based on a secure understanding of the needs of pupils. For example, many schools provided pupils with hard copies of workbooks and other activity materials according to parental preference. In addition, schools delivered live online lessons or sessions that brought classes together where this was appropriate. In general, special schools have adapted well to the challenges in ensuring that teaching approaches continue to meet the needs of pupils.

Sector summaries:

Maintained special schools

Staff provided creative videos or live sessions that explained to parents the purpose of activities, including exercise sessions that supported pupils' gross and fine motor skills. Some schools had daily, and sometimes twice-daily, catch ups with parents. The frequent communication between school and parents provided parents with the confidence to undertake activities at home with their child and schools were able to monitor the progress that pupils were making.

The extent to which pupils and families engaged in learning depended on many factors. In general, pupils with greater needs were less likely to engage regularly. A few schools reported that older, more able pupils did not always engage in blended or distance learning particularly well. Typically, these pupils struggled to adapt to the restrictions of lockdown and continued to socialise with friends in their communities. Established routines, such as rising early in the morning to attend school, were lost. Overall, it has proved more difficult to re-engage these pupils. A small but increased number of pupils returned with significantly more complex social and emotional needs, including a tendency to self-harm and having suicidal thoughts.

All schools have continued to assess pupil progress. Headteachers considered that, overall, many pupils responded well while learning at home. They engaged in learning activities, and some appreciated the relative isolation that working away from their classmates brought. For others, many schools reported that pupils' progress suffered, for example with their communication, numeracy, independence and social skills, and emotional wellbeing. In addition, some pupils returned to school with anxieties related to separation, fear of infection and perceived loss of friendship groups.

Maintaining pupils' and families' engagement in learning was much harder during the second national lockdown. Headteachers attributed this to parents juggling home schooling with work, caring and other family commitments. The lack of wider support services, including respite, added further pressure on families. These findings are echoed by those contained in Crew's (2020) 'Literature review on the impact of COVID-19 on families'. Schools responded appropriately where they could by offering increased hours for children to attend school.

There were appropriate systems in place to ensure the awarding of centre determined grades, which include liaising with other special and mainstream schools. Staff have been flexible and encouraging in supporting pupils to manage the workload and assessment regime as part of this process. For example, schools adjusted staff and pupils' timetables and ensured that staff had more time to support and guide pupils. This was particularly important in keeping pupils engaged in their work and reducing the anxieties that they may have felt.

Practical activities to engage pupils

Meadowbank School provided pupils with pots, seeds, and soil to grow sunflowers. In addition, the school provided guidance for parents on cooking, storytelling, and doing other practical activities with their children. The school was successful in securing a grant from a charitable foundation. These funds were used to provide various resources such as playdough, wooden jigsaws and playing cards.

Family engagement worker

The role of the family engagement officer at Ysgol Bryn Derw became increasingly important during national lockdowns. The engagement worker provided an alternative approach for parents and carers to communicate their support needs. The school used its Recruit, recover, raise standards (RRRS) grant funding to develop this role. The school benefited further from the contribution of a Barnardo's support worker who worked at the school for one day a week to support the work of the family engagement officer.

Sector summaries:

Maintained special schools

Overall, many leaders have continued to work with providers to secure appropriate destinations for school leavers. However, arrangements to support the effective transition of older pupils into further education and other destinations have proved challenging. Experiences that pupils would normally have had to familiarise themselves with, such as travel, people, courses and buildings, were not always in place. Overall, for pupils who made the transition in September 2020, there was no clear national picture of whether those pupils remain suitably engaged with their education and training.

Despite the pandemic, the philosophy and purposes of the Curriculum for Wales remained at the core of special schools' work. Most schools continued with their plans for designing and implementing the Curriculum for Wales. A few schools report that, due to the impact of the pandemic, they have not made the progress that they had planned.

Leadership

All leaders identified that staff in special schools have shown great resilience, ongoing commitment and flexibility. They reported an increase in team and community spirit and a strengthening of relationships over the year. However, they shared how staff have been anxious, frightened and physically and emotionally drained. Many headteachers recounted the traumatic experiences that COVID-19 outbreaks have had on their school communities.

The extent and impact of working through the pandemic and its effects on the emotional wellbeing of staff, pupils and their families may not be known for some time. This is potentially much greater for families, pupils and staff in maintained special schools, particularly as the education, care and support needs are generally greater than for other children and young people. As noted in an Equality and Human Rights Commission report (2020, p.28), 'Families with children who need support in education have faced particular difficulties accessing educational and other support during the period of school closures'. This finding is echoed by (Daniels *et al.*, 2020), quoted in the Wales Centre for Public Policy (2021, p.2), who note that, 'groups with additional needs, and pupils with difficult home environments have not always received adequate support'.

Staff confidence improved considerably with access to regular lateral flow tests and after receiving both doses of the vaccine. In general, those schools that provided intimate care were prioritised for vaccinations but the availability of vaccinations for special school staff varied across local authorities.

Leaders have faced considerable pressures in trying to meet day-to-day operational challenges over the course of the pandemic. These challenges were linked to ensuring pupil and staff safety, while providing on-site, remote, and blended learning to meet pupils' needs. Many headteachers identified the pressure caused by the constant need to adjust provision when pupils and staff self-isolate, and the frustration caused when guidance did not always cover the very specific circumstances of the sector.

A multi-disciplinary approach to person centred practice and developing the curriculum

Crownbridge School has developed a strong focus on person-centred planning with an emphasis on enhancing pupils' emotional, physical, and social wellbeing. Planning for the curriculum includes advice and guidance from nurses, therapists, and specialist teachers.

Sector summaries:

Maintained special schools

Despite these challenges, many headteachers continued to prepare their schools for the implementation of additional learning needs (ALN) and curriculum reform. Generally, most welcome the individualised approaches of the reforms. They are ready to develop individual development plans and person-centred planning is well established in their provision and annual review processes. As a result, most headteachers are in a strong position for ALN reform. However, a few expressed disappointment that the ALN guidance is directed mainly at mainstream schools with limited regard for developing relevant targets for pupils in the special schools sector. Around a fifth of schools identified that they had integrated the person-centred planning model and their curriculum planning processes.

Many leaders identified the positive developments that have emerged from adapted ways of working and noted that they intend to incorporate these within their future ways of working. These developments include:

- the use of digital technology to support pupils learning on-site as well as from home
- the use of online apps and platforms to support communication between school and parents
- the use of online platforms to support meetings
- improvements to the curriculum to extend the provision of on-site outdoor learning

Throughout the year, leaders have continued with quality assuring teaching and the curriculum in some measure. This included regular discussions with staff, reviewing planning and dropping into virtual lessons. In the summer term, schools started to use the range of quality assurance arrangements that were in place before the pandemic. In a very few schools, observations of lessons resumed.

Many leaders prioritised professional learning opportunities to develop the ability of staff to support the mental health and social and emotional needs of pupils. This included providing staff with a deeper understanding of adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed practices. At Ysgol Rhyd y Gors and Portfield School, for example, all staff were trained in trauma-informed practices, and a few were awarded level 5 diplomas. In many schools, leaders were able to build on successful existing approaches such as further developing a sensory curriculum that includes reflexology and massage.

Leaders in a few schools continued to provide opportunities for staff to develop their digital technology skills throughout the year, to support the school's provision for remote and blended learning. Increasingly, these focused on meeting the individual needs of staff and pupils as opposed to whole-school approaches. Nearly all headteachers confirmed that professional learning continued to support the school to consolidate its preparation for ALN reform and the Curriculum for Wales.

Planning for curriculum and ALN reform

Trinity Fields School and Resource Centre and Ysgol Pendalar have continued with their plans for curriculum reform and those required by the new ALN legislation. They have made stronger connections between the two. For example, their approaches to curriculum design and planning are based on the aspirations and expected outcomes that they have for pupils as they progress through the school.

Most leaders appreciated the strong support they had received from colleagues in the local authority throughout the period of the pandemic. Senior officers provided practical advice and guidance as well as personal support for school leaders. In a few schools, leaders benefited from support from their regional consortium, particularly where officers had strong knowledge and understanding of the specialist needs of pupils attending the school.

Sector summaries:

Maintained special schools

Nearly all schools embraced the flexibility and increased opportunities for personalised professional learning presented by online programmes. At Heronsbridge School, for example, leaders moved much of the mandatory professional learning online, providing additional time for staff to meet to evaluate the outcomes of their curriculum development work. Many leaders noted the benefits of online learning for staff wellbeing in enabling them to access this more flexibly and to follow up areas of personal interest.

A peer review approach

Ysgol Tir Morfa received a grant from the regional consortium to collaborate with other schools in a peer-to-peer review project looking at assessment strategies for the new curriculum. This included looking at personalised assessments, the use of IDP targets and their use of an online commercial assessment framework.



Context

In January 2021, there were 36 independent special schools in Wales. This figure is the same as in January 2020. Independent special schools educate pupils from 3 to 19 years of age who have a wide range of special educational needs (SEN), including autistic spectrum condition (ASC) and social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Many of the schools are small and pupils usually live in children's homes attached to the schools. A minority of these schools also educate day pupils or pupils who live in children's homes not attached to the school. A minority of all independent special schools educate day pupils only. Independent special schools are the second largest group of providers for pupils educated other than at school (EOTAS) after PRUs. Nearly all placements at independent special schools are funded by local authorities in Wales or England.

As part of our engagement work with this sector, we contacted all independent special schools at least twice and made a very few visits. The focus for each discussion with leaders was the wellbeing of pupils, staff and senior leaders, how schools were supporting teaching and promoting learning, implications for the schools in the future, and leadership throughout the pandemic.

Sector summaries:

Independent special schools

Compliance with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003

In independent schools, we usually inspect the extent to which the school complies with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. This year, due to restrictions to on-site visits, we have not assessed compliance with the regulations. In 2019-2020, six of the independent special schools inspected or visited as part of the monitoring process failed to comply with at least one of the standards.

This year, the Welsh Government formally requested us to undertake one unannounced focused inspection under section 160 of the Education Act 2002 (Great Britain, 2002). The inspection had a particular focus on standard 3 and standard 1 of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003, which relate to the welfare, health and safety of pupils and the quality of education provided (National Assembly for Wales, 2003).

At the time of the focused inspection, the school met the requirements for standard 3 but failed to meet the regulatory requirements for standard 1.

We will monitor all of these schools as part of the annual monitoring process to ensure that they make the necessary improvements to maintain registration.

Wellbeing

Most schools remained open throughout the pandemic. In schools that provide education for children living in children's homes attached to the school, nearly all continued to provide education on-site throughout the pandemic. In contrast, where schools provide education for day pupils, the proportion of these pupils attending daily varied significantly over the year, according to the space available on-site and the school's interpretation of Welsh Government guidance.

Leaders ensured that nearly all pupils continued to receive the therapeutic support they were entitled to over the past year. They reported that multi-agency working had continued remotely throughout the year, with many leaders describing how the use of online platforms had helped to improve the attendance of participants at review and progress meetings.

In schools that employ their own in-house therapists, face-to-face therapeutic support generally resumed on-site in the autumn. In schools that use external staff and consultants, this was generally provided online for much of the year, with face-to-face support resuming gradually during the spring term. A few leaders had reservations about the suitability of this model for all pupils, describing how a few pupils chose to opt out rather than participate in the session.

Many leaders of schools that provide for day pupils noted that the use of online platforms throughout the pandemic had helped to improve communication and relationships with parents.

Extended pastoral care

At Catch22, a day school for primary-aged pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, the headteacher described how the school had extended the pastoral care it provides since the start of the pandemic. She described how all parents have an out-of-hours contact number, to reach either her or the school's pastoral lead, so that they can raise any concerns when they have these, rather than waiting for the next day. The school has also introduced a home-school book for pupils who want one, so that staff are able to share with parents the 'extraordinary progress' she feels some pupils are making. In addition to the half-termly progress reports sent home to parents, the headteacher described how the school had also introduced half-termly parents' evenings online. These initiatives are enabling parents to provide more regular and timely feedback to the school.

Sector summaries:

Independent special schools

In general, where schools provided education on-site for their pupils throughout this period, pupils' wellbeing was good, and they remained calm and settled. The trend observed at the start of lockdown, of fewer cases of challenging behaviour, had continued.

The mental health of some pupils was a concern due to a loss of routine, changes made to their usual programme of learning, and restricted access to the community or to off-site providers. Similarly, a few pupils in residential schools struggled when having only virtual or restricted face-to-face contact with their family for extended periods, particularly at Christmas. In a few day-schools, where pupils had been learning at home for much of the spring term, pupils' anxieties contributed to a deterioration in their behaviour following the full return to school after Easter.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Nearly all leaders continued to adjust arrangements for teaching and learning to take account of changing circumstances throughout the year. In nearly all cases, leaders reviewed teaching space in the school to lessen the numbers in each class and reduce the movement of staff and pupils around the school. In residential schools attached to children's homes, face-to-face teaching continued for most of the year. Where schools cater for day pupils in addition to residential pupils, leaders made significant changes to prevent the risk of infection across groups. For example, they introduced new timetabling arrangements from January to reduce the overall number of pupils on-site at any one time, including implementing remote or blended learning to support pupils attending either part-time or learning at home.

In general, pupils responded well to health and safety measures on-site. However, many found online and remote learning challenging because of the nature of their educational needs, their social vulnerability and previous disengagement from learning. A few leaders of residential schools described the difficulties in providing online teaching for pupils because of protocols around internet access in the care homes.

Teaching staff focused on promoting pupil wellbeing when planning activities and assessing progress. For example, they strengthened the provision for personal and social education, as well as physical exercise and mindfulness. Lessons routinely addressed issues associated with pupils' social and emotional wellbeing, through activities such as circle time or social skills sessions.

In the spring term, pupils' access to the local community and off-site providers for exercise, vocational activities and therapeutic provision was reduced considerably. To limit the impact of this, many staff developed the use of the immediate outdoor environment to provide pupils with opportunities to exercise and relax. Staff also strived to re-create opportunities for vocational learning and work experience on-site. Overall, however, these restrictions had a negative impact on the development of pupils' social, communication and independence skills, and on opportunities to prepare pupils for transition to their next steps in learning.

Ensuring secure online learning

At The Branas School, a residential school for pupils with complex social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, the school found it particularly challenging to ensure that pupils accessed their learning safely from the children's homes via a secure internet connection. During previous lockdowns, the school had not been able to provide online learning because the homes lacked internet access. To address this issue, the school provided the pupils with devices and purchased mobile hubs for each home. The school set up online learning accounts for the pupils and topped up the pay-as-you-go hubs during the period of blended learning. Once all pupils returned on a full-time basis, the homes met this cost, allowing the pupils to have monitored internet access to complete their homework in the homes. The school continues to monitor pupils' internet use.

Sector summaries:

Independent special schools

In a few cases, there was a disruptive impact on pupils' wellbeing and progress in learning when care homes had to close following guidance from Public Health Wales. In these instances, the length of time pupils had to self-isolate in the homes proved a challenge for teachers and leaders to maintain continuity of teaching and learning.

Leadership

Nearly all leaders shared the personal pressures they faced over the last year in seeking to ensure the safety and wellbeing of pupils and staff. Many were concerned for the welfare of their staff, citing anxiety and high rates of absence due to staff having to self-isolate during the autumn and spring terms. In the summer term, staff confidence and attendance improved, due largely to the vaccination programme and the availability of regular testing.

A few leaders of residential schools found the burden placed on them by authorities requesting additional information and updates about the progress and wellbeing of pupils difficult. Despite these challenges, many leaders' experience of the pandemic enabled them to review and make positive changes to their provision. In the summer term in particular, leaders identified a range of additional or planned innovations which demonstrated how the school had moved beyond reacting to the operational challenges presented by the pandemic and was moving forward with its longer-term improvement priorities. In nearly all cases, their experiences during the pandemic helped staff to re-evaluate what is important. As a result, they made changes to the nature of the curriculum, for example, or the therapeutic model deployed by the school.

The majority of leaders continued to provide staff with professional learning opportunities linked to the school's improvement priorities and the needs of pupils. This included training around trauma-informed practice, applied behaviour analysis, autism awareness, attachment disorder, and dyslexia awareness. The development of online training had been particularly beneficial in enabling the majority of schools to develop more personalised programmes of professional learning.

Although it is not a requirement for independent schools, leaders in around half of schools described how they were reviewing their curriculum to align this more closely with the Curriculum for Wales in maintained schools. Many leaders also confirmed that they are at the early stages of understanding and implementing ALN reform. They described the difficulties they have experienced in accessing additional support from local authority and regional officers, because of confusion around their independent status.

Many leaders were challenged by the volume of guidance that they were expected to process at short notice with no clear highlighting of what might have changed between different versions. In addition, in residential schools in particular, there were difficulties caused by differences in guidance between England and Wales, particularly in terms of how this affected communication with parents who live in England.

Professional learning to support pupil needs

Gwenllian Education Centre is a school for complex needs that include communication difficulties associated with ASC. Over the last 12 months, leaders have reviewed its performance management and professional learning provision so that these two processes relate better to the school's expectations, objectives and requirements. All school staff now access a registered behavioural technician (RBT) training course. On completion of the training, staff receive ongoing supervision from the school's behaviour analyst. This involves direct training and support for staff in relation to specific pupils that the staff are directly engaged with and ongoing monitoring of their performance. The monitoring is undertaken against an assessment tool that is specific to the RBT role, and direct feedback and support are linked to this. Additional personalised targets are set to support the wider professional development of staff, which address improvement priorities highlighted through the school's self-evaluation.

Section 1

Sector summaries: Independent mainstream schools

Context

In January 2021, there were 37 independent mainstream schools in Wales. This figure is one fewer than in January 2020.

This year, as part of our programme of engagement work with the sector, we contacted all schools remotely at least once and made a very few engagement visits. Our discussions with headteachers and senior leaders focused on the wellbeing of pupils and staff, how schools have supported learning, and leadership throughout the pandemic.

This report is based discussions during these remote meetings with headteachers and senior leaders and a very few engagements visits.

Sector summaries:

Independent mainstream schools

Compliance with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003

In independent schools, we inspect the extent to which the school complies with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003.

This year, the Welsh Government formally requested us to undertake three announced focused inspections under section 160 of the Education Act 2002 (Great Britain, 2002). The inspections had a particular focus on standard 3 of the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003, which relates to the welfare, health and safety of pupils (National Assembly for Wales, 2003).

At the time of the focused inspections, one school met the requirements for this standard. However, two schools did not meet the regulatory requirements for this standard fully and, in addition, one school failed to meet the requirements for standard 6 relating to the provision of information and standard 7 relating to the handling of complaints.

We will engage with these schools and monitor whether they make the required improvements to maintain registration.

Wellbeing

In the autumn term, schools maintained a strong focus on promoting the wellbeing of pupils and staff. Around one in ten schools identified that a very few pupils or staff did not attend school as they were shielding themselves or members of their family. Around a fifth of schools reported an increase in safeguarding concerns. The issues reported by pupils included domestic violence, anxiety and concerns about body image. Schools have responded thoughtfully. For instance, one school arranged for each year group bubble to meet with the designated safeguarding person to address any concerns they had.

In the spring term, the wellbeing focus shifted to ensuring that all pupils were 'visible'. For example, leaders said that they maintained contact with learners through regular phone calls, social media and online platforms, or through visits to the family home. There was an upward trend in the number of pupils who were exhibiting concerns such as eating disorders, gaming addiction, or anxiety relating to the virus. In a few schools, leaders invited small groups of pupils to come into school to receive additional support and attend the live lessons that their teachers were streaming to others. One school established a dedicated helpline for pupils needing specific support. In addition, teachers monitored pupils' engagement in online lessons, submission of work and attendance at 'check in' sessions. One headteacher reported that, in general, parents monitored the involvement of younger pupils and helped facilitate the learning process. If staff had concerns about the engagement of older pupils, the school contacted parents to reinforce expectations and discuss possible wellbeing issues.

Addressing pupil wellbeing

At Cardiff Muslim School, there has been a focus in the school on addressing the wellbeing of staff and pupils. There is a feelings box in each class and regular assemblies on achieving happiness. Each child has been given a 'happiness journal', which they write in every day, and staff address any concerns.

Sector summaries:

Independent mainstream schools

In the summer term, as staff and pupils returned to school, a few pupils were anxious about their return, and a very few required support from services, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) or their general practitioner. In general, pupils were pleased to be able to return to school. A few teachers identified that many pupils have found the level of work that would be usual at this time of year to be challenging. A few teachers noted a range of 'socialisation' issues, resulting to some extent from long periods away from school and isolation. These included more frequent friendship issues and some degree of conflict among younger pupils who appeared to have 'forgotten how to play together'.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

When schools re-opened in September, while all leaders followed Welsh Government operational and learning guidance, a very few sought additional support, for example in relation to music and sport. Adaptations to school routines varied between schools. Around half of schools considered that no adaptations to the curriculum had been necessary. Where curriculum adaptations did occur, they included:

- changes to the personal and social education programme to include a greater focus on wellbeing
- the introduction of touch typing to the curriculum in response to an increase in online work
- more oral work in modern foreign languages when pupils returned to school
- an increased emphasis on learning outdoors

Nearly all teachers adapted their practice and teaching strategies during the pandemic to meet pupils' needs and the difficulties of learning online. There was strong development in staff's ICT skills. Teachers had to be more creative in the tasks that they set for pupils to complete, and leaders believe that this resulted in improved pupil engagement. However, the most significant impact on the quality of provision was the reduction in the ability of staff to deliver more practical lessons, such as drama, art, music, physical education, and practical aspects of science.

Many schools recognised early on that it was unlikely that public examinations would take place as normal this year. Nevertheless, they recognised their responsibility to help pupils to prepare for the next stage of education. Leaders believed that this included some form of 'higher-stake exam' to help pupils to develop the necessary skills and confidence to take exams in the future. These schools established policies and approaches to replicate typical examination conditions, as far as possible, to help determine grades in each subject.

Although schools adopted slightly different approaches to help determine grades, they were approved by the relevant English and Welsh examination boards. These arrangements commonly included a mixture of assessments and ongoing coursework that helped to create a portfolio of evidence to support secure grades.

Ensuring pupils are 'visible'

During the second national lockdown, pupils at Rougemont School accessed four lessons each day, including a pastoral session. This allowed staff to monitor pupils' engagement with learning on four occasions each day in addition to their assessment of pupils' work.

In the preparatory school, each morning, there were 'welcome' videos or live calls that set out the schedule for the day. This session involved celebrations of pupils' birthdays or other special events. Similarly, at lunchtime, staff and pupils would 'share a song', and there was an assembly at the end of the afternoon.

In the senior section of the school there were daily pastoral check-in sessions of between 45-60 minutes where staff provided guidance and talked to pupils about a range of matters and generally checked on pupils' wellbeing. Subject leaders used a tracking system to assess pupils' engagement fortnightly using a ten-point scale. Pastoral leaders then analysed the information to help identify where the form teacher should contact the parents of pupils who might require extra encouragement or support.

Checking pupil wellbeing

OneSchool Global in Newtown used a 'Feel Good Indicator' to monitor wellbeing. Pupils regularly self-evaluated on a 1-10 scale. For those pupils scoring themselves below 5, staff followed up and liaised with parents to provide necessary support.

Sector summaries:

Independent mainstream schools

Co-curricular programmes, which are activities provided outside of the normal daily timetable, are usually a strength in this sector. However, many schools adjusted their co-curricular programme in response to the pandemic. These changes include around a fifth of schools cancelling all co-curricular activities, and many reducing the amount of sport provided. The range of weekend activities for boarders has also reduced, along with sporting fixtures. Leaders in one school reported that one of the reasons parents chose their school was the strength of the sporting provision. Due to the restrictions, pupils were unable to participate in the usual wide range of sporting activities. However, in a few schools, extra-curricular activities continued online to retain the sense of being part of the school community, especially for pupils who have returned to their homes abroad.

In the spring term, nearly all schools had a smooth return to online learning, with staff applying lessons they had learnt in the previous lockdown. These included reducing the length of lessons to allow time for teachers and pupils to 'move' between activities, offering more opportunities for independent work and incorporating time 'offline' into the school week.

Developing a distance learning curriculum programme

St Clare's is part of an international group of schools and used the knowledge and experience of other schools that had experienced the pandemic to help inform their work. Leaders produced a distance learning curriculum programme that was shared with all families.

This booklet contained a message from the headteacher as well as relevant information regarding:

Academic systems

- The structure of a distance learning week
- Timetables for each stage of the school
- Information about the technology platforms being used
- Guidance relating to screen time
- Expectations for registration, marking and assessment and homework

Pastoral systems

- Reward systems
- The school counsellor
- The broader curriculum

Communication procedures

- How to keep in touch
- Expectations – of the school, pupils and families
- Safeguarding guidance for working online

In the summer term, nearly all pupils returned to school and continued with the planned curriculum.

Preparing for and completing a virtual camp out

Myddelton College adjusted its learning through the outdoors programme to include sessions where pupils prepared for and completed a virtual camp out. This included preparing a menu, packing a virtual or actual rucksack, deciding where to place the tent and explaining the reasons for their choice.

The programme also included a webinar with a motivational speaker who spoke to the full school community about adapting to the 'new normal' in education and the importance of showing resilience and the ability to adapt to different challenges. Pupils have engaged with the online programme enthusiastically.

Sector summaries:

Independent mainstream schools

Overseas pupils

Maintaining continuity of learning for overseas boarders presented significant challenges. This was particularly the case regarding quarantine requirements for pupils returning to the United Kingdom, but also providing accommodation and a programme of activities for those who remained here throughout the year. Schools with overseas boarders have implemented a range of strategies, including adaptations to the school day and extension activities to support these pupils when in quarantine.

A few overseas boarders did not return to school to resume their education in September 2020 due to concerns about the level of COVID-19 infections in the United Kingdom. In some cases, these pupils left the school, but continued to access online learning throughout the year. Where pupils returned home before Christmas, they began the next term in quarantine in their boarding houses but were able to access all learning online.

During the spring term 2021, one school provided a full timetable of live lessons but made several adaptations to the timetable, such as bringing forward some afternoon lessons to lunchtime to make it more convenient for international students who remained at home in different time zones. Staff also recorded or pre-recorded some lessons so that pupils could access this material and undertake work when most convenient for them.

Despite these adaptations and initiatives, leaders recognised that pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) have been disadvantaged to some degree. For example, some of these pupils did not always understand everything during streamed lessons and were often reluctant to ask for clarification or help. When pupils are actually in class, it is easier for teachers to appreciate misunderstandings and misconceptions as part of the ongoing monitoring of their work.

In a few cases, virtually all overseas pupils remained in boarding accommodation throughout the year, including the Christmas and Easter breaks, rather than returning to their home countries.

Leadership

Throughout the year, around half of leaders identified concerns about the impact on staff of evolving work practices. Staff were on duty constantly to ensure that pupils were safe, and the move to online provision and the increased use of electronic communication meant that parents and pupils regularly communicated with staff outside of normal school hours. Leaders emphasised that it had been critical to monitor closely the wellbeing of all staff and to support individuals to 'keep things in perspective' in what has been an intense period of activity. In response to these concerns, one school appointed a staff wellbeing officer, and another planned for a staff wellbeing week.

Good communication with parents was vital. Around three quarters of schools conducted surveys of parents and around a quarter also surveyed their pupils or staff. This feedback was used to refine provision throughout the pandemic.

Provision for overseas pupils

Since September 2020, the Haberdashers' Monmouth Schools have provided holiday camps for overseas boarders during the Christmas, Easter and half-term holidays. The schools contracted an outside agency to organise these camps, which were based at the school and used the school and local facilities to provide a range of experiences. During this time, the pupils were able to take part in an array of activities ranging from roller skating to playing golf, from knitting to festive paper-cutting, as well as receiving study support. This enabled these pupils to remain in the United Kingdom rather than facing the potential risks and quarantine requirements associated with travel when returning to their home countries.

Sector summaries: Independent mainstream schools

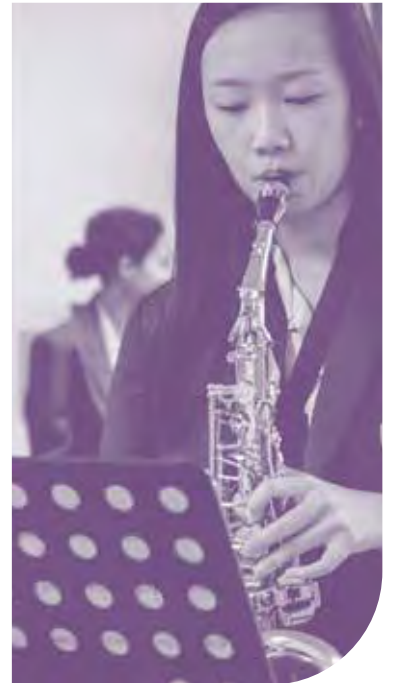
Quality assurance activities were difficult to carry out with restrictions in place. Also, leaders did not wish to add to staff pressure. In the many cases where quality assurance did take place, this led to further improvements and adaptations including:

- developing the use of online provision to meet pupils' individual needs more closely
- supporting individual teachers to ensure consistency in provision
- restructuring lessons to reduce the amount of 'teacher talk'
- more live input for younger pupils
- combining online learning with other activities to reduce screen time

When pupils returned in September and again after Easter, many schools completed assessments for all pupils to identify possible learning gaps and where catch-up activities and individual support was required. Generally, leaders did not consider that there were significant gaps in pupils' learning during lockdown due to their provision and pupils' engagement. Leaders recognised that many pupils with additional learning needs, such as dyslexia, had fallen further behind, echoing research from the OECD (2020b, p.2) that identified pupils with special educational needs as one of the groups that are 'likely to lose the most in terms of educational outcomes'; and 'risk falling further behind' during the pandemic. In addition, younger pupils tended to exhibit a decrease in their attention span or a reduction in fine motor skills.

In a few cases, pupils were further ahead than expected in certain aspects of learning, as teachers had gained teaching time from other activities, such as sports days or concerts.

Many schools saw an increase in professional learning, including accessing external provision and the internal exchange of good practice. The two main areas of focus were staff and pupil wellbeing, and use of ICT. For example, in two schools, staff training days in September placed an emphasis on supporting pupils' wellbeing, with a focus on the pressures children might feel from home and how they might adapt on their return to school. A few schools established information communication champions, enabling staff to develop their skills in using information technology more effectively to support learning. In other schools, proprietors invested in hardware for staff and pupils, supported by training. There was a strong focus on sharing good practice internally and staff were willing to ask questions and ask for support as they realised that everyone was in the same position and had similar concerns.



Section 1

Sector summaries: Independent specialist colleges

Context

In January 2021, there were seven registered independent specialist colleges in Wales. This is the same as in January 2020. These colleges educate around 200 learners aged 16 years and over. The colleges provide for a diverse range of learners' needs, including autistic spectrum condition, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and profound and multiple learning difficulties. In four of the colleges, many learners live in residential homes attached to the college.

As part of our engagement work with the sector, we contacted all independent specialist colleges remotely at least twice. The focus for each discussion with heads of education was the wellbeing of learners, staff and senior leaders, how colleges were supporting teaching and promoting learning, implications for the college in the future, and leadership throughout the pandemic.

Sector summaries:

Independent specialist colleges

Wellbeing

In all colleges, leaders made many adjustments throughout the year to promote the safety and physical wellbeing of learners. They implemented measures to mitigate the risk of infection, in line with relevant guidance from the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales. This included reviewing arrangements for social distancing, movement around the college campus, regular cleaning, and the wearing of personal protection equipment.

The colleges' therapeutic provision, in areas such as occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, continued to support learners throughout the year. By the summer term, this support had resumed on a face-to-face basis in all colleges. Where learners and their families had been isolating or shielding, therapists engaged remotely to support learners, their parents and their families. In general, multi disciplinary meetings and annual reviews continued online, with external specialist staff visiting only where necessary.

Generally, learner wellbeing remained strong throughout the year. In residential colleges, where learning continued on-site for most of the year, learners returned to college in September enthusiastic to learn. They attended and engaged well despite the many changes that they experienced over the year. Most learners responded positively to infection control measures. However, in three of the colleges with residential homes attached, the physical and emotional wellbeing of learners became a concern when they had to remain in the homes for extended periods, following cases of infection there.

Similarly, in four colleges, infection control measures restricted transition arrangements for new learners joining the college in September 2020. College staff had limited opportunities to visit learners' previous schools to assess their needs and abilities, and learners were unable to attend the college in advance to familiarise themselves with their new staff and surroundings. In two cases, these restrictions impacted negatively on the attendance and engagement of a few learners.

Sector summaries:

Independent specialist colleges

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

All leaders continued to adjust the colleges' usual arrangements for teaching and learning over the year, to take account of the changing context and to implement measures to reduce the risk of infection.

In the autumn and spring terms, adjustments focused on reviewing groupings of learners to reduce social contact across the college and to enable physical distancing in workshops and classrooms. In residential colleges that also educate day learners, for example, leaders made separate arrangements for day and residential learners. In colleges that cater for day learners, these changes included part-time models of attendance with provision for distance learning made for the days that learners were not on-site.

In three colleges, teachers' planning focused strongly on activities that address learners' wellbeing explicitly.

The teaching staff in all colleges adjusted their planning creatively to overcome restrictions. However, increased health and safety measures had a negative impact on the breadth of learning experiences available to learners. For example, the loss of access to off-site providers and the wider community limited their leisure and work experiences and opportunities to practise independence skills or access therapeutic provision. In addition, providing distance learning for this group of learners was particularly difficult. Some could not engage with online platforms meaningfully, while others required more specialised support to learn at home than was available to them in that setting.

All leaders confirmed that most learners were on track to achieve their accreditation outcomes. However, they acknowledged that extended periods of lockdown of the residential houses had considerable impact on the progress of learners. For example, restrictions limited their opportunities to develop their social, communication and independence skills. Leaders have significant concerns about the readiness of learners in the final year of their course to progress successfully to their next stage of life and learning. In one college, the head of education had received no information from local authorities about the proposed destinations of leavers by Easter, and so college staff were unable to plan meaningfully to support them.

A recovery curriculum focusing on health and wellbeing

Leaders at National Star in Wales – Mamhilad described how they implemented a recovery curriculum in the autumn term to ensure a greater focus on the health and wellbeing of learners. This included relaxation sessions at the end of each day and a focus on learners' health and emotions in the content and delivery of sessions. Leaders encouraged teaching staff to reduce the pressure on learners wherever they felt this to be beneficial, for example when reviewing learners' progress against their targets or completing the assessments of new learners.

Wellbeing breaks

At Coleg Elidyr, leaders described how staff planned wellbeing breaks within their teaching sessions. These activities included small animal therapy, aromatherapy, art, yoga, music and dance. Each learner's individual learning plan included a strong focus on their wellbeing and staff reviewed their progress in this area regularly. In addition, the college moved its 'student forum' meetings online to enable learners from different 'bubbles' across the college to provide their feedback and help shape different aspects of their learning experiences during the pandemic.

Sector summaries:

Independent specialist colleges

Leadership

The priorities of all leaders throughout the year were to ensure the wellbeing of staff and learners, and to maintain continuity and quality in the learning experiences they provided to learners. In four colleges, the impact of adjustments to the colleges' usual ways of working on staff wellbeing over the year was significant. In one residential college, for example, leaders referred to the demotivation of staff caused by the extended closure of the residential homes and the impact of this on the quality of learning experiences teaching staff could provide. In the spring and summer terms, the availability of testing and vaccination helped to improve staff confidence and wellbeing.

In four colleges, leaders felt considerable pressure from the volume of guidance they had to interpret over the year, and the challenges caused where operational guidance did not refer to the context of residential colleges. In particular, there were additional difficulties when guidance from different public bodies conflicted and created further uncertainty and anxiety among staff.

Generally, where colleges belong to wider organisations, leaders valued the support they received from colleagues in these organisations. In addition, their membership of the professional association of specialist college leaders provided them with useful opportunities to share experiences and learning.

In the three colleges that cater exclusively for day learners, regular communication with parents during this period helped to strengthen relationships with parents and carers. Parents appreciated the contact and support provided by staff, particularly where learners were being educated mainly in the home environment.

In residential colleges, communication between the educational and residential staff strengthened during the pandemic, as these different teams worked together to address the challenges presented.

All leaders continued to adapt professional learning over the year. They encouraged staff to take part in a wide range of learning that reflected the specific needs of learners, as well as strategies to support learner wellbeing and distance learning. Increased access to professional learning online improved the potential to tailor professional learning to individual staff members' development.

A new approach to professional learning

At Beechwood College, the adaptations they had to make to arrangements for teaching and learning during the year caused them to review their approach to professional learning. They reported that these opportunities increased significantly as staff worked together to share ideas to support learners' wellbeing and learning. This included a greater emphasis on communication strategies and the use of online platforms to capture learners' progress and engagement. Leaders extended their approach to professional learning by including opportunities for this to take place in daily briefings and staff wellbeing sessions on a 'bite-sized' basis. Leaders reported that these approaches helped staff to respond flexibly to the changing circumstances the college faced during the year.

Context

In January 2021, there were 22 registered pupil referral units (PRUs) in Wales. This is the same number as in January 2020. There were approximately 850 pupils educated in PRUs in January 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021m). There are three local authorities without a registered PRU. PRUs are the largest group of providers for pupils educated other than at school (EOTAS).

This year we contacted all PRUs at least once as part of our engagement work. Senior leaders in all PRUs engaged with us through remote meetings and we carried out a very few engagement visits. The focus for each discussion was how PRUs promoted the wellbeing of their pupils and staff during and after lockdown, support for teaching and learning, and leadership and management throughout the pandemic.

Sector summaries:

Pupil referral units

Wellbeing

All PRU provision remained open throughout the year, including during the second national lockdown, to provide education for vulnerable learners and the children of critical workers.

Many pupils were generally pleased to return to their PRU in September and were mostly keen to see their peers and staff. Incidents of poor behaviour were lower than usual.

Leaders continued to prioritise supporting pupils' wellbeing during the year and had built on the effective practice identified and shared from the first national lockdown. For example, many refined the categorisation of pupils' vulnerability and needs to ensure that the most suitable member of staff was in regular contact with them to support and respond to their needs.

Many leaders expressed concern about how the pandemic had affected pupils' wellbeing overall. As the year progressed, staff observed increasing evidence of the social and emotional trauma that pupils experienced during lockdown, particularly when pupils did not attend the PRU. For example, pupils lacked suitable behavioural boundaries at home or access to the usual support structures they needed for their emotional and mental health. In several cases, multi-agency working was beneficial in supporting the wellbeing of these pupils and their families, particularly those hardest to reach or engage.

Enhancing support for pupils' wellbeing

Leaders in Maes Derw PRU in Swansea adjusted the responsibilities of teaching assistants to provide greater wellbeing support for pupils, including designating 'PRU key workers'. For the autumn local restrictions and second national lockdown, all pupils had a key worker to provide them with stronger wellbeing support. The key workers made daily contact with the most vulnerable group of pupils, and every two to three days or weekly with others, depending on their needs. Doorstep visits by a key worker replaced calls if a pupil and their family were unavailable. The key workers also delivered learning packages and went through learning tasks with pupils. This contact was in addition to contact from teaching staff.

Supporting pupils and their families

In Ceredigion PRU, staff responded flexibly and provided valuable support for the individual needs of pupils and their families during periods of remote learning. This approach included support such as frequent contact with pupils that were not attending the PRU, doorstep visits and remote wellbeing activities, followed by structured wellbeing sessions when pupils attended the PRU.

Multi-agency working during this time, mostly virtually, was a strength. The multi-disciplinary team of staff from the PRU and other agencies met weekly to discuss concerns about any pupils. During the second national lockdown, the team evolved to include representation from health and social care, Team Around the Family, the Youth Justice Service and Drug Aid. The headteacher confirmed that this approach has resulted in prompt responses and appropriate follow-up and referrals being made, if needed.

Sector summaries:

Pupil referral units

Nevertheless, during the spring and summer terms there was too much inconsistency between organisations and between local authorities in the provision of support and therapies to promote pupils' wellbeing and meet their needs. This was generally because of large differences in the speed at which services returned to face-to-face provision or were available at all. As a result, leaders increasingly developed their own staff in a range of approaches and interventions, such as trauma-informed therapies and strategies to encourage resilience, to provide their own wellbeing offer for pupils. This allowed staff in the PRUs to deliver increasingly individualised support for pupils' wellbeing needs through activities such as counselling, mentoring and mindfulness, and relaxation sessions.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Akin to Carpenter's (2020) 'Compassionate Leadership', nearly all leaders' approach to the curriculum was flexible and responsive to pupils' behavioural, emotional and learning needs. The initial focus for pupils' return in September was on reintegrating pupils safely, re-establishing relationships and helping them adjust to new routines and arrangements. This focus was to keep pupils and staff safe, and promote pupils' health and wellbeing, before progressing specific skills, subjects or learning areas.

For the spring and summer terms, leaders in many PRUs put a stronger focus on assessing pupils' core skills and reviewing their individual learning programmes. In several cases, assessment showed evidence of regression in numeracy and literacy, particularly reading, spelling and comprehension. Leaders in many PRUs adapted the curriculum to include enhanced provision for these core skills, including one-to-one and small group support and interventions.

For the summer term, many leaders also had a stronger emphasis on learning in the outdoors, including developing the learning environment. These adaptations have been useful in promoting pupils' learning as part of planning and preparation for the Curriculum for Wales, as well as in response to the pandemic.

Adapting the curriculum

In the spring and summer terms, leaders at Glanynant Learning Centre refined teaching on-site and for remote learning during the mornings to follow a broad three lesson structure: literacy, numeracy and topic(s). Teaching staff usually designed and planned short tasks to keep pupils focused, particularly those learning at home. In addition, pupils completed their own online learning skill challenges in literacy and numeracy. During the afternoons, teaching focused on topic work, including health and wellbeing tasks, such as a scavenger hunt or physical activity.

Extending provision through outdoor learning

Staff at Y Tŷ Dysgu Homfrey continued to work with partners in the community to extend provision during the second national lockdown. For example, pupils accessed outdoor education with the support of a local charitable trust. During this period, the trust provided the PRU with exclusive use of its community facilities. Careers Wales secured, one day a week, work experience placements for a few Year 11 pupils with a local woodland and community garden centre. These pupils developed a range of skills from horticulture through to bridge building as part of an accredited programme of study.

Sector summaries:

Pupil referral units

Developing the learning environment

This year, Tŷ Gwyn PRU developed its learning environment to provide extended and improved opportunities for pupils' social interaction and enhancing their physical and mental health. For example, a new running track and basketball court were installed and seating is now available in the main outside area and the inner courtyard, which pupils can choose to use if they prefer to have quiet time. In addition, the PRU entrance has planters and bird boxes designed, constructed, and maintained by pupils as part of their art and design technology lessons.

Pupils make effective use of the outdoor facilities to develop their physical health and, where necessary, to remove themselves to the seating areas if they feel they need time to calm down. Leaders confirm that this is a positive development, which has contributed towards fewer incidents of poor behaviour.



In nearly all PRUs, leaders have placed a stronger emphasis on developing pupils' and staff digital skills in anticipation of further lockdowns or self-isolation arrangements. Many leaders identified the use of digital technology as a positive development, which they continued to build on during face-to-face lessons, where appropriate. However, many leaders also recognised the limitations of digital technology for remote learning with particular groups of pupils. These concerns included where pupils lack the required behavioural control or where the home environment does not enable them to engage and learn safely with digital devices.

Pupils in key stage 4 did not always have access to their usual full curriculum, for example due to restrictions in attending off-site facilities where they needed to practise with specialist equipment. Often these facilities did not become accessible until the summer term. In a few cases, this proved significantly de-motivating for pupils, and staff found it difficult to engage them in arrangements for their examinations and qualifications.

Overall, many pupils' levels of engagement with their learning were too variable, similar to the findings by WISERD (2020) in their multi-cohort study 'Life in Lockdown'. In cases where PRUs identified that pupils' overall levels of engagement were high, this was most often where there was intensive support in place to assist pupils' engagement.

Sector summaries:

Pupil referral units

Leadership

Maintaining staff wellbeing has been one of leaders' key priorities throughout the year. This required vigilance and careful management to keep PRUs open throughout this time. This was most evident when staff were balancing on-site, remote and blended learning provision during the second national lockdown. Many leaders affirmed the hard work and personal commitment of their staff during this difficult period, and their willingness to respond positively to frequent changes in what was asked of them.

In most PRUs, increased communication with pupils and their families throughout the year strengthened relationships considerably. The keeping in touch arrangements during the first national lockdown were built on in preparation for the second, such as identifying when families were struggling with their child at home. In several cases, the empathetic response of staff, and the targeted provision arranged to help the parents support their child's specific behavioural or learning needs, led to the development of significant trust during this difficult time.

Staff benefited from a wide variety of professional learning activities throughout the year, from mandatory safeguarding training through to accessing courses with a strong emphasis on supporting pupils' emotional health. In the spring and summer terms, the ongoing emphasis on developing staff digital skills lessened, with a focus instead on professional learning to support the wider strategic priorities identified in each PRU's improvement plan. During the summer term, professional learning opportunities included consolidating preparations for additional learning needs (ALN) reform and the Curriculum for Wales.

Developing approaches for the Curriculum for Wales

At Pembrokeshire Learning Centre, part of the PRU's professional learning activities involved teaching staff planning and developing their approaches to the Curriculum for Wales. The teacher-in-charge recognised that it had been even more critical at this time to deliver high-interest bespoke lessons to engage pupils. Teachers shared best practice from their lessons as examples to discuss with colleagues and used these experiences to inform their mapping and planning arrangements for the Curriculum for Wales. Additionally, the PRU is developing teaching assistants' role to include increased opportunities for them to contribute to and support curriculum development.

Developing a virtual parent support programme

Due to COVID-19 restrictions in the spring term, Tai Educational Centre was unable to invite parents on-site for its weekly parent support programme. The programme is designed to improve parenting skills and foster parents' involvement in their child's education, with the aim of reducing behavioural difficulties.

During the second national lockdown, leaders realised that several parents and carers needed this support more than ever. Following staff welfare calls, leaders felt that these families faced significant challenges from having their children at home without the structure, routine and usual support from the PRU. The PRU therefore continued its intensive parent support by adapting the delivery of the programme to offer virtual sessions.

Sector summaries:

Pupil referral units

Many leaders found the health and safety guidance and practical support from their local authority throughout the year helpful. They also expressed frustration that guidance was not always suitable for PRUs, such as in relation to multi-site settings and for pupils who are dual registered with a PRU and their mainstream school. As a result, in several cases, dual registered pupils remained with their PRU for the full year.

Retaining beneficial health and safety routines

Leaders at Denbighshire PRU reported that many pupils returned positively to on-site education at the start of the autumn term, and after the second national lockdown. A few changes introduced because of COVID-19 helped the PRU to run more smoothly. For example, the change of entry and exit points for pupils, and staggered start and finish times, has resulted in less movement about the PRU and led to a calmer learning environment. The headteacher explained how, with only senior leaders and the caretaker allowed in most corridors, opportunities for pupils to congregate or show off and misbehave in front of others during and at the start and end of the day are reduced significantly. As a result, the PRU will consider retaining these beneficial health and safety arrangements introduced during this time.

In many PRUs, leaders used the Welsh Government's (2020e) 'Recruit, recover, raise standards: accelerating learning programme' funding to support pupils' literacy, numeracy and wellbeing skills, such as by appointing an additional staff member to deliver bespoke intervention packages.

Provision in all PRUs remained open throughout the year to provide education for vulnerable learners and the children of critical workers in line with relevant Welsh Government guidance. This meant that PRU staff have been responsible for on-site, remote and blended learning, including provision for many pupils with dual registration throughout the year. As a result, many leaders expressed significant concerns about the sustainability of provision and the capacity of staff to continue working in this way.

Improving the quality of teaching and learning

At Conwy Education Centre, leaders used the current context to prioritise the PRU's professional learning programme to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Activities included a whole PRU approach to evaluating teaching and learning and refining work scrutiny processes, as well as developing a better understanding of aspects particularly relevant to the current context.

Specific focus areas to improve teaching and learning included understanding metacognition and differentiation better, and further exploration of how teaching assistants add value to what teachers do. The headteacher noted that increased opportunities to develop staff professional knowledge and expertise during the days that they did not attend the PRU site have been particularly beneficial.

Section 1

Sector summaries: Local government education services

Context

Local government education services include those provided or commissioned by a single local authority as well as those provided in partnership with other local authorities. School improvement services are provided largely in conjunction with four regional consortia on behalf of local authorities, though the model for how this works varies around Wales. This year, the local authorities that were originally part of the ERW region continued to revise their collaborative working arrangements.

This year, we did not carry out inspections of local government education services because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We continued to work with the three local authorities that required follow-up activity as a result of their core inspections.

Our local authority link inspectors continued their regular work with local authorities and regional consortia. In the autumn term of 2020, much of this work focused on the support that local authorities and regional consortia had provided to schools and PRUs to address the challenges caused by the pandemic. This work resulted in detailed feedback to each local authority and consortium to support their self evaluation and the publication of a thematic report, 'Local Authority and Regional Consortia Support for Schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19' (Estyn, 2021p). We published the report in January 2021 and it contains five recommendations for the Welsh Government, local authorities and regional consortia. We discussed the progress made with these recommendations with officers in the summer term. We sent letters giving details of this progress to each local authority and regional consortium. Our findings about how local authorities and regional consortia supported schools to provide distance learning and help vulnerable learners have informed this report.

Sector summaries: Local government education services

Wellbeing

This academic year, schools and PRUs across Wales have prioritised pupil wellbeing. Local authorities and regional consortia responded well by providing guidance, resources and professional learning opportunities to help school staff to address pupils' needs in the changing circumstances resulting from the pandemic. In many local authorities, closer working arrangements were forged between education and children's services. This helped officers to respond quickly and avoid duplication in their support for individual learners, their families and schools. Much of the professional learning and guidance offered to leaders, teachers and support staff focused on understanding how trauma can affect children and young people, and how staff can identify those who are struggling and provide support for them.

In the autumn term, when schools and PRUs re-opened to all pupils, typically around 85% of pupils attended (Welsh Government, 2021b). For most of the term, rates of attendance were between 80% and 90%. However, the number of pupils attending declined through late November and into December as the rate of COVID-19 cases increased across the country. Throughout the autumn term, local authority officers engaged with pupils and their families to encourage them to attend school. Despite this, pupil attendance across Wales varied depending on the context of the local authority. In local authorities that were badly affected by the pandemic, including areas with high numbers of pupils eligible for free school meals, attendance levels were only around 50% by the end of the autumn term. Older secondary aged pupils had the lowest attendance at this time. The Education Policy Institute (2021c) reported that attendance in Wales was lower and varied more than in other nations in the United Kingdom. In the summer term, directors of education remained concerned about attendance levels and barriers to pupils re-engaging with schools. At the end of May 2021, for example, the average attendance level across all local authorities was 88% in comparison to around 94% in 2019.

This year, there has been an increase in the number of parents who chose to educate their children at home. Prior to the pandemic, the number of pupils being educated at home was rising, but there has been a sharper increase this year, with all the local authorities in Wales reporting a higher rate of pupils being educated at home compared to 2019 (Welsh Government, 2021m). The Welsh Government postponed the introduction of statutory guidance and regulations on elective home education due to COVID-19. This means that local authorities still have limited responsibilities and powers around children educated at home. Nonetheless, in many local authorities, officers provided additional support and guidance to families who had chosen to educate their children at home. In Anglesey, officers established an elective home education forum to help to strengthen the procedures around home education. In Blaenau Gwent, officers linked children educated at home with schools to enable them to have support from professionals with home learning. In a few cases, support from local authorities across Wales gave families the confidence to reintegrate their children into school.



Sector summaries:

Local government education services

In January 2021, the Children's Commissioner published a report *Coronavirus and Me* (2021a) based on a survey of around 20,000 children in Wales. The survey questioned pupils about whether they felt happy or were worried, sad, or lonely. Three-in-five seven-year-old pupils reported being happy compared to around one-in-five pupils who were 17 and 18. When asked about support for emotional and mental health, three-in-five pupils aged 12 to 18 said that they were not happy to ask for help from counselling services provided through their school (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021a). The Welsh Government gave local authorities an additional £1.25 million funding this year to increase the capacity of counselling services. Some local authorities provide these services directly, but more commonly the service is commissioned from an external provider. While some counselling services resumed face-to-face sessions with children and young people during the autumn term, others continued to provide sessions online or over the telephone.

Other local authority specialist services also continued to provide a mix of online and face-to-face support during the late spring and the summer term. This proved difficult for pupils, particularly for those who are vulnerable. In the summer term, a few leaders of special schools and PRUs expressed frustration at the inconsistent approaches to on-site support and therapy across different specialist services and in different local authorities. In around half of PRUs, leaders confirm that support from counsellors, CAMHS and the Youth Service and Youth Justice teams was continuing to take place online.

In our survey with pupils, parents and school staff in autumn 2020, we asked about the opportunities that pupils had to take exercise. Seventy-seven per cent agreed that the school was offering them sufficient exercise opportunities. In many local authorities, youth, play and sports team members provided support for schools to engage pupils in physical activities. In Newport, the 'Get Active Primary School Challenge' was launched to help improve children's fitness levels following the school closure periods.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

This year, nearly all pupils in Wales worked remotely for at least part of the spring term. This meant that local authorities and regional consortia needed to continue to adapt their support and guidance to schools around teaching and learning to help school leaders and teachers to manage rapidly changing circumstances.

In our survey in the autumn term, many of the headteachers who responded felt that local authorities had been proactive in providing digital devices and internet connectivity to pupils without access to these at home. Teachers and governors were less positive about this support. Around half of governors said that local authorities had provided effective support in this area. Although many teachers from primary schools and PRUs, and a majority of those from special schools, said that schools were helping pupils to overcome barriers to learning at home, only around half of the secondary school teachers and a minority of the teachers from all-age schools who responded to our survey agreed with this. In the spring term, when schools



Sector summaries: Local government education services

closed again to pupils, it was still the case that not all pupils could access online learning. The Children's Commissioner's report (2021b) identified that 12% of the schools that responded to their survey indicated that they have more than 20% of learners without access to a device, and almost all indicated that some proportion of their learners were sharing devices. Local authority officers identified an increased demand from families for support to help pupils to learn remotely in the spring term. In addition to pupils having to share devices with family members, local authorities identified other barriers to remote learning, including pupils living in rural areas where mobile wireless internet coverage is poor and an increase in the number of pupils recognised as disadvantaged though their eligibility for free school meals. Directors of education recognise the need for a long-term strategy to address digital exclusion. They are aware of the need to build on the work done so far to improve access to technology and recognise that this is key to ensuring that pupils are prepared well for a society where there is an increasing focus on working in an online environment. They also recognise the benefits that the enhanced digital skills of both teachers and pupils have on ensuring the provision of rich and varied learning experiences. Ceredigion County Council established their e-sgol provision prior to the start of the pandemic. One of the original objectives of the provision was to broaden the choice for A level pupils by delivering remote lessons. During the pandemic, this resource was used to enrich the education of pupils in Ceredigion and across Wales. Officers secured tutors in 10 subjects for pupils in Years 11 to 13. Sessions were offered bilingually where possible. Three hundred pupils in Ceredigion and 3,000 pupils across Wales attended sessions.

In the autumn term, pupils had fallen behind with reading and writing skills, and school closure periods had a negative impact on the speaking and social skills of younger pupils in the foundation phase. These issues remained in the summer term. Across Wales, local authorities and regional consortia continued to work with schools to address these issues. They retained a focus on supporting schools to develop pupils' skills while taking care to promote positive language around this work for schools, pupils and parents, for example avoiding terms such as 'catch up'.

One of the aims of the Welsh Government's (2020e) 'Recruit, recover and raise standards programme' was to provide support for pupils in Welsh medium schools who live in non-Welsh speaking households. These pupils had not had opportunities to hear and speak Welsh as often as usual. Local authorities put a number of initiatives in place to support schools and pupils. Several local authorities, including Gwynedd and Carmarthenshire, used their immersion facilities to provide additional support for pupils, and Cardiff increased its immersion provision to help cope with demand. Officers in the regional consortia also provided support for schools. For example, the EAS placed members of its Welsh support team in Welsh-medium primary schools across the region during the autumn term to support staff and pupils to address the shortfall in pupils' skills.



Sector summaries:

Local government education services

Local authority services to support pupils with special educational needs found ways to continue their support for pupils while COVID-19 restrictions on visitors to school were in place. For example, in Caerphilly, the regional Sensory and Communication Support Service (SENCOM) worked remotely with pupils through video conferencing technology and provided bespoke training to school staff so that they could support pupils with hearing or visual impairments. In the summer term, headteachers from primary and secondary schools reported that they needed more support from local authorities to prepare for the new additional learning needs act.

Across Wales, regional consortia and local authority officers have seen the COVID 19 pandemic as an opportunity to focus on developing the ethos and principles of the Curriculum for Wales, for example through the focus on health and wellbeing and the increase in pupils' and teachers' digital skills. In Powys, challenge advisers promoted the use of the pedagogical principles to enrich pupils' learning. In Flintshire, officers provided training on using the outdoor environment to develop pupils' resilience and perseverance in problem-solving. Despite this positive work, local authority officers recognise that the pandemic has slowed the progress that schools were making in addressing the implementation of the new curriculum. They see this work as a priority once COVID-19 restrictions on schools ease. In our discussions with headteachers in the summer term, many headteachers highlighted the need for support to continue for their work on the Curriculum for Wales. In particular, they feel that there has not been enough focus from local authorities and regional consortia around assessment processes and progression in learning.

Leadership

In the autumn term, local authorities and regional consortia worked closely together and with the Welsh Government to respond to the evolving context caused by the pandemic. They collaborated to support pupils' full return to school and provide support and guidance to school leaders to help them to manage the impact on schools of COVID-19 outbreaks. Through the Association of Directors of Education Wales (ADEW), senior leaders provided good support for each other and worked together effectively to create shared approaches and resources.

In our survey in October 2020, the majority of headteachers agreed that their local authority involved them effectively in discussions about local education services. However, a few school leaders did not feel involved enough. In the summer term, headteachers were positive about the support that they had received from local authority officers. Many felt that it was easier to attend meetings that were held remotely, enabling them to attend more regularly. This led to better communication between local authorities and schools, and more regular contact improved the working relationship between officers and headteachers.



Sector summaries: Local government education services

Local authority officers worked closely with school and PRU leaders across Wales to ensure that school sites were safe for pupils to return to school in the autumn and spring terms. They carried out risk assessments with school and PRU leaders and held drop-in online meetings for headteachers to discuss health and safety issues.

In the autumn term, regional consortia and local authority officers supported schools to plan how they could best use the funding from the Welsh Government for the 'Recruit, recover, raise standards' programme. The Welsh Government issued guidance for schools to support the use of the grant, acknowledging that, while many pupils had not progressed as well as they could, there were specific groups of pupils for whom the impact of the pandemic was greater. These included pupils in year groups preparing for examinations, pupils who had made the transition from primary to secondary school and vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils. As a result of these findings, the Welsh Government has put additional funding in place for the coming academic year, including for the youngest pupils whose education has been disproportionately affected.

In the autumn term, the professional learning provided by regional consortia and local authorities focused mainly on supporting pupils' wellbeing as they returned to school and on helping teachers to improve their approaches to distance and blended learning. Officers from local authorities and regional consortia had used the initial lockdown period to engage with national and international research and used professional learning opportunities to share their findings with schools. In Bridgend, school improvement partners highlighted evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (2020) that the quality of teaching is more important than how it is delivered. This helped schools in the local authority to think about their approaches to distance and blended learning. In Carmarthenshire, officers supported schools to move learning from the distance learning model used during the school closure period to a model that could be used as schools re-opened fully. In the spring term, regional consortia and local authority officers faced challenges in monitoring the effectiveness of provision while schools were teaching remotely. In the summer term, school improvement partners were able to resume visits to schools. Although they could not carry out their full range of usual activities, many headteachers told us that they found it helpful to be able to hold face-to-face discussions about teaching and learning and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the school's work.



Sector summaries: Local government education services

Our local authority link inspectors continued to hold assurance and risk workshops as part of our joint working arrangements with Audit Wales and Care Inspectorate Wales. This year, these took place remotely with nearly all local authorities. The workshops focused on the strengths and shortcomings that the three inspection and regulatory bodies identified during their work with local authorities. These were presented to senior officers and elected members of the council to enable them to consider the work of individual service areas in a wider context. This year, the common assurances related mainly to the local authorities' responses to the COVID 19 pandemic. Leaders in schools and PRUs in many local authorities were positive about the support provided by officers, for example to help them with their provision of digital devices to support distance learning. Links between service areas in local authorities and officers' communication with schools improved. The main concern this year across nearly all local authorities was the variation within and across schools in the provision of distance learning experiences for pupils. In addition, long-standing issues for the local authorities remain from prior to the pandemic. The most common across the local authorities are the performance of secondary schools over time, attendance and exclusion rates, the progress of pupils eligible for free school meals and the quality of self-evaluation in education directorates.

Youth services

Many youth workers worked in school hubs. They worked with other educational professionals to provide support for learners, through visiting homes, delivering food and toiletry parcels and medication. Those with play work experience used their skills effectively to support the work in primary school hubs. Youth workers remained active during school holiday periods and during evenings and weekends during the school terms. Many of these practices were recognised in the Wavehill report (Marshall *et al.*, 2021) to the Welsh Government, 'Research to inform development of the youth work strategy'.

Detached and street-based youth workers engaged with young people to ensure that they understood key health messages, such as the need to maintain social distancing. They also ensured that they stayed in touch with young people who did not connect through virtual platforms. In areas such as Rhondda Cynon Taf, the local authority invested in mobile provision such as vans equipped with seating and television screens, and teams used these with groups of young people who had been congregating on streets. As the restrictions lifted in the spring, youth workers in the Vale of Glamorgan developed a 'pop up youth club' offer. Youth workers in authorities such as Conwy and Gwynedd worked closely through outreach programmes with North Wales Police to tackle anti-social behaviour and its causes.



Sector summaries:

Local government education services

Throughout the last year, youth workers worked to support homeless young people at a time when they were particularly vulnerable. They also provided support for other vulnerable groups, such as looked after children, young carers, those experiencing family breakdown and those who are not in touch with other agencies or support networks. For example, youth workers in Blaenau Gwent helped young people to find accommodation and the local authority placed some young people, who would not usually be eligible to access support, in bed and breakfast accommodation to ensure that they had a safe place to live. Youth workers across Wales assisted and advised young people facing unemployment or eviction and gave them help in applying for financial support.

The pandemic has raised the profile and benefits of youth work through highlighting the broad and adaptive skillset of youth workers. The need to recognise the professional status of youth work as an essential key service for young people aged 11-25 was highlighted in our thematic report published this year 'The Value of Youth Working Training: A sustainable model for Wales 2020' (Estyn, 2020j) and discussed in our blog [Understanding the value of youth work and youth workers](#) (Estyn, 2021v).

This was also emphasised in the first report of the Interim Youth Work Board for Wales (January 2021) [Time to deliver for young people in Wales](#).

School re-organisation

This year, 14 local authorities consulted on proposals for school re-organisation. Around a quarter of the proposals were to increase provision for pupils with special educational needs. The majority of these consultations propose to increase the capacity at existing schools and units. A minority consider the establishment of new schools or units. Almost a quarter of all proposals this year focus on increasing Welsh-medium education provision. These proposals consult on a range of strategies, including increasing provision in established Welsh medium schools, changing the language medium of existing schools from English to Welsh and one proposal of a new Welsh medium primary school in Blaenau Gwent. Six consultations include schools identified as rural schools, which require the proposer to follow a more detailed set of procedures and requirements in formulating a school closure proposal under the School Organisation Code (Welsh Government, 2018). Two of these consultations advocate merging the small school with another local school. However, four propose closing the school. Four proposals from four local authorities consult on the establishment of all-age schools, continuing a trend from previous years. This includes the proposal for a first all-age school in Monmouthshire local authority. In January 2020, there were 22 all-age schools in Wales, so these four proposals would mean an increase of almost 20% nationally.



Sector summaries:

Local government education services

Follow-up activity

When we judge that a local government education service is causing significant concern, we hold a post-inspection improvement conference around three months after the core inspection, followed by progress conferences. Senior leaders from the local authority and other stakeholders attend these conferences, which focus on the authority's plans to address shortcomings and the progress officers are making to address the recommendations. In the autumn term 2020, we held progress conferences with Powys, Pembrokeshire and Wrexham. We took a tailored approach to this work, holding discussions with senior officers in these local authorities about the best way to carry out the conferences.

In November 2020, we held our first conference with Pembrokeshire and Wrexham local authorities. The conferences ensured that officers and elected members had a shared understanding of the challenges facing the council and were in agreement about how they would address these issues. Following the conferences, both local authorities identified ways in which their action plans could be strengthened to ensure progress in addressing the recommendations in their core inspection reports.

We held a progress conference with Powys County Council in November 2020. This was the local authority's second conference following its core inspection in July 2019. During the conference, the local authority demonstrated that it has begun to make sound progress since the inspection. Officers show a clear commitment to addressing the issues that were raised as well as making purposeful evaluations of the progress made as a result of actions implemented from their post-inspection action plan. We held a meeting with senior officers and elected members in the spring term 2021 to determine the best time to hold a formal monitoring visit, during which inspectors will judge the progress made since the core inspection in 2019.



Context

In January 2021, there were 12 colleges providing further education courses in Wales. Many are large multi-sited institutions that cover a wide geographical area. A minority, such as Grwp Llandrillo Menai, NPTC Group and Coleg Cambria, operate as a group, with multiple sites operating with separate college names under the overall control of one further education institution. A few colleges, including The College Merthyr Tydfil and Coleg Sir Gar (incorporating Coleg Ceredigion), operate as wholly owned subsidiaries of higher education institutions.

A report by ColegauCymru (Buchanan *et al.*, 2020) identified that, in recent years, further education enrolments have been falling, especially amongst those studying part-time. The latest published information shows that, in 2019-2020, 94,220 learners undertook further education learning programmes (Welsh Government, 2021i). Of these, 46,290 studied on full-time programmes and 47,930 studied part-time. The number of part-time enrolments is expected to fall further in 2020-2021, due mainly to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This year, inspection activities remained suspended due to the COVID-19 crisis. As part of our engagement work with the sector, we continued our link inspector engagement with colleges remotely. Our discussions with leaders focused on the wellbeing of learners and staff, how colleges supported teaching and learning and leadership throughout the pandemic. We also gathered evidence for four thematic reviews. In summer 2021, we visited a few colleges to find out how they had adapted to the return to face-to-face delivery.

Sector summaries: Further education

Wellbeing

This year, colleges continued to make the health and wellbeing of learners and staff a key priority. They made a wide range of support services for learners available during periods of lockdown and when more on-site learning was taking place.

Following the return to on-site learning from September 2020, most colleges made face-to-face support for learner wellbeing more widely available, subject to risk assessments and adjustments to help maintain social distancing. Online wellbeing resources, guidance documents, support information and online referral processes were also available to all learners.

Colleges gradually changed their support provision as site restrictions eased. In many cases, colleges prioritised vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, including learners on independent living skills programmes, for on-site attendance and support.

Colleges maintained pastoral support throughout the year through face-to-face sessions or online tutorials, depending on whether learners were able to attend on-site. They reported a high demand for counselling and many also reported an increase in safeguarding referrals, particularly relating to self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Providers worked closely with external agencies to make sure that appropriate support was available for these learners. Colleges maintained regular contact with learners who were not engaging with planned learning activities to check on their wellbeing.

Most colleges carried out surveys of learners' wellbeing. In these surveys, many learners reported that, during periods of remote learning, they missed their friends, face-to-face contact with teaching staff and social interaction with the wider college community. Many learners identified that they were particularly anxious about the uncertainty surrounding their final assessments and the prospects of making the transition to higher education or into employment.

Colleges maintained regular contact with vulnerable learners through face-to-face meetings, telephone, text, social media, video calls and online platforms. They used Welsh Government grants to help provide support for learners entitled to free meals to afford meals during holiday periods, as outlined further in the Education Policy Institute's report, 'Education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic'. (Sibieta and Cottell, 2020)

Having shared, rather than exclusive, access to a digital device was common among learners, as was also identified by the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2021 b). In addition, some households lacked internet access or reported having insufficient data allowances. To address these concerns, colleges loaned substantial quantities of equipment to learners, provided portable Wi-Fi devices or helped with the costs of purchasing mobile data.

A whole college approach to mental health and emotional wellbeing

Senior leaders at Bridgend College engaged extensively with learners, staff, trade union representatives and governors to identify specific gaps in existing support provision. This has enabled them to develop a clear and cohesive wellbeing strategy. The college strives to develop a safe and supportive environment where learners and staff can openly discuss mental health issues and access a wide range of support services.

Prioritising support for learners

Coleg Sir Gar and Coleg Ceredigion decided to prioritise and follow up all new referrals for learner support using a standard initial need evaluation tool to help determine the most appropriate support interventions. The learning support team created an 'at-risk' register of learners, including those who they had already supported. The new triaging approach helped reduce delays and minimise waiting lists.

Sector summaries:

Further education

Staff, such as learning support assistants, provided individual and small group support to learners with additional learning needs through a mix of online and face-to-face activities. For example, when delivering learning remotely, colleges made use of features such as 'breakout rooms' and 'record functions' available through online platforms.

Teaching, training, learning and the curriculum

As lockdown restrictions eased in September 2020, most learners returned to college sites for at least some of their learning time, but many learners continued to undertake at least half of their learning remotely. A very few learners, such as those on independent learning skills (ILS) programmes, received most or all of their learning on-site due to difficulties in delivering this provision effectively on a remote basis.

Colleges followed Welsh Government guidance on bringing learners back on-site. For example, they prioritised vulnerable learners and on-site delivery of learning and assessment activities for learners undertaking licence to practise qualifications, such as for electrical and gas accreditation programmes. Nearly all learners who were unable to complete assessments for these qualifications last year were able to achieve their qualification in the autumn term.

Despite the easing of restrictions for on-site delivery in September 2020, the teaching and assessment of practical subjects remained challenging due to ongoing restrictions to group sizes to meet social distancing requirements. Colleges worked closely with ColegauCymru and the Welsh Government to agree that the overall curriculum content of most full-time learning programmes, including the range of qualifications which these include, be adjusted to focus on learners' main qualification.

This year, further education colleges continued to extend and improve their capacity for distance learning across all learning programmes using a range of online learning platforms. Most colleges have continued to adopt a blended learning approach as an integral component of many learning programmes. They were prepared to revert to full remote delivery where necessary.

During the spring term, nearly all learning was delivered online for most learners, with a small but gradually increasing number starting to return to college sites to complete practical assessments and Essential Skills Wales (ESW) confirmatory tests. Most colleges increased the proportion of face-to-face teaching for learners substantially following the Easter break.



Sector summaries: Further education

Summative assessment posed a major challenge to colleges, teaching staff and their learners. The revised assessment arrangements across the range of vocational qualifications were more complex to implement than those for GCSE and A levels, especially where practical assessments and work placement activities were still required. Work placement opportunities remained severely restricted due to the pandemic, despite the gradual easing of restrictions across many occupational sectors. During this year, college leaders again voiced their concerns about the lack of timely, clear guidance from regulators and awarding organisations on the amended arrangements for assessment and accreditation for 2020-2021.

Learner and staff 'quick surveys' and frequent staff meetings provided useful feedback to inform the ongoing evaluation of blended learning models and helped identify areas for improvement. Throughout the year, colleges continued to manage on-site attendance of learners and staff cautiously, through the continued application of social distancing requirements in and around college buildings. For example, they reduced group sizes, prioritised practical sessions and alternated learners' days of attendance to help manage the risk of virus transmission.

Leadership

This year, college leaders continued to respond quickly and positively to the many challenges presented by the ongoing pandemic. They identified that positive working relationships with trade unions helped to facilitate the flexibility in working practices to cope with changing circumstances throughout the year. College leaders continued to meet regularly throughout the year to plan and share responses to COVID-19. They worked closely with the Welsh Government and other key stakeholders to update guidelines for revised ways of working as the COVID-19 situation evolved.

College leaders maintained communications with external stakeholders, including parents and employers, mainly through their websites and social media posts. They maintained good internal communication with staff, for example by holding weekly staff briefing sessions online and circulating weekly staff bulletins. Leaders continued to make use of virtual meetings to cut down travelling and help reduce the risk of virus transmission. They reported that most staff had shown great flexibility and resilience in adjusting to changing ways of working, including the transitions between remote and on-site activities.

Colleges provided ongoing support to develop and update the digital skills of all staff, including extensive professional learning for staff on pedagogy specific to distance and blended learning. For example, staff delivering initial teacher training programmes for post-16 teachers have increased their focus on blended and remote delivery methods since the outbreak of the pandemic. Leaders gave careful attention to providing guidance and support to staff on implementing arrangements for centre determined grades across many qualifications.

Providing A level learners with a holistic view of their progress

In September 2020, Grwp Llandrillo Menai strengthened its use of formal monitoring points twice each half-term. Learners submitted a substantial piece of assessed work, and teachers collated grades centrally via an electronic mark book. When learners accessed the system, they could see their progress over time and access personalised feedback about their assessments. Learners reported that these methods had improved their understanding of their progress since courses moved online.

Safe face-to-face learning

During periods when learners were allowed on-site during the pandemic, staff at St David's Catholic Sixth Form College divided each teaching group in two and used a blend of remote and on-site face-to-face delivery simultaneously. One half of each teaching group attended lessons during the first two-and-a-half days a week, while the other half of the group joined the lessons remotely from home, using a live link to the classroom. Teachers reversed the arrangements for the second half of the week to enable all learners to benefit from attending on-site provision.

Sector summaries:

Further education

Colleges provided strong support for staff wellbeing during periods of home working and during the transition back onto campuses. For example, they made counselling services available to staff, either via the colleges' own counsellors or via external employee assistance programmes. Recruitment of further education learners for 2021-2022 has been conducted through a mix of online and face-to-face activities, with staff delivering a range of virtual open day events, online taster sessions and scheduled site visits.

Quality assurance arrangements continued to evolve to reflect the use of blended learning approaches. Overall, the approaches adopted placed a strong emphasis on mutual support and sharing effective practice rather than overly focusing on learner outcomes and performance data. For example, many observations of teaching and learning were peer led rather than conducted by line managers. Colleges continue to use feedback from surveys of learners and staff to evaluate and help improve the effectiveness of provision.

Governing boards and board sub-committees of colleges continued to meet regularly throughout the year. Meetings took place via online platforms and leaders reported that governors had been kept well informed of the main developments in relation to the COVID-19 situation, as well as its impact on key decisions.

The Welsh Government provided substantial financial support to colleges to help with staff and learner wellbeing, to provide catch-up sessions for learners and to address digital deprivation and other extra costs arising from COVID-19. As a result, colleges generally maintained a strong financial position despite the pandemic.

Follow-up activity

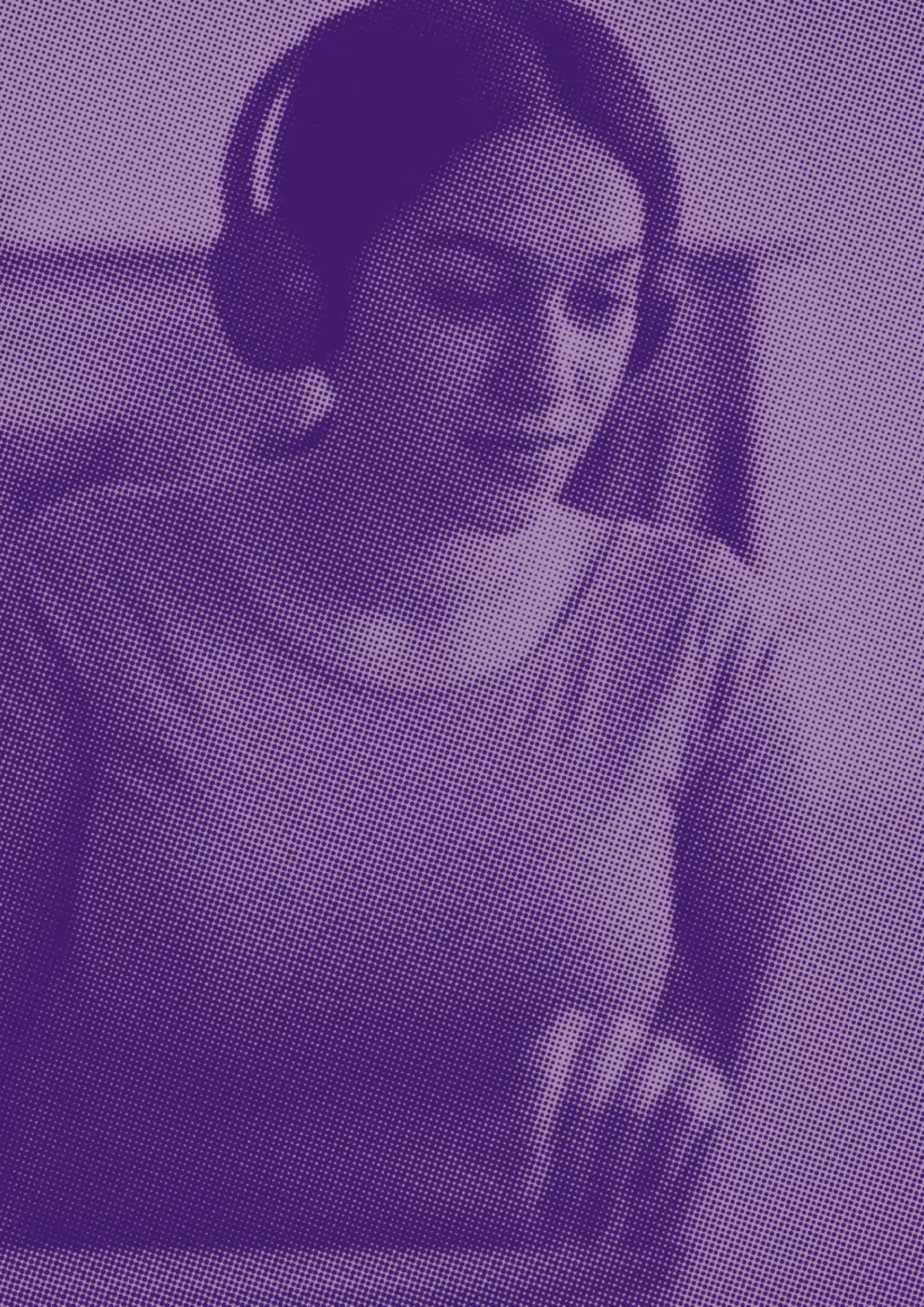
No follow-up activity was required for any further education colleges this year.

Online professional learning

The College Merthyr Tydfil has focused on professional learning sessions that have a common broad format; they are hosted online and last for 30 minutes. Feedback from teachers suggested that the various sessions provided a menu of quick-fire opportunities to learn about useful techniques and strategies to aid their overall teaching. Staff felt that the sessions helped them to plan and deliver remote and blended learning sessions more effectively.

Evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning

In December 2020, St David's Catholic Sixth Form College introduced 'lesson reflections' arrangements for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Teaching staff choose from four methods of evaluating their teaching, learning and student experience. The aim of these arrangements is to maintain a focus on continuous improvement and to share effective practice, irrespective of whether teaching is delivered remotely or face-to-face. Using these methods, the college reports that staff have significant ownership of the process, which supports their wellbeing.



Context

In January 2021, there were 17 contract holders commissioned by the Welsh Government (2020f) to deliver work-based learning in Wales. The majority of these providers work in consortia or with other sub-contracted training providers. Approximately 100 sub-contracted providers work with contract holders to deliver work-based learning. The latest published information shows that, in 2019-2020, around 52,190 learners undertook work-based learning programmes, 16,065 on level 2 foundation apprenticeships and 30,475 on level 3 apprenticeships or level 4 higher apprenticeships. Around 5,650 learners undertook other training, including level 1 traineeship and employability programmes (Welsh Government, 2021 i). The Welsh Government has completed its commissioning for the work-based learning contract that will start in September 2021, with 10 lead providers contracted to deliver apprenticeship programmes.

From September 2020, we continued to engage remotely with leaders and staff in work-based learning providers through our link inspector calls. We called most providers each term to focus on the implications of the pandemic on learner wellbeing, teaching and learning, and leadership throughout the pandemic. These engagements also supported two thematic reviews requested by the Welsh Government on remote and blended learning and on learner mental health and wellbeing. In summer 2021, we visited a few work-based learning providers to find out how they had adapted to the return to face-to-face delivery.

Sector summaries:

Work-based learning

From September 2020, the work-based learning sector continued to be hit particularly hard with the furlough of staff and the closure of many businesses. Sectors such as hospitality and catering, retail and commercial, hair and beauty and areas of engineering, especially aeronautical engineering, continued to be affected the most. With many businesses being closed for such an extended period, the number of new apprenticeship entrants declined. However, in summer 2021, the situation improved significantly with sectors such as construction and hospitality seeing an increased demand for staff. As other sectors returned to their workplaces, employers reviewed their staffing and new entrant apprentice needs. An in-depth review of figures is available in 'Apprentices furloughed or made redundant during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic' series (Welsh Government, 2021 a).

Wellbeing

Learners have worried about their job security and personal finances. They faced challenges with being furloughed and feeling isolated due to lockdown restrictions. In a few cases, learners worried about returning to their workplaces. Providers have supported learners to overcome their fears and strengthen their resilience. A minority of learners, including higher apprentices, faced challenges when working and learning at home, particularly where they were home schooling their own children, sharing digital devices or not being able to find an appropriate workspace. Regular learner surveys undertaken by providers gave a useful insight into learners' experiences and concerns. Many providers were concerned about the ongoing impact of learner wellbeing and put in place specialist staff and strategies to help support learners.

Supporting the wellbeing of work-based learners during the pandemic

Wellbeing officers at the Quality Skills Alliance (QSA) consortium of work-based learning providers provide helpful support and advice to learners. This continued during lockdown periods, with an enhanced range of useful strategies applied to support learners' wellbeing.

Support staff established a remote wellbeing service using online platforms so that learners could continue meet them virtually when in-person meetings were restricted. Initially, staff identified learners at risk, or in need of additional support, by using a RAG (red, amber, green) rating system. This enabled them to tailor support to the needs of individual learners. Staff maintained at least weekly contact with their most vulnerable learners. They also provided support to over 120 new learners. Resources and essential information were sent out to all learners, including cyber safety guidance, useful tips on working from home, exercise programmes to suit a range of abilities and specific information addressing domestic violence and other forms of abuse.

Identifying and supporting the most vulnerable work-based learners

ACT uses a risk rating approach to help identify those learners who are particularly vulnerable and most at risk. This approach is then used to inform the type, level and frequency of support provided. Examples of support provided include food parcels, hygiene products, IT and other education resources. Staff also make regular wellbeing phone calls and learners can attend the learning centre for face-to-face wellbeing support even during lockdown periods.

All learners have a designated wellbeing officer assigned to them. Wellbeing officers provide learners with relevant resources to help them engage in remote learning activities where necessary. They provide contact details for specialist support agencies and the provider's counselling service and help with referrals. The wellbeing officers have provided virtual sessions on wellbeing, including specific sessions on how COVID-19 can affect individuals' emotional health and wellbeing. By identifying those learners who are particularly vulnerable and most at risk, the provider provides early interventions and support.

Sector summaries:

Work-based learning

In many cases, providers increased their contact with vulnerable learners by telephone, email and online to check on their wellbeing. Assessors generally provided learners with opportunities to talk every week, but mainly signposted external support services where required. However, in a few cases, there was two to three weeks between contact with learners. This meant that they did not always access timely support.

Teaching, training, assessment and provision

From September 2020, providers continued to deliver parts of their apprenticeship schemes to learners remotely. They maintained their focus on theory elements of the framework, such as technical certificates and Essential Skills Wales qualifications. Providers identified that learners required more guidance and support when working remotely than with face-to-face learning. Staff provide this additional support through email, telephone conversations and video meetings. Throughout the year, teachers, trainers and assessors built on the established practice of giving learners written feedback on their work via their electronic portfolios. In our thematic report on blended learning (Estyn, 2021b), we identified that there were significant challenges for work-based learning providers to provide the practical components of qualifications through remote and blended learning approaches and that that quality of teaching and learning remained variable overall.

In many learning areas, providers could not undertake on-site assessments due to business closures or COVID-19 restrictions. Sectors such as health and care, hospitality and catering, retail, engineering and manufacturing technologies, and hair and beauty were the hardest hit. Learners across all learning areas made slower progress than expected. This meant that they needed to stay on their training programme for longer to complete their frameworks.

When training centres closed, the majority of traineeship learners did not have the necessary computer hardware nor, in a number of cases, internet connections to access remote learning. Providers supported these learners by supplying laptop computers and internet access dongles when required. This support meant these learners could continue to engage with their learning throughout the lockdown. Most providers recognised learners on traineeship programmes as a priority group to return to face-to-face learning when sites re-opened.

As businesses re-opened and learners returned to the workplace, providers worked with employers to complete risk assessments to enable face-to-face assessments to be carried out where possible. This continued to be a challenge in the health and care sector with assessors not being allowed into care homes and similar settings during the pandemic. Across all sectors, where appropriate, providers carried out assessments remotely or used alternative methods of portfolio evidence collection, such as video or voice recording of learners undertaking practical tasks in their workplaces. Learners sat external examinations according to lockdown rules and procedures that allowed learners to return to their off-the-job colleges and training centres safely.

Most Essential Skills Wales delivery was conducted online, mainly through one-to-one remote sessions. In a few cases, providers brought learners together into groups for online sessions.

The design and use of specialist training resources

Staff at Cambrian Training Company designed a suite of training modules for learners who have been made redundant. These modules include job applications, letter writing, interview skills, confidence building and finance management. Staff hold live question and answer sessions with learners who have been made redundant to give them an opportunity to learn about opportunities in alternative learning areas. One example of this focuses on what it is like working in hospitality within the health and care sector, with information about working conditions, work and management opportunities and salary packages.

Using a range of resources to engage learners

Two providers, Cambrian Training Company and Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, have adapted resources to make sure learners have access to them by using different methods. For example, they use a range of digital meetings, together with printed resources or face-to-face meetings, to support their learners. Staff send learners paper resources, such as digital literacy and English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) grammar workbooks where necessary. They have significantly increased the availability of literacy and numeracy sessions by delivering online classes in the evening as well as during the day.

Sector summaries:

Work-based learning

This gave learners the opportunity to work on tasks in small groups with their peers once again. Across providers, there was variability in the progress learners made and the rates at which they achieved their Essential Skills Wales qualifications.

As lockdown restrictions eased during the summer, several sectors saw a high demand from customers. This was especially the case in the construction sector where builders were experiencing a high demand for their skills. This is likely to expand the opportunities for apprentices in the sector.

Leadership

Leaders across work-based learning responded quickly to the challenges brought by the pandemic. They developed their communication with staff at all levels, giving them a wide range of information to keep them up to date. They placed a high priority on the wellbeing of learners and staff. Leaders recognised the need to support staff in many aspects, including professional learning to develop their understanding and skills in delivering programmes remotely.

Managers focused strongly on the wellbeing of staff during the pandemic. In the best cases, providers strengthened their communication with staff at all levels. This included regular input from senior managers, along with useful staff meetings and electronic communications. However, communication with, and sharing of information between, subcontractors was variable. Across the sector, providers supported their staff to develop their skills with a useful range of professional learning activities. These activities focused on delivering remote training sessions and supporting learners' health and wellbeing remotely. In most cases, providers brought forward elements of the framework that could be delivered online. However, many learners joined work-based learning programmes because they want to do practical work. As a result, providers often found it difficult to maintain learner motivation and engagement.

In general, the work-based learning sector found that it is more difficult to take apprenticeship programmes online due to the large practical components of the programme and assessments related to qualifications that demonstrate occupational or professional expertise. To support the sector, Jisc, funded by the Welsh Government, developed a pilot digital pedagogy course for a small number of work-based learning staff to help them to develop sector-specific online teaching and assessment skills. Each lead contract holder was invited to send a representative to the course. The course was designed as a 'train the trainer' programme with the aim of participants sharing their knowledge with others. Participants report that they found the course of great value and that they have shared their professional development with other staff in their organisations and companies. The same digital pedagogy course is also being trialled with adult learning in the community partnerships.

Follow-up

Two providers remained in follow-up during the period of the pandemic. We engaged regularly with these providers throughout the year. In July, we reviewed the progress both providers have made on recommendations from their core inspections through Estyn review improvement conferences. As a result of the progress made by these providers, we removed both from follow-up.



Context

Adult learning in the community is delivered by 15 partnerships across Wales and Addysg Oedolion Cymru / Adult Learning Wales. Membership of the partnerships differs from area to area, but most include provision offered by the local authority, further education college and voluntary organisations.

Adult learning in the community provision normally takes places in community venues, such as libraries, community learning centres or schools. The closure of these venues during the pandemic has had a big impact on partnerships' ability to deliver their normal programmes.

Over recent years, the sector has focused its funded provision on courses for adults to improve their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Partnerships also provide a small number of leisure and recreational programmes for personal interest, wellbeing, and inclusion, such as yoga classes, needlecraft or local history. In many cases, partnerships support voluntary groups or clubs to run their own leisure and wellbeing provision, by providing venues or advertising classes.

Sector summaries:

Adult learning in the community

Recent Welsh Government policy has been to encourage partnerships to merge into fewer, larger, regional partnerships. Progress towards this goal has been patchy as partnerships have focused their attention on responding to the pandemic.

From September 2020, we continued to engage remotely with leaders and co-ordinators in partnerships through our link inspector calls. We called most providers regularly to focus on the implications of the pandemic on learner and staff wellbeing, teaching and learning, and leadership throughout the pandemic. These engagements also supported two thematic reviews on remote and blended learning and learner mental health and wellbeing. In summer 2021, we joined a few online lessons and conducted remote calls with a few adult learning in the community partnerships to find out how they are continuing to support adult learners.

The pandemic reduced the number of learners and learning activities taking place considerably. In our engagement calls, providers report between a quarter and half of the normal number of learning activities taking place, which is in line with Welsh Government statistics (Welsh Government, 2021i). In addition to the challenges of delivering remote learning, partnerships found it difficult to recruit new learners or to run programmes such as family learning, which typically take place in schools.

As lockdown restrictions varied over the course of the year, partnerships varied their provision between centre-based and online delivery, depending on conditions.

Wellbeing

From September 2020, partnerships increased their focus on progression in learning, as well as continuing to support learners' wellbeing.

During periods of lockdown and when learning centres were closed, many learners faced increased social isolation due to not being able to attend classes in person. Others, such as those on ESOL courses, particularly at entry level, or those without the necessary technology or connectivity for remote online learning, found it particularly difficult to engage in learning remotely.

Most partnerships provided information to learners through online newsletters, and other communications. Most included elements of online safety in their programmes to help learners stay safe from online scams and fraud.

For those partnerships where learners were enrolled as a student in the partner college, counselling services were available in the college, although it is not clear how much adult learners in the community were aware or made use of these services. Partnerships without a college partner referred learners to external agencies or to social services support within the local authority's provision.

Developing designated wellbeing roles within adult learning in the community partnerships

Bridgend adult community learning partnership, along with adult community learning partnerships in neighbouring local authorities in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil, worked collectively to secure Welsh Government funding for a project to identify and develop a network of 'wellbeing champions' across the three areas to cascade knowledge, information and resources to their peers and advise tutors on ways to support their learners on wellbeing issues.

Sector summaries: Adult learning in the community

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Partnerships focused their delivery on their core provision of literacy, numeracy and digital skills and ESOL. By its nature, the sector delivers to adult learners in the community. Although schools re-opened between lockdowns, venues such as public libraries and community centres, where much delivery normally takes place, often did not. During periods where learning venues were open, partnerships used these opportunities to issue learners with digital equipment and to improve their digital skills so that they were able to participate online when lockdown restrictions tightened.

Unlike the school sector, adult learning in the community partnerships and their learners do not have access to the Welsh Government online teaching and learning resource, Hwb, and the tools that are available on it. This slowed the sector's ability to establish online learning platforms quickly. Poor internet access continues to be a barrier to full online participation for a few learners.

In the online sessions we observed in the summer term of 2021, learners engaged well with their tutors and with each other in synchronous online sessions. Overall, learners expressed mixed views about online learning. Some learners preferred the convenience of learning at home and the flexibility that this allowed, while others missed the interpersonal, social aspects of learning. A few learners, especially those with additional learning needs, lacked the independent learning skills and confidence to sustain learning at home without the direct support of a tutor in a classroom situation.

During the early summer of 2021, adult learning in the community partnerships began to re-open their community learning centres and gradually return to face-to-face learning, often blending centre-based and online teaching approaches. Partnerships considered how to reconnect with their traditional learners and adapt their provision to serve the needs of new learners whose lives may have been disrupted during the pandemic, and who are adjusting to a change of employment or direction and need to develop new skills. In their early planning for the new academic year, partnerships considered their approach to delivery and their provision offer. Most planned to retain some aspects of blended learning, even if COVID-19 restrictions are fully lifted and centres are open.

Adapting a course for remote and blended learning delivery

Cardiff and the Vale College delivered an Entry 3 course for ESOL in conjunction with Cardiff and the Vale adult learning in the community partnership. The team delivering the course re-designed the schemes of work and teaching plans to work effectively as a blended learning course to use in lockdown. The teachers divided the learners into 'bubbles', small groups of no more than five people, to be COVID-19 secure when learners are on-site. They reviewed the course and adjusted it to decide when to teach language skills discretely or as mixed skills. The team arranged to introduce new material to learners online as a whole group. Teachers took responsibility for delivering different elements of the course. Learners had additional opportunities to work in their 'bubbles' with a teacher on-site or online to practise listening, reading, and speaking. Teachers took account of learners' social, financial, and cultural circumstances when asking learners to do work online. For example, if learners lived with their families and had limited personal space, they could choose to join the class with videos turned off.

Sector summaries: Adult learning in the community

Leadership

Over the course of the year, patterns of working for managers and tutors have stabilised and are now more regular and sustainable.

Partnerships' approaches to professional learning have evolved over the year. Partnerships report that a few teaching staff started from a low skills base in using digital technology, and that many had never used digital teaching tools. Partnerships collaborated well to bid for Welsh Government professional learning funds. They began to benefit from the support of digital teaching mentors, who received intensive training, and worked with colleagues to improve their digital teaching skills.

Developing a professional learning portal

Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales, which works with all adult learning partnerships across Wales, developed a useful central professional learning portal that their own teachers and those of their partners could access. This facility had the potential to help adult learning in the community partnerships across Wales develop shared understanding about online teaching, learning and assessment methods as well as developing quality standards further.

Follow-up activity

Following a desk-based review of evidence, one partnership was removed from follow-up in June 2021. One partnership remains in follow-up.



Context

Following a series of accreditation events there are now seven accredited partnerships of initial teacher education (ITE) in Wales, comprising universities and their partner schools. The partnerships provide undergraduate and post-graduate routes into teaching. From September 2020, two new routes, both leading to post graduate certificate of education (PGCE), became available, a part-time route, and an employment-based route, both provided by the Open University Partnership.

In 2020-2021, we continued to work with the partnerships to pilot approaches to inspection that align with the new accreditation procedures for ITE. In collaboration with the sector, we undertook three trial activities virtually, to test different inspection methodologies.

In addition to this work, we kept in contact with all the ITE partnerships throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We held virtual engagement meetings with leaders of individual providers and with ITE leads in regional consortia, focusing on the wellbeing of students and staff, support for teaching and learning, and leadership throughout the pandemic. We also held regular stakeholder events and worked with the sector to develop our inspection guidance materials.

Sector summaries: Initial teacher education

Recruitment

In September 2020, 1,498 students were recruited onto full-time ITE programmes. Eight-hundred and eight joined primary programmes and 690 began secondary programmes. In addition, 138 students (43 secondary and 95 primary) were recruited to the Open University's routes¹.

After several years of poor recruitment, there was an overall increase in the number of students recruited to ITE programmes this year. Primary numbers increased by 35%, and secondary by 59%. This uplift in recruitment varied from partnership to partnership, and although increasing, the number of students training in subjects where there is a shortage of teachers in the secondary sector remains a concern. The most significant shortage is in students training to be teachers of Welsh. The proportion of students training to teach through the medium of Welsh across secondary subjects has remained about the same for the past few years and differs in each partnership. The Welsh Government requires partnerships to work towards recruiting 30% of each cohort as Welsh-medium students. Only one partnership achieved this for the academic year 2020-2021.

Standards and wellbeing

Students responded positively to the challenges of training this year. School staff in particular noted strengths in students' digital skills, which helped them to engage with remote learning during periods of lockdown. Staff in some partnership schools also expressed gratitude for the way in which students supported the school in developing digital approaches to learning.

As a response to the changes to programmes brought about by the pandemic, students demonstrated strengths in particular attitudes and behaviours this year, such as flexibility, adaptability, perseverance and resilience. Partnerships identified that students had honed specific skills in their teaching, for example their questioning skills when planning for online learning, and had approached planning and resourcing in new ways in preparing asynchronous² lessons.

Celebrating the work of students in an online conference

In May 2021, Yr Athrofa Professional Learning Partnership held an 'Aiming for Excellence' conference, which included presentations by leading professionals. The conference also provided a platform for students on all ITE programmes in the partnership to present aspects of their research, practice and learning from their experiences of training in 2020-2021. Through the conference, the partnership demonstrated the adaptability and commitment of staff in the university and partner schools to continue to support students and celebrated the resilience of students throughout this challenging time.

Developing students' understanding of digital pedagogies

The University of South Wales Partnership has well-established expertise in digital learning. In adapting the BA (Hons) Primary programme for 2020-2021, partnership leaders realised that the development of students' digital skills would be vitally important in helping students to manage the demands of remote learning. Approaches to digital teaching and learning are integrated across the ITE programme, providing students with a strong foundation of understanding of the pedagogy of using digital tools. All students are provided with a digital device to explore approaches and applications, and university tutors created videos to support the students' use of various applications with pupils. As a result, students adapted well to teaching online. They investigated a range of creative solutions to remote learning across many curriculum areas. Students report that they learnt many new skills during lockdown.

¹ Unpublished data provided by the Education Workforce Council (EWC)

² Asynchronous learning takes place when practitioners prepare lessons that learners access at different times. It offers learners flexibility in their study. Asynchronous learning often takes place online and may include pre-recorded lessons that learners watch independently.

Sector summaries:

Initial teacher education

However, the restrictions brought about by COVID-1, have meant that students have had fewer opportunities to engage in:

- teaching practical sessions
- planning for a full range of learning in a subject, particularly those following secondary programmes, including planning for GCSE and A level students
- interacting with pupils in the classroom and wider contexts, such as break-time, lunchtime, and learning outside of the classroom
- working with other adults in the classroom and observing teachers working in a range of contexts
- a range of classroom management approaches
- testing out the links between theory and practice in school

As a response, the Welsh Government (2021j) has provided a grant scheme to support those on ITE programmes in 2020-2021 who, due to COVID restrictions in Wales, either on a national, local or individual basis, have been unable to gain sufficient school experience to evidence attainment for award of QTS.

Teaching and learning

The restrictions of the pandemic meant that students were unable to undertake experiences in school in the ways that these were originally planned for the autumn term. As a response, all partnerships redesigned their programmes to bring forward academic and theoretical study to the start of the year. There were limited opportunities for students, mentors and tutors to meet face-to-face, but when this occurred, students benefited from the chance to explore aspects of classroom practice and to build relationships with their peers and partnership staff. A few partnerships provided valuable opportunities for students to test out their teaching strategies through online 'micro-teaching'³. This helped students to build their confidence and their repertoire of approaches in a supportive environment.

The necessary re-organisation of the programmes, combined with the difficulties of working in school, meant that students had fewer opportunities to investigate the links between theory and practice in the classroom, or to gather evidence to support their research assignments. However, in some schools, students had more opportunities to engage in professional learning with school staff through virtual professional development events. In the most effective of the lead schools, students have been able to experience approaches to career-long professional learning, and to see how these schools support staff to continuously develop their ideas and skills.

A modified approach to research to support school improvement

The Cardiff Partnership reconsidered the approach taken to students' research assignments this year. PGCE students were unable to collect evidence in schools to explore the links between theory and practice in the autumn term. Instead, they analysed critically a range of educational literature to investigate an area of development from their school's improvement plan. They worked with the 'Research Champions' in the lead schools to ensure that their approach would be relevant to the school's context. This helped to reinforce the research culture in the school. Students produced an infographic to illustrate key ideas in tackling the issue. In some cases, students presented their findings to senior leaders and to school governors. The assignment helped students to consider how research might be used to improve practice in a real-life context. At the same time, lead schools reported that the students' work was beneficial to the school.

³ A technique that allows students to practise their teaching to a small group of their peers

Sector summaries:

Initial teacher education

A particular challenge this year has been preparing students to teach the Curriculum for Wales. Partnership schools are at various stages of development in preparing for the new curriculum, as outlined in our report 'Preparing for the Curriculum for Wales' (Estyn, 2020h). Many lead schools have been involved with curriculum reform as pioneer, innovation or Quality Improvement schools, and university tutors have also engaged in various aspects of the Curriculum for Wales work. However, opportunities for students to gain first-hand experiences of how schools were preparing for the curriculum have been limited, particularly in secondary schools. In the best cases, especially in primary schools, staff encouraged students to develop innovative plans for learning, and students experienced how schools were approaching curriculum reform in different contexts. Approaches to developing students' understanding of curriculum design and development are too variable across all programmes.

All programmes have processes to assess students' trajectory towards Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) as set out in revised guidance [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): additional temporary guidance for Initial Teacher Education \(ITE\) partnerships January 2021](#) (Welsh Government, 2021c). All partnership staff understand the principles of doing this, although in practice it has been challenging to work with all partners to ensure that everyone has a common understanding of how to judge the trajectory of students' progress against the standards for QTS. Overall, students found the process of submitting evidence challenging. They found it difficult to identify relevant evidence, particularly against standards where they feel that they have too little experience. In 2021-2022, those students who need further support will be able to gather more evidence through the Welsh Government grant scheme.

Leadership

Despite the uncertainties of COVID-19, universities and lead schools have demonstrated notable tenacity and agility in working together to support student teachers this year. Lead schools have shown a particular commitment to ITE, ensuring that they continued to provide the school-based elements of the programmes during times when they faced significant challenges due to the pandemic.

All partnerships have systems to track the progress of students and intervene in a timely and appropriate way when issues with individual students arise. However, although many partnerships collected a wide range of data about students' progress, effective systems to identify strengths and areas for improvement to inform improvements are at an early stage of development.

Alternative approaches to supporting student teachers in school

Before the pandemic, link university tutors from the Aberystwyth Partnership would visit schools to evaluate a student's progress. To overcome the restrictions of travelling to schools, the Aberystwyth Partnership developed a process of 'unseen observations'. Prior to the student teaching a lesson, the student and their university tutor met online to discuss the lesson plan and intended learning. After the mentor had observed the student teaching, the student, the mentor and the university tutor met again online. The tutor listened to the mentor providing feedback and the student reflecting on the lesson. Then, all three participants discussed how the student could make progress. The strategy allowed for an ongoing dialogue between tutors, mentors and students.

Sector summaries:

Initial teacher education

All partnerships faced difficulties in placing students in school this year because of COVID-19 restrictions. Consequently, partnerships reached out to a wider network of schools to support students. Developing relationships with the regional consortia supported the sharing of information about schools, which helped the partnerships with student placements. However, the expansion of the partnerships, together with limitations on visiting schools, meant that partnerships have not undertaken quality assurance procedures and individual mentor development as planned. As a result, students have had significantly variable school experiences.

All partnerships found value in meeting virtually and this has benefited their development. Many partnerships have developed new ways of working with their mentors that overcome geographical boundaries and time constraints. Webinars and online professional learning events have supported mentors in developing their practice. In the most effective cases, mentors have shared their experiences and their research of mentoring through the pandemic.

All partnerships demonstrated a strong commitment to collaboration, and their working relationships are maturing. Each partnership ensured that all partners were equally represented on leadership boards and committees. They are beginning to explore the ways that the expertise of each partner organisation may contribute most effectively to the strategic leadership of the partnership. All partnerships are developing a culture of research-informed practice. Universities are supporting the development of inquiry in their lead schools, and partnerships are working together to inform the development of the sector.

Using research to develop approaches to the assessment of student teachers

At the CaBan partnership, a mentor development group comprising partnership staff from school and university is carrying out research to find the most effective way to describe a student teacher's progress through their ITE programme. They have reviewed the literature on student progression to identify typical behaviours at certain points of a novice teacher's development. This has informed a set of descriptors to be used by mentors in assessing students' progress towards QTS.

The tutors and mentors in the group are investigating this aspect of their work as part of their own post-graduate research studies. The partnership will pilot the use of the draft descriptors and guidance for assessment across the partnership. Following the pilot, the partnership will evaluate and refine these approaches.



Context

In August 2016, full responsibility for the Welsh for Adults sector was transferred to the National Centre for Learning Welsh (the Centre). The Centre is an arm's length body that is funded by the Welsh Government and is based in the University of Wales, Trinity St David. It funds Welsh for Adults programmes delivered by 11 'Learn Welsh' providers. The Centre receives additional funding from the Welsh Government for the 'Work Welsh' programme, which aims to strengthen employees' bilingual skills in the workplace.

Since the Centre's inception, the number of learners enrolled on courses and the number of learning activities held has continued to grow (Welsh Government, 2020c). The national Work Welsh scheme figures were included fully for the first time in 2019-2020. However, there was a significant reduction in funding for this programme during 2020-2021.

This year, Learn Welsh providers continued to provide a full range of courses and informal learning activities virtually. A few providers offered a small range of face-to-face courses when circumstances allowed. As a result, we went ahead with the proposed inspection of the Centre and our first virtual inspection, in January 2021. In addition, during the summer term we carried out a series of try outs to pilot inspection approaches for blended learning.

Sector summaries: Welsh for Adults

Wellbeing

During the inspection of the Centre, which took place during the second national lockdown, nearly 1,700 learners completed our learner questionnaire. Nearly all learners felt safe and enjoy their learning, and most said that they receive good personal support from their tutors. Most learners found it easy to search for information and register for courses through the national digital platform. Overall, levels of learner satisfaction were high.

The Centre's leaders used feedback from learners to help plan the provision to meet their needs and interests. During the pandemic, the Centre experimented with planning provision by registering learners nationally and then working with individual providers to arrange courses in their areas at times that were convenient for learners. This enabled learners to contribute to the process of structuring provision, based on their availability.

Learn Welsh providers created an inclusive and supportive learning environment, which encouraged learners to practise their language skills without fear of making mistakes. Most tutors supported learners to set useful personal targets, evaluate progress and plan the next steps in their learning. Learners identified that attending courses had been beneficial to their wellbeing as well as their progress as Welsh learners.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Tutors have continued to develop their teaching methodologies for working in an online environment effectively. For example, they have developed strategies to engage learners in newly developed online and blended learning resources.

The Centre has been successful in bringing more consistency to Learn Welsh provision across Wales. It has created a national curriculum and course books across all levels. Using the Centre's established digital platform for learners to search, enrol and pay for courses enabled the sector to react quickly to the pandemic by moving most provision online. In addition to providing online learning, the platform hosts a range of digital resources that enables practitioners to share good practice. It also provides continuous professional development to Learn Welsh staff, including approaches to online teaching and learning. The National Centre has a small amount of funding to help learners to access courses, including those suffering from digital poverty. However, at present the use of this fund is limited.

Most learners reported that learning Welsh has helped them to feel part of the wider Welsh-speaking community.

Sector summaries: Welsh for Adults

Leadership

The Centre has developed a constructive and supportive working relationship with Learn Welsh providers, which enables them to conduct honest and challenging discussions, when necessary. Leaders from across the Centre and the 11 Learn Welsh providers have continued to work closely together to further adapt and improve provision, building on the regular meetings established to share practice early in the pandemic.

The Centre worked closely with the individual Learn Welsh providers to support the wellbeing and care of the workforce by providing a wellbeing and mental health programme with an external expert. Participation in the programme, which includes coping with change, mental resilience and taking care of wellbeing while working from home, has been high. This has had a positive impact on tutors' wellbeing and their continuing participation in the sector during the pandemic.

The Centre has developed to become an influential, national voice for the sector. It has succeeded in creating a wide range of strategic partnerships with national organisations to extend the formal and informal learning offer. The Centre has taken advantage of these partnerships to provide a varied and exciting range of opportunities for learners to use their linguistic skills, whether socially, culturally or professionally, including throughout the pandemic. It has a clear vision to transform the linguistic landscape of Wales by supporting learners to become active users of the Welsh language within their communities, workplaces and networks, whatever their level. As a result, the Welsh for Adults sector contributes effectively to the Welsh Government's aim of achieving **a million Welsh speakers by 2050** (2017).



Context

Gyrfa Cymru Careers Wales is the Welsh Government owned subsidiary body, that provides all-age, independent and impartial careers advice and guidance. This year, Careers Wales (2021) launched its new five-year vision, 'Brighter Futures'. This new strategy aims to provide 'high quality, impartial careers guidance and coaching that can have a positive impact on...education, employment and wellbeing outcomes' (Careers Wales, 2021, p.4). It applies to primary and secondary school pupils, young people aged 16-18 in learning and work, and adults requiring careers support and guidance.

Sector summaries:

Careers

To complement this strategy, the Welsh Government published draft guidance to support the cross-cutting theme of careers and work-related experiences (CWRE) for the Curriculum for Wales. Independent advice was commissioned to review recent publications by Estyn, the Welsh Government and the Gatsby Foundation (2013) for consideration during the development of the guidance material.

In our thematic report '[Post-16 partnerships](#)' (Estyn, 2021 q), we found that many learners value the advice and guidance they receive at school, but a minority feel that this does not offer enough information about pathways other than A level study, beyond the school's own sixth form. Many learners believe that they do not know enough about the quality of the options available to them and the outcomes achieved by learners who recently completed those courses.



Section 1

Sector summaries: Learning in the justice sector

Context

In Wales, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation leads on inspections of youth offending teams, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons leads on inspections of prisons, including the young offenders' institution, and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) leads on inspections of the secure children's home. Estyn joins these teams to inspect the quality of education and training.

Estyn's inspection guidance for inspecting prisons in Wales can be found here:

[Estyn, Inspection Guidance](#)

Sector summaries:

Learning in the justice sector

Inspecting Probation Services

HMI Probation has not undertaken inspections of Youth Offending Services in Wales during this year.

Inspecting secure children's homes

CIW has not inspected the education provision in Hillside Secure Centre this year.

Inspecting prisons

In nearly all prisons in Wales, education and training is delivered by the prisons, rather than external agencies. In HMP Berwyn, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service contracts with Novus Cambria to deliver education.

This year, Estyn worked with partners to inspect the provision for adults in Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Swansea and for young people in Young Offender Institution (YOI) Parc and HMP Usk and Prescoed. Estyn also maintained contact with other prisons in Wales (HMP Cardiff, HMP Parc and HMP Berwyn) through telephone interviews.

HMIP's published inspection reports can be found here:

[Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons](#)

Wellbeing

Under direction from the UK Government, the priority within prisons in Wales has been to minimise the transmission of illness during the pandemic. This has meant that in nearly all prisons, for much the period of restrictions, prisoners have been confined to their cells for up to 23 hours a day. All prisons made arrangements to isolate prisoners who showed symptoms of illness and to enable those with pre-existing medical conditions that made them additionally vulnerable to isolate themselves.

Prisons were instructed to suspend arrangements for families and friends to visit prisoners in the early stages of pandemic restrictions, owing to the risk of visitors introducing infection to prisons. All prisons gave prisoners additional telephone credit to enable them to maintain contact with their families. They also set up facilities that enabled prisoners to stay connected with families through a secure video call system, which most prisoners found very helpful.

Sector summaries:

Learning in the justice sector

In HMP/YOI Parc, the education provision has engaged young people in learning throughout the pandemic effectively and enabled them to progress in their learning. Throughout the period of restrictions, the young people's unit has continued to provide its learners with education, enabling them to access workshops or class-based sessions for a minimum of two hours each weekday, while managing their risks of exposure to infection by allocating them to small cohort bubbles.

Swansea's education staff outreach workers engaged well with prisoners on wings to help them continue with their education. This has enabled a majority of prisoners to gain accredited qualifications at a range of levels while COVID-related restrictions were in effect. HMP Berwyn staff began to use in-cell telephony to support learners pursuing qualifications, enabling a few prisoners to progress towards gaining accreditation. In other prisons without this technology, staff have been responding to requests from a few prisoners and supplied them with printed or photocopied learning resources to enable them to continue to study. A few prisoners in Usk and Prescoed made good progress towards Open University courses or courses funded by the Prisoner Education Trust. In Usk, a few prisoners had been supplied with art materials, which they found benefited their mental health.

In all prisons, prisoners' access to library materials has been very limited. Education staff responded quickly to lockdown restrictions by producing distraction packs for prisoners. These contained quizzes, wordsearch exercises and, in several prisons, articles written by prisoners. The packs also focused on wellbeing resources.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

HMP/YOI Parc's management of learners' provision gradually increased the level of activities they could access over the year, and from 19 April 2021 the offer of educational activities for learners was extended to 4½ hours a day. This was made possible by the fact that there was only a small number of young people in the institution and they are isolated from the main prison population. The continued provision of education and skills activities enabled them to gain many qualifications between April 2020 and March 2021.

While access to education activities elsewhere has been very restricted, all prisons have continued to allocate a minority of prisoners to essential work roles.

In HMP Swansea, essential jobs allocated to prisoners, such as tailoring, building maintenance work, cleaning or food pack assembly have remained open. There were good arrangements in place for prisoners to maintain hygiene in workshops. The prison adapted work activities to respond well to the impact of COVID-19. For example, prisoners in the tailoring workshop began to make protective clothing for front line health care staff. Identifying the need for increased levels of hygiene within the prison led to the prison increasing the number of prisoners training as cleaners, with several being trained to undertake bio-cleaning on wings.

Sector summaries:

Learning in the justice sector

Throughout the pandemic, prisoners in HMP Prescoed have been employed to keep the prison's farm running, gaining skills in an authentic work setting. Prisoners also maintained Prescoed's market garden to grow food for prisoners. Managers increased the work opportunities in the prison by opening a new bricklaying workshop, enabling more prisoners to be involved in work and training. Prescoed also made effective use of its links with external employers to place prisoners into work opportunities within the community throughout the period of restrictions.

Developing education resources for prisoners

While access to online resources is highly restricted in all prisons, HMP Cardiff has begun to produce and develop TV-based education resources for prisoners. Prisoners can access these materials from their cells. The prison will continue to use these resources after COVID restrictions are lifted to enhance the learning experience for prisoners. Other prisons, such as Usk and Swansea, have worked in partnership with Cardiff to explore how they may be able to develop this facility in their prisons.

Leadership

Leaders and managers in all prisons placed a high priority on minimising the risk of infection transmission in their prisons. They have managed social distancing well within their institutions. Many prisoners in HMP Swansea reported that senior managers had communicated well with them to ensure that they understood how arrangements were being managed to ensure prisoners' safety.

In all prisons, leaders and managers introduced routine testing of staff early. Many education and training staff were invited to work at home for part of the week, where they were able to develop and update learning resources. This reduced the traffic into prisons.

All prisons have paid close attention to UK Central Government and Welsh Government guidelines regarding safety in prisons. Education and training staff carried out early risk assessments of classrooms to identify how many learners each could accommodate once prisons were instructed that education activities could resume while observing social distancing. However, in HMP Usk, this reintroduction has been limited by the building's very small classrooms.

Education and training staff in prisons across Wales worked well with each other to share resources to include in resource packs for prisoners.

Maintaining good communication with prisoners

The governor of HMP Swansea made frequent tours of the prison's accommodation wings regularly to communicate with prisoners through the period of pandemic restrictions. Prisoners appreciated these attempts to keep them informed and this gave them opportunities to understand how the arrangements staff improved prisoners' safety.

Section 1

Sector summaries:

Follow-up in primary, secondary, and all-age schools, PRUs and non-maintained nursery settings

Context

At the beginning of the academic year, 12 secondary schools, nine primary schools and two pupil referral units (PRUs) required special measures. Nine secondary schools, two all-age schools and six primary schools required significant improvement. In addition, four non-maintained settings required focused improvement. Until very recently, we have been unable to monitor the progress of these providers first-hand, on account of the restrictions due to the pandemic.

Sector summaries: Follow-up in primary, secondary, and all-age schools, PRUs and non-maintained nursery settings

Throughout the academic year, we maintained close contact with these vulnerable schools, PRUs and non-maintained settings. We allocated a pastoral HMI to each school or PRU. The pastoral HMI had experience of working directly with the provider and knows their context well. We allocated a lead inspector to maintain contact with settings in focused improvement. Generally, contact has been half termly for providers in special measures, and termly for providers in significant improvement and focused improvement. However, for a minority of providers, contact was more frequent in response to the providers' specific needs.

Almost all contact over the autumn and spring terms has been through virtual meetings with leaders. Through supportive discussions, inspectors have been able to understand the school's/PRU's/setting's situation regarding learner and staff wellbeing, approaches to distance learning and leadership. Inspectors and leaders discussed the progress providers have been able to make in addressing the recommendations of the core inspection, as well as the impact of extended periods of distance learning on pupils' progress in schools and PRUs. For a few providers placed in special measures or significant improvement early in 2019-2020 before the pandemic, we have reviewed the school's post-inspection action plan and the local authority's statement of support during virtual meetings with leaders and supported leaders to strengthen their plans where necessary. Where appropriate, inspectors have supported providers to review and adapt their action plans to account for changes in timescales and mode of operation due to the pandemic. In addition, where appropriate, we established discussions with the local authority regarding relevant issues raised by the provider.

Over the year, the focus of the pastoral contact has been non-evaluative. In most providers, leaders have reported a continuous drive to bring about improvements, despite the disruption and additional workload caused by the pandemic, including periods of home learning. Many leaders have been under significant pressures during this time and inspectors have identified that their wellbeing has suffered. For example, in non-maintained settings and PRUs, leaders identified significant pressure in keeping their setting open safely during the second lockdown. For primary schools where many leaders have a significant teaching commitment, the management of the pandemic has put significant strain on the headteacher.

As the pandemic has eased over the year, inspectors have made short, pastoral visits to nearly all providers in special measures and many providers in significant improvement. These non-evaluative visits have served to set the scene for resuming formal, statutory monitoring, most likely in the autumn term 2021. In nearly all schools and PRUs, leaders have been proud to welcome inspectors back to their provision and to explain at first hand the work undertaken since March 2020.

Sector summaries:

Follow-up in primary, secondary, and all-age schools, PRUs and non-maintained nursery settings

During the second half of the summer term, inspectors resumed formal on-site monitoring activity in a small number of schools in statutory follow-up. One primary school visited was removed from special measures and one secondary school was removed from significant improvement following their monitoring visits, because they had made enough progress in addressing the recommendations from the core inspection and had developed their leadership capacity well.

During the spring term, working jointly with CIW, we removed two of the four settings from focused improvement. We received notification from the local authority of the permanent closure of a further setting in focused improvement during the autumn term 2020. During the second half of the summer term, we were able to resume formal focused improvement monitoring and removed one setting from focused improvement.

Estyn review and progress review

At the beginning of the year, there were 49 primary schools, 22 secondary schools, three special schools, one all-age school and one PRU in Estyn review. This is a non-statutory level of follow-up, where providers cause concern but not to the extent of requiring significant improvement or special measures. In addition, 22 non-maintained settings were in progress review, not including CIW-only inspections.

During the spring term 2021, inspectors worked together with local authority officers from each authority to review the progress of providers that had been in Estyn review for more than 18 months. In particular, the virtual review panels considered leaders' capacity to continue to make improvements. As a result of these reviews, 26 primary schools, 14 secondary schools and a PRU were removed from follow-up. In six different authorities, the review panels decided to keep six primary schools and two secondary schools in monitoring for a further period of time. Inspectors have established further joint reviews to evaluate the progress of these eight providers alongside the remaining providers still in Estyn review, during the autumn term 2021.

In addition, during the spring term 2021, inspectors worked with local authority officers from 10 local authorities to review the progress and ongoing capacity of non-maintained settings that had been in progress review for more than three terms. We removed 13 settings from progress review, working in partnership with CIW. However, the review panel agreed to keep four settings from four different local authorities in progress review for a further period of time. We will evaluate their progress during a further review with local authorities, during the autumn term 2021. Since September 2020, two settings in progress review in two different local authorities have either closed or ceased to provide funded education.

During the summer term 2021, working jointly with CIW, we reviewed the progress of a further two settings from two local authorities. We removed one of these from further follow-up activity, although one required additional time to embed the improvements.



Section 2

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

September 2020

In September 2020, schools and colleges re-opened to all learners. There was a period of flexibility of up to a fortnight in recognition that schools may want to focus on priority year groups, such as those new to secondary schools, those sitting exams in the summer or those in reception classes. This also allowed time for any planning and reorganisation. Following advice from the Chief Medical Officer for Wales, face coverings were recommended for all members of the public over 11 years in indoor settings in which social distancing could not be maintained, including schools and colleges and dedicated transport. Welsh Government guidance for schools and further education required settings and local authorities to undertake 'risk assessments of their estates to determine if face coverings should be recommended for staff and young people in communal areas'. This included school and college transport.

On 3 September, the Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, announced that, while the impact of COVID-19 had made it necessary to reprioritise government business to reflect the unprecedented nature of the crisis, the additional learning needs (ALN) code and associated regulations remained a key priority. They would be laid before the Senedd in February 2021 to enable the commencement and phased roll out of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act to start in September 2021.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On 7 September, the Welsh Government **announced** funding of £1.8 million and £469,000, for schools and further education settings respectively, to provide free face coverings for all learners.

On 11 September, the First Minister, Mark Drakeford, **announced** new limits on the number of people who could meet indoors, as evidence showed that indoor gatherings were the main source of transmission for the virus in Wales. People were encouraged to work from home wherever they could to limit person-to-person contact, and local authorities were given new powers to shut down premises and events on public health grounds. The changes came into effect on 14 September amid an increase in cases of coronavirus nationwide and the emergence of a number of hotspot areas, particularly in the South Wales valleys. People were allowed to continue to travel across local authority boundaries for the purposes of accessing or delivering education.

In mid-September, Estyn began engagement calls with non-maintained settings funded to deliver early education across Wales to learn more about how individual settings and the sector in general had managed since March 2020, and how they were operating at that time. The work focused on three main topics, including wellbeing, supporting learning and re-establishing provision.

On 20 September, the Minister for Education **announced** that the Welsh Government would ensure that all pupils eligible for free school meals would continue to receive provisions if they were shielding or had to self-isolate, thanks to £420,000 of funding.

On 21 September, the Joint Biosecurity Centre **recommended** that the COVID-19 alert level should move from level 3 (A COVID-19 epidemic is in general circulation) to level 4 (A COVID-19 epidemic is in general circulation; transmission is high or rising exponentially). The Chief Medical Officers for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland recommended that all four nations of the UK move to level 4.

Towards the end of September, Estyn restarted engagement calls to schools and PRUs, with an initial focus on a thematic review of the extent and impact of local authorities' and regional consortia's approaches to supporting schools, their school communities, governing bodies and learners. This work included questionnaires for learners, governors, parents and school staff to gather their experiences over this period. This work helped to share effective practice across Wales and to identify what might be done differently if there was to be further disruption to learning, with a particular focus on supporting vulnerable learners and putting into practice guidance to support pupils' learning (Estyn, 2021 p). From the end of September, Estyn also restarted link inspector engagement calls to further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships. The calls focused on gathering information about how providers were developing blended learning approaches and engaging with learners to support their wellbeing.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

Throughout September, the Welsh Government **introduced** a series of local measures to combat rising cases of COVID-19 in areas such as Caerphilly and Rhondda Cynon Taf. Measures included such strategies as banning meeting indoors and not leaving the county without a reasonable excuse.

October 2020

On 1 October, Kirsty Williams **confirmed** membership of the 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnicities Communities, Contributions and Cynefin in the new curriculum' working group. The group would review the learning resources currently available to support the teaching of themes relating to these communities, their contributions and experiences; advise on the commission of new learning resources; and review and report on professional development to support teaching in these areas of learning. The following week, an analysis of responses to the public consultation on legislative proposals for religion, values, and ethics (RVE) in the Curriculum for Wales was published. This showed 'broad support' for the majority of proposals relating to RVE, including both the scope of RVE and arrangements for Agreed Syllabus Conferences.

On 5 October, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020a) published its report on progress made in achieving a new Curriculum for Wales. The report recognised that Wales 'has a clear vision for its education system and for its learners and sets out recommendations which prioritise actions based on what the system, and more specifically schools, need to roll out the new curriculum successfully from 2022'.

In early October, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) published a report that described the way the Welsh Government provided laptops and wi-fi devices to address the lack of access to online learning caused by the coronavirus pandemic as 'commendable' (Sibieta and Cottell, 2020). The report stated that, in contrast to other UK nations, the Welsh Government was able to draw on 'well-established infrastructure to act quickly following the closures' (Sibieta and Cottell, 2020, p.8).

By 9 October, there were local COVID-19 **restrictions** in 15 local authority areas and in Llanelli to control 'a rapid and sharp increase in coronavirus cases'. The Welsh Government recognised that 'The general trend in Wales is a worsening situation and most areas where local restrictions are in place have reported a seven-day trend where COVID-19 cases have increased'.

On 12 October, Qualifications Wales (2020) published a breakdown of the final results that were awarded in summer 2020 for GCSEs, AS and A level qualifications in Wales. They noted that at a national level the results issued this summer were considerably higher than results in recent years. They also identified evidence of inconsistent increases in results across centres and subjects this year. A small number of centres and a small number of subjects saw substantially greater increases than seen in previous years. In some cases, the increases in results were very large and atypical.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

The following day, the Welsh Government (2020b) published an updated action plan setting out the next steps in Wales' reform journey, ahead of the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales in 2022. The action plan, known as 'Our National Mission', showed the steps the Welsh Government has taken in response to the coronavirus pandemic and its response to the independent report published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) the previous week. At the same time, the Welsh Government (2021d) published 'Curriculum for Wales: the journey to 2022'. This document set out shared expectations that were developed and agreed in discussion between the Welsh Government, regional consortia and Estyn.

On 15 October, Estyn (2020a) published a thematic report 'Celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion', which highlights good practice in creating school and college cultures that celebrate diversity, prioritise inclusion and address LGBT+ issues in a development-appropriate manner.

On 19 October, the First Minister **announced** that a 'short, sharp "firebreak" will be introduced across Wales at the end of this week to help regain control of coronavirus'. It would apply to everyone living in Wales and would replace the local restrictions that were in force in some parts of the country. During the firebreak, primary and special schools would re-open as normal after half-term; and secondary schools would re-open after the half-term for children in Years 7 and Year 8 and most vulnerable children. Learners would be able to go into schools, further education settings or work-based learning settings to take exams or assessments, but others would continue their learning from home for an extra week. Universities would provide a blend of in-person and online learning. Childcare settings would stay open as normal.

On 20 October, Estyn (2020j) published a thematic report on 'The value of youth work training'. This report evaluates the quality of youth work training and the appropriateness of the training to provide youth workers with the skills they need to fulfil their role and meet the demands of modern youth work in all its forms.

After the October half-term, Estyn continued to carry out its engagement activities with schools and settings, with a focus on teaching, curriculum and professional learning. These activities were a continuation of the work planned for the pause in inspection activity during the academic year. Estyn's engagement activities with post-16 providers focused on gathering information for two thematic reviews about their blended approaches to supporting learning and about learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing.

On 22 October, the Welsh Government **announced** that it was providing an extra £10 million towards supporting university students during the pandemic. The funding is intended to support activities such as increased mental health services and student financial hardship funds. It would also help universities to bolster their student support services, including food services for students who are required to self-isolate.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

At the end of October, the Welsh Government published its interim report based upon documentation from key bodies and the experiences of a wide range of stakeholders involved in, or impacted by, the awarding of grades for GCSEs, AS and A levels, Skills Challenge Certificate and vocational qualifications in the summer 2020. This set out five recommendations including: 'In 2021, qualifications should be awarded on the basis of robust and moderated assessment undertaken by the learner's educational setting and not through an exam series' (Casella, 2020, p.10).

November 2020

On 10 November, Kirsty Williams **confirmed** Wales's approach for qualifications in 2021. This set out that there would be no end-of-year examinations for learners taking GCSEs, AS levels or A levels. The Minister outlined, 'that in place of exams, the Welsh Government intended to work with schools and colleges to take forward teacher-managed assessments' and that these would be, 'externally set and marked but delivered within a classroom environment under teacher supervision'. Her expectation was that this work would 'form the basis for centre-based outcomes which will be linked to an agreed national approach to provide consistency across Wales'.

On 12 November, the deputy Minister for Health and Social Services **launched** a new 'Parenting. Give it Time' campaign to provide information, support and advice for parents. The campaign covered issues reflecting parents' concerns during the pandemic, including how to understand and respond to children's behaviour. It offered practical tips and expert advice on a range of issues, with the core themes being: your child's behaviour, giving your child time, and supporting parents through the challenges they face.

The following week, the Minister for Education **announced** that the new all-Wales 'National Master's in Education' programme would be available for teachers from September 2021. This will support up to 500 education professionals to take the qualification.

On 20 November the Welsh Government updated its 2019 'Online safety action plan for children and young people in Wales'. The action plan was expanded to reflect the important role that cyber resilience and data security has in ensuring that our children and young people are safe and secure online.

On 23 November, updated operational guidance on the use of face coverings in schools and colleges came into force (Welsh Government, 2021). The guidance now stated that face coverings should be worn: in all areas outside the classroom by staff and learners in secondary schools and colleges; on dedicated school and college transport for learners in Year 7 and up; and by visitors to all schools and colleges, including parents and carers dropping off and picking up children.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On 24 November, Qualifications Wales [announced](#) that, following the Minister for Education's decision to cancel GCSEs, AS and A level exams in summer 2021 and having listened to early proposals from the Design and Delivery Advisory Group, they had made the decision to continue to use non-examination assessments in GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020-2021. Also, that the January exam series, unit assessments for GCSE Welsh Literature, English Literature and information and communication technology (ICT) would be cancelled.

In the same week, officials from all four home nations [agreed](#) a common plan for the festive period at the end of December. This outlined that travel restrictions across the four administrations would be lifted between 23 and 27 December, and up to three households could form an exclusive 'bubble' to meet at home during this period.

On 26 November, Estyn (2020h) published a report that focused on identifying how maintained secondary, all-age and special schools were preparing for the Curriculum for Wales. This report contains case studies and cameos from settings around Wales, to help others on their journey towards the implementation of the new curriculum 2022.

On the same day, the Welsh Government (2020d) published its vision for the post compulsory education and training sector (PCET) in Wales. It highlighted the challenges that Wales will face in the future: recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing a new relationship with the European Union, and dramatic longer term technological, environmental, cultural and demographic change.

December 2020

As the COVID-19 crisis worsened, there were a wide range of announcements throughout the month of December as the government reacted to a situation that was changing quickly.

On Tuesday 8 December, Wales began to [vaccinate](#) people against COVID-19. All health boards began administering vaccines to care home staff, those over 80 years and frontline health and social care workers most at risk.

On 9 December, Estyn (2020i) published the Chief Inspector's Annual Report for 2019-2020. This annual report reviewed the standards and quality of education and training in Wales from September 2019 to March 2020. It also offered an initial account of how schools and other education and training providers supported pupils and learners during lockdown, while providing continuity of learning for them remotely. In his foreword, the Chief Inspector recognised that the challenges to the Welsh education system during this time were 'many, complex and unexpected'. He reflected on 'what has been learnt from the crisis and on some implications for the future'.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

At the same time, Estyn (2020c, 2020d, 2020e, 2020f, 2020g) published insight reports on the immediate effects of the pandemic on schools, PRUs, all-age settings, and post-16 providers. These reports summarised the findings made from the engagement calls carried out during September and October.

On 10 December, the Minister for Education [announced](#) that secondary schools and colleges in Wales would move to online learning from 14 December as part of a 'national effort to reduce transmission of coronavirus'. She identified that the R rate in Wales had increased to 1.27 with a doubling time of just 11.7 days.

On 14 December, the Welsh Government [set out a plan](#) to roll out serial coronavirus testing in schools and colleges from January. Under this process, schools and further education settings would be offered the ability to perform serial testing, using lateral flow tests of close contacts to replace the need to self-isolate for those within that setting. This means that learners and staff identified as close contacts would be asked to either self-isolate as normal OR to take a lateral flow test at the start of the day for the duration of the self-isolation period. Those who test negative could continue with their normal activities.

On 16 December, the First Minister [confirmed](#) that Wales had met the criteria to move to alert level 4. As a result, new restrictions would apply to all of Wales. These included: that all non-essential retail would close at the end of trading on Christmas Eve; all hospitality premises would close from 6pm on Christmas Day; and tighter restrictions on household mixing, staying-at-home, holiday accommodation and travel would apply from December 28, after the five-day Christmas period.

On the same day, Kirsty Williams [provided further details](#) of how the system put in place to replace examinations for general qualifications in 2021 would work. This included the establishment of a Design and Delivery Advisory group that would support 'wellbeing, fairness and progression' for learners in 2021. The decision was supported by the news that the Welsh Government was investing an additional £1.9 million in education resources to support learners in Year 12 and Year 13 and those in college in preparing for their A level assessments.

On the 19 December, the Welsh Government [announced](#) that Wales was to return to a national 'lockdown'. The First Minister identified that 'new information has required an immediate response'. After hearing advice from senior medical and scientific advisers, the Welsh Government decided to bring forward the alert level 4 restrictions for Wales, in line with the action being taken in London and the South East of England. Stay-at-home restrictions came into effect from midnight and rules that allowed two households to come together to form a bubble over a five-day period applied on Christmas Day only.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

January 2021

As the new year began, on 4 January, the Welsh Government, in consultation with the Welsh Local Government Association and Colegau Cymru, [agreed](#) that all schools, colleges and independent schools would continue with online learning until 18 January. Schools and colleges were open only for children of critical workers and vulnerable learners, as well as for those who needed to complete essential exams or assessments.

Despite the announcement made on 4 January, on 8 January the First Minister [announced](#) that the move to online learning in all schools and colleges in Wales would continue and be brought in line with the government's three-week review cycle. Therefore, they would consider the approach to schools at the same time as the next review on 29 January. Mr Drakeford identified that, 'Unless there is a significant reduction in cases of coronavirus before that review schools in Wales will continue to provide online provision until the February half term. Vulnerable children and those of key workers will still be able to undertake face to face learning.' Childcare settings remained open.

On 11 January, the Youth Work Board for Wales (2021) published 'Time to deliver for young people in Wales'. Among its recommendations were that the Welsh Government should establish a legislative basis for youth work in Wales and review the funding model for youth work.

On 15 January, Estyn (2021p) published its review, 'Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19'. The review provides an overview of how local authorities and regional consortia worked with schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) to promote learning and support vulnerable pupils during the COVID-19 period between June and November 2020. The following week, Estyn provided each local authority and regional consortium with an individual evaluative commentary on the support that they gave to their different learning communities during this time.

On 18 January, the Welsh Government [announced](#) an additional £40m for universities to support students facing financial hardship, helping the students most affected by the pandemic with expenses such as accommodation costs.

On 20 January, the Welsh Government [provided an update](#) that learners undertaking GCSEs, AS and A levels approved by Qualifications Wales would have their qualifications awarded through a Centre Determined Grade model. This meant that grades would be determined by schools or colleges based on an assessment of learners' work.

On 28 January, Estyn (2021q) published a thematic report and training materials on post-16 partnerships. It reported on strategic planning and partnership working for the education of 16 to 19-year-olds in school sixth forms and further education colleges. It provided an overview of the way that mainstream school sixth forms work with each other and with further education colleges, to support learners to study the post-16 courses that best meet their needs and abilities.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

At its three-weekly review, the Welsh Government announced that schools and colleges would remain closed until after February half-term, apart from provision for vulnerable learners and children of key workers. The First Minister [announced](#) that the return to primary schools would be planned in a phased and flexible way from 22 February, if the public health situation continued to improve. He also outlined that, 'If there is sufficient headroom, we will bring back small numbers of secondary and college learners at the same time'.

During the final week of January, Kirsty Williams [announced](#) the publication of the Curriculum for Wales implementation plan. It set out how the Welsh Government would support schools in delivering the Curriculum for Wales and the collaborative ways of working that they would continue to use to make this happen. At the same time, it launched a consultation on non-statutory School Improvement Guidance. This guidance set out the new framework for evaluation, improvement and accountability, aligned to the Curriculum for Wales.

February 2021

At the start of the month, the Welsh Government [set out plans](#) for a £9.4m investment in children and young people's mental health services. £4 million would be made available to improve access to emotional and mental health wellbeing support in schools and a further £5.4m funding would go towards Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to support young people who need more intensive support, both in the community and in specialist mental health in-patient services.

On the same day, Kirsty Williams [announced](#) that the government would be making additional funds available to local authorities to enable them to increase funding to the non-maintained sector to align with the current Welsh Government funding rate for childcare within the Childcare Offer.

The following day, it was [announced](#) that, under the new Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act, from 1 September 2021 the new system would commence for children of compulsory school age and below who: attend maintained schools in certain year groups, are detained, and have not been assessed as having special educational needs on or before that date, regardless of their year group or setting. This means that children who currently have special educational provision via a statement and those who are in any form of post-16 education will not be included in the first year of the Act's implementation.

February also saw the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2021 a) publish 'Coronavirus and Me', a second nationwide survey of the views and experiences of children and young people in Wales. The report presented the views and experiences of 19,737 children and young people, age 3-18, in the current lockdown. It identified that 'life has been difficult for all age groups' and 'Strong negative feelings were expressed by many children and young people'.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On 5 February, the Chief Medical Officer for Wales [outlined thinking](#) on the return to face-to-face learning for children and young people. He outlined that the potential to relax restrictions remained limited. However, any headroom should be dedicated to a phased return of primary school children. As a result, the Welsh Government [announced](#) that, from 22 February, there would be a phased return to face-to-face learning for foundation phase pupils (three to seven-year-olds). Those providing personal care to the clinically extremely vulnerable in special schools would be offered vaccinations by the end of February. An additional £5 million would be provided to provide high quality face masks and schools and settings would be offered lateral flow tests for all staff twice weekly.

On 7 February, the Welsh Government [announced](#) an extra £29 million for colleges, including £26.5 million to support learners on vocational learning programmes. The funding could be used to support learners in completing their vocational qualifications during the academic year, by providing additional support and removing barriers that may prevent completion. An extra £2.5 million supported Welsh colleges and work-based learning training providers to provide additional mental health support in recognition of the increased mental wellness issues as a result of the pandemic.

Two days later, the Welsh Government [announced](#) a further £9.8 million to support learners with additional learning needs to remove barriers to education for children and young people due to COVID-19. £8.8 million would be provided to local authorities, including funding for special schools, with £1 million for young people in further education.

The following week, the Welsh Government [announced](#) a further £15 million for education technology in schools. The investment was a continuation of the Hwb EdTech programme and aimed to further support the transformation of digital infrastructure of all maintained schools and PRUs in Wales. The funding would also be used to ensure ongoing MiFi connectivity for digitally excluded learners, to the end of the current school year in July.

On the 19 February the First Minister [announced](#) that if cases of COVID-19 continued to fall, the remainder of primary learners, as well as learners in Year 11 and Year 13 in secondary schools and those sitting equivalent qualifications in colleges, would return to school or college from 15 March in a flexible way.

Three days later, the Ministers for Education and for Health issued a [joint statement](#) setting out that they were extending the offer of regular, twice weekly, lateral flow tests at home to 'all pupils of upper secondary age'. This would start with offering tests to Years 11 to 13, all further education college learners and learners on work-based apprenticeship and traineeship programmes.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On 24 February, the Minister for Education, [speaking on a visit](#) to a Cardiff primary school, confirmed that funding for Wales's Pupil Development Grant Access scheme would be doubled to cover additional year groups in 2020 to 2021 and that the grant's terms would be extended to 'allow the purchasing of laptops and tablets in response to the coronavirus pandemic'. The funding of £10.3m, an increase from £5.1m, would allow the Welsh Government to extend the scheme to provide support for those in Years 1, 5, 8, 9 and 11, at a rate of £125 per learner.

On 25 February, the Welsh Government (2020a) released the consultation response to its draft Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill. The draft Bill set out proposals to create a new Commission that would replace the current Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and 'have the tools to ensure a strong mutual relationship between citizens, communities, researchers and providers'. It will have responsibility for the apprenticeship programme and adult community-based education, and mainstream sixth form school-based Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) delivery through local authorities.

March 2021

On St David's Day, the Welsh Government [announced](#) an additional £50 million towards improvements to school buildings across Wales. The capital funding will allow local authorities to focus on large-scale maintenance projects, such as replacement roofs, new window systems or heating and ventilation works, rather than small scale routine repairs.

On 3 March, the Minister for Education [confirmed](#) that from 15 March all primary schools would re-open, and announced that secondary settings would have the flexibility to provide learners in Years 7, 8 and 9 with the opportunity of a check-in focused on wellbeing and readiness for a return to onsite learning after Easter.

The following day, Estyn (2021m, 2021w) released thematic reviews that focus on 'English language and literacy in settings and primary schools' and 'Welsh language acquisition'. This collection of thematic reports and supplementary materials (Estyn, 2021m) describes practice that supports the successful development of learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in the language of the setting or school. The 'Welsh language acquisition' report provides an overview of how effectively Welsh-medium and bilingual settings and schools teach and support the acquisition and development of Welsh language skills of learners aged between three and eleven years. The 'English language and literacy in settings and primary schools' report identifies how effectively English-medium settings and schools in Wales support and teach English language and literacy to learners aged three to eleven.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On 8 March, the Education Minister [announced](#) a further £72 million to support learners as part of the response towards recovery and progression since the pandemic. The funding, a continuation of the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards programme, was for extra learning resources and support for foundation phase learners in schools and childcare settings that provide early education. Support would also be targeted at learners in Years 11, 12 and 13, to provide additional help with their transition into the next stage.

The following day, the [Curriculum and Assessment \(Wales\) Bill](#) reached its final stage before being passed into law. Members of the Senedd voted to pass the final text of the Bill, meaning that the Curriculum for Wales will be introduced in 2022. Later in the month, the Welsh Government also [agreed](#) additional financial support of £0.8m to Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol. This additional support is aimed at progressing Welsh-medium and bilingual further education and apprenticeships in priority areas. The funding aimed to increase the number of bilingual tutors in colleges across Wales from September 2021.

On 9 March, Estyn (2021t) published an interim report that summarised the findings from engagement and pastoral phone calls made to secondary schools during January and February 2021. This report is based on the information discussed during remote meetings with headteachers, senior leaders and teachers from across Wales.

On 11 March, the Welsh Government [announced](#) an additional £30 million to develop new Welsh-medium education. This is part of the Welsh Government's commitment to reach one million Welsh speakers by 2050, by supporting all learners to become Welsh speakers by the time they leave school.

On 19 March, the report of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities, Contributions and Cynefin in the New Curriculum Working Group was published (Williams, 2021). The Welsh Government accepted all of its recommendations.

On the same day, the First Minister [set out](#) how restrictions may be eased, as early results about the effectiveness of the vaccines appeared promising in terms of their effect in both preventing severe disease and transmission. This included a first phase of opening for non-essential retail from the following Monday and a possible lowering of the alert level the following week. He set out a timetable that stretched into April for the opening of further sectors, such as close contact services and leisure and fitness facilities.

On the 23 March the Senedd approved the Additional Learning Needs Code and all regulations (Welsh Government, 2021p). From September 2021, a new ALN system will go live on a three-year phased basis, so that learners can access the new system at the earliest opportunity. This aimed to provide everyone – schools, pupil referral units, local authorities and others supporting learners – with a gradual transition to the new system.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On the same day, Estyn published two thematic reports entitled 'Support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing' (2021u) and 'Developments in remote and blended learning practice' (2021b) Both focus on the work of further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships between March 2020 and January 2021, during the pandemic. The first provides an overview of how these providers have supported learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing. The second sets out how they have developed their practice to deliver teaching, training and learning, either as remote or blended learning. At the same time, the Welsh Government (2021f) released the results of a survey on the effect of COVID-19 on learners aged 16 or older, in a school sixth form, further education or work-based or adult learning in college or in the community.

Also, on 23 March, Qualifications Wales [announced](#) adaptations to qualifications for 2022 and the final details for 2021. This set out how atypical grades would be identified and followed up in summer 2021 to ensure that learners and their parents can have confidence in the validity and credibility of the results.

The following day Estyn published findings from our engagement work during the spring term. Reports from engagement activity in secondary schools (2021j), maintained special schools and PRUs (2021d), the non-maintained (2021f) and the primary sectors (2021h) summarise findings from across Wales. These reports focus on a range of important topics, such as wellbeing, teaching, the curriculum, professional learning, and additional learning needs.

April 2021

On the first day of the month, the First Minister [confirmed](#) that amid a continuing improvement in the public health situation in Wales there would be a 'return to face-to-face teaching in all settings, including schools, FE, HE and others' on 12 April.

On 14 April, the Welsh Government [announced](#) that the legal requirements for end of key stage assessments (foundation phase, key stages 2 and 3) and the associated key stages 2 and 3 moderation were disapplied for the summer term 2021, as a result of COVID-19. In addition, the statutory requirement for schools to run personalised assessments in Numeracy (Procedural) and Reading was to be on a 'reasonable endeavours' basis for the rest of the academic year.

On the same date, the Welsh Government (2021g) released details of the reviews and advice it requires from Estyn, in terms of thematic reports and other support. This identified that Estyn would redirect some of the resource normally used for the full set of thematic reports and concentrate on supporting the Welsh Government's learning recovery plan from the COVID-19 pandemic for the education and training sectors.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On 21 April, the Welsh Government released a [report](#) on outcomes for learners who were on vocational programmes, general education programmes (including A levels), apprenticeships or adult learning courses between August 2019 and July 2020.

On 22 April, the First Minister brought forward a further [relaxation in restrictions](#), including the resumption of indoor supervised activities for children. This meant that Wales would complete the move to alert level 3 by Monday 3 May.

On 30 April, the Education Policy Institute (2021a) released its report 'A comparison of school institutions and policies across the UK'. This identified that the four UK nations have begun to adopt increasingly different approaches to education policy after 20 years of devolution.

At the end of April, Welsh Government [announced](#) that £8.5 million had been allocated to further education colleges and school sixth forms to provide transition support for learners in Year 11, and learners in Years 12 and 13 studying AS/A2 level qualifications, who are transitioning to the next steps in their education. This additional funding was provided in recognition that learners have experienced disruption to their education during the pandemic.

During April, 'Education Support' launched its new mental health and wellbeing hub, offering free wellbeing resources for teachers and school staff in Wales. Called '[Taking Care of Teachers](#)', the hub is funded by the Welsh Government and provides a range of information, guides, tips, videos and links to help support the mental health and wellbeing of school staff.

May 2021

Following the Senedd Elections on 6 May, Jeremy Miles MS became the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language on 13 May.

On 14 May, the First Minister [confirmed](#) that Wales would move down into alert level 2.

On 17 May, Qualifications Wales (2021a) published further information for schools and colleges on the appeals process in summer 2021. This provided information about how appeals against exam grades would work this year.

The same day, Estyn (2021o) released a blog post setting out how future inspections might reflect the range of work undertaken by youth workers. This builds on previous posts, such as 'Understanding the value of youth work and youth workers', published in January 2021 (Estyn, 2021v).

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On 21 May, the Welsh Government [opened a consultation](#) on additional guidance for the new Curriculum for Wales. The eight-week consultation included draft guidance and a code for teaching of Relationships and Sexuality Education and Religion, Values and Ethics. There was also a consultation on the amended What Matters Code, which sets out the 27 statements across the six areas of learning and experience on which schools must base their curriculum.

On 26 May, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language made a [statement](#) in the Senedd about the Welsh Government's 'Renew and reform' strategy to support learners' wellbeing and progressions. He noted that the pandemic had taken a significant toll on young people, on the education profession that supports them, and on their families. He outlined that 'The packages of support that we are developing are designed to address the unique challenges faced by different learners'.

On the same day, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language [announced](#) an extra £19 million to support education and early years settings. The funding will be used to ensure that children continue their learning progress following disruption due to the pandemic, with a focus on the wellbeing of children and staff.

On the 26 May, Welsh Government (2021k) also published the results of the online survey and stakeholder sessions into the mandatory status of English in the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill. Following the publication of the Bill, concerns were raised about the mandatory status of English and its effect on Welsh language immersion. The proposed amendment would be to make English a mandatory element from age seven. This would mean that it would be for schools to decide whether and how to teach English prior to that age. Of those responding, over two thirds (68%) were in favour of the proposed amendment.

June 2021

During the first week of June, the First Minister [announced](#) that, from Monday 7 June, Wales would move down to alert level 1. This meant that extended households could be increased to up to three households, and outdoor events such as larger sporting events could begin to take place.

On 11 June, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language [announced](#) the publication of the 'Renew and Reform Plan' (Welsh Government, 2021n), which set out how an additional £150 million investment would be used to support learners and practitioners. The plan builds on the support and interventions deployed over the last year and includes £24 million to continue this programme and retain the 1,800 full-time equivalent staff recruited in the 2020-2021 academic year. The plan also recognises that learners who began their post-16 education this academic year have been particularly impacted by the pandemic. As a result, it includes £33 million to support learners in colleges and sixth forms across Wales who are starting A level or vocational courses.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On the 16 June, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language released a [press statement](#) expressing his concern regarding recent reports of sexual harassment and abuse in schools. This followed the publication on 10 June of Ofsted's (2021) rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges, and the growing profile of the website '[Everyone's Invited](#)', which offers an anonymous platform for people to write about their experiences. Press [reports](#) highlighted the number of Welsh schools named on this website. In his statement, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language promised a review of all current resources to ensure that schools and learners are fully supported. He also asked Estyn to conduct a review into culture and processes in schools to help protect and support young people better and noted that the findings of that review will play an important role in supporting settings and informing Welsh Government policy.

On the same date, Julie Morgan, Deputy Minister for Social Services, [announced](#) £5 million of funding to support children and young people to take part in a range of sporting, cultural and play-based activities. All local authorities will receive a share of funding to stage activities, with the offer tailored to the needs and wants of the children, young people and communities in their area.

On 22 June, Estyn (2021n) published a thematic report on 'How schools and colleges used the RRRS and catch up grants for post-16 learners'. This report focuses on the support for post-16 learners since September 2020 through the 'Recruit, recover, raise standards: accelerating learning programme' grant (the RRRS grant) in schools and the catch-up grant in further education colleges.

On 21 June, Jeremy Miles released a [written statement](#) setting out his approach to ensuring that there is 'space for schools' to recover from the pandemic by easing potential pressures. These measures include the suspension of school performance measures and categorisation for a further year. At the same time Estyn [announced](#) an extension to the suspension of the core, maintained schools and PRUs inspection programme to include the autumn term 2021. Inspections in some other sectors, such as local government education services, would resume in September and a range of other routine work would continue.

On 23 June, Estyn published information explaining the new [approach to inspection](#) arrangements for schools and PRUs. This includes clarification that summative judgements will be removed to shift the focus to the evaluations within the narrative of the report and have a deeper focus on a school's strengths and areas for development. It confirmed that these new arrangements will be trialled with a small sample of schools and PRUs in the spring of 2022.

On 30 June, the Welsh Government announced the creation of a new [National Network](#) to support design, adoption, and implementation of the new curriculum. It will be owned and facilitated by teaching practitioners and will help them connect, drive change, gather and share understanding and co-construct approaches.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

Also, on the final day of June, Jeremy Miles released a [written statement](#) for higher education and adult learners in further education colleges, work based learning and adult learning in the community partnerships. It indicated a move towards these providers moving towards operating as 'normally' as possible in the autumn. Examples of this 'normal operating' include the relaxing of social distancing models for university students, adult and part-time learners, allowing more in-person learning in the autumn term.

July 2021

On 1 July, the Deputy Minister for Social Services [announced](#) that after discussion with public health officials the use of consistent contact groups will no longer be required from Monday 19 July for childcare and play work settings, including Flying Start.

On the same day, Estyn (2021t) published a document summarising the main findings of all thematic reports carried out in 2020 and spring 2021. These report on standards and provision across a range of education and training sectors and themes, and refer to evidence gathered through thematic reviews before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are intended to encourage wider thinking and to contribute to current debates in policy areas, as well as sharing cameos and case studies of interesting practice across all sectors.

On 6 July, Estyn published its latest findings from engagement visits carried out across many education sectors in Wales. They include key messages for the non-maintained (Estyn, 2021g), special (Estyn, 2021e), primary (Estyn, 2021i), secondary (Estyn, 2021k) and initial teacher education (Estyn, 2021c) sectors. This is further supported by a publication the following week reflecting on how special schools and PRUs have developed and refined their approaches to remote learning during the last year (Estyn, 2021r).

On the same day, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language provided an [oral statement](#) to the Senedd during which he announced that, while the roll-out of the new curriculum would remain unchanged for primary schools, formal implementation of the new curriculum will not now be mandatory in secondary schools until September 2023, with roll-out in that year to Year 7 and Year 8 together. To support this and ensure a continued momentum towards the Curriculum for Wales, he [confirmed](#) funding of £7.24 million for schools to support their curriculum reform plans, including engagement with the National Network announced at the end of June.

On 8 July, the Welsh Government [announced](#) £2 million of funding to further education colleges to provide training for jobs in the green economy. Six colleges were awarded funding to deliver the courses, which will include areas such as electric and hybrid cars, environmentally friendly heating systems and e-bikes.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On 9 July, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language wrote to all headteachers and principals/CEOs in Wales to provide more clarity on how schools and colleges can continue to operate safely when they return in September. The three main changes were that face coverings would no longer be routinely recommended in classrooms, that contact groups would no longer be required for learners and that normal session times would resume.

Early the following week, the Welsh Government (2021e) published its new five-year Work Programme for Cymraeg 2050, the national strategy to reach one million Welsh speakers by 2050. One of the interim milestones is for 30% of children in Year 1 to be in Welsh-medium education by 2031. This would be driven by opening a minimum of 60 extra Welsh-medium nursery groups by 2026, in addition to 40 opened over the last four years.

On 14 July, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language released a [statement](#) regarding the phased implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act. He recognised the impact of the pandemic on preparations for this reform and announced a sequenced implementation of the new system. He clarified that the new system would apply from 1 January 2022 for pupils who have already been identified as having special educational needs by a school. Pupils who are newly identified as having additional learning needs will move to the new system from 1 September 2021.

On 22 July, the First Minister announced that Her Majesty the Queen had accepted the recommendation that Owen Evans will become the new Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales. He will replace the current Chief Inspector, Meilyr Rowlands, who took the opportunity to [thank](#) “all practitioners in particular for their remarkable work and resilience during the recent pandemic”. Claire Morgan, one of Estyn’s strategic directors, will act as the interim Chief Inspector until the new Chief Inspector takes up this role in January 2022.

On 27 July, the chair of Race Council Cymru, Judge Ray Singh, [reported](#) that he feels that the shortage of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) teachers in Wales’s schools is “at crisis point”. The Minister for Education and the Welsh Language responded by explaining that his ‘plan is, in autumn term, to bring forward a strategy of recruiting black and minority ethnic candidates into our teaching workforce to make sure it draws on the rich diversity we see all around us in Wales’.

On 29 July, the Welsh Government [announced](#) that young people who are about to turn 18 are being invited to have their COVID-19 vaccine in Wales. This is to support those young people entering the workplace or starting university in the autumn term. This will run alongside the programme to vaccinate children and young people aged 12 years and over with specific underlying health conditions that put them at risk of serious COVID-19, or who live with someone who are immunosuppressed.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

August 2021

Following on from the announcement at the end of July, the Minister for Health and Social Service, Eluned Morgan, [announced](#) on 4 August that, in line with advice from the Joint Committee for Vaccination and Immunisation, she will be working with the NHS on the arrangements needed to offer the vaccination to all 16 and 17-year-olds.

On 5 August, the First Minister [confirmed](#) that Wales would move to the new alert level zero on Saturday August 7. He confirmed that some important precautions will continue, but adults who are fully vaccinated and children and young people under 18 will no longer need to isolate if they are identified as close contacts of someone who has coronavirus.

On 10 August, the results for A level, AS, Level 3, Advanced Welsh Baccalaureate and Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate were published (Qualifications Wales, 2021c). As with last year, these were based on teacher assessment. The number of pupils achieving A* or A at A level rose again from 41.8% in 2020 to 48.3%, significantly higher than the 27% of pupils who achieved these grades in examinations in 2019. The number of pupils receiving an A at AS level also rose again to 37.1%, from 29.5% in 2020. There were small rises in the number of pupils achieving A*-A in the Advanced Skills Certificate and a slight decrease in those achieving the top grades within the Level 3 vocational qualifications when compared to 2020 results.

Two days later, GCSE results were published for pupils in Wales (Qualifications Wales, 2021d). The results showed that grades improved again, with 28.7% of pupils achieving an A* or A grade, compared with 18.4% in 2019, the last year of examinations. Seventy-three point six per cent of grades were A* to C, compared with 62.8% in 2019 (the last year in which there were examinations). After a small contraction last year, the gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers continued to widen.

On 25 August, the Welsh Government [announced](#) that an extra £1.7 million in funding would be allocated to ensure that newly-qualified teachers (NQTs) in Wales, who saw their training disrupted by the pandemic, would receive a term of employment to help them into their new roles. They explained that this would also allow schools to increase capacity and free up other teachers to provide extra help to vulnerable learners.

Timeline of events linked to the COVID-19 crisis during the academic year 2020-2021

On the same day, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language released a [press statement](#), setting out guidance to support learners returning to schools and colleges in September. This included instructing staff in primary schools, and staff and learners in secondary schools and colleges, to take two lateral flow tests three days apart during the week leading up to their first day back.

On 27 August, as announced in July, the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language published the local [COVID-19 Infection Control Decision Frameworks](#) for schools and colleges. Supported by public health officials and local authorities, they consisted of core measures that should be in place and variable measures that may be tailored to reflect the level of risk identified. Schools were asked to implement these frameworks as soon as possible but had until 20 September to phase in approaches.

August finished with a commitment from the Welsh Government to make classrooms and learning spaces as safe as possible for learners' return to schools and colleges. On 30 August, it [announced](#) funding of £3.31 million for 1,800 ozone disinfecting machines which are effective in killing the coronavirus, whether be it airborne or adhered to a surface. In addition, the Welsh Government announced further funding of £2.58 million for 30,000 Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) sensors to be provided to schools, colleges and universities throughout Wales. The sensors will alert teachers and lecturers when CO₂ levels rise, thereby aiding the control of ventilation in learning spaces.



Estyn is the office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. We are independent of, but funded by, Senedd Cymru. The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education in Wales.

Estyn is responsible for inspecting:

- nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
- primary schools
- secondary schools
- all-age schools
- special schools
- pupil referral units
- independent schools
- further education
- independent specialist colleges
- adult learning in the community
- local government education services
- teacher education and training
- Welsh for adults
- work-based learning
- learning in the justice sector

Our inspection work is aimed at raising standards and quality in education and training across Wales.

In a number of sectors, we work with other regulators and inspectorates to inspect provision. We work in partnership with Ofsted to inspect work-based learning provision that operates in both Wales and England. Our inspectors liaise with Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) to inspect residential schools and local authority secure children's homes, as well as working jointly with CIW in the inspection of non-maintained nursery settings. We also take part in inspections of youth offending teams (YOTs), led by HMI Probation, and of prisons led by HMI Prisons. On occasions, we join Ofsted to inspect independent specialist colleges in England that have 10 or more Welsh learners. We may also join inspections of prisons in England where there are significant numbers of Welsh prisoners. In addition, we include inspectors from Audit Wales when we inspect local government education services.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for the academic year 2020-2021 we did not carry out any core inspection activity, apart from an inspection of The National Centre for Learning Welsh. (see relevant section). We are currently preparing a new framework for inspections in some sectors, which will be implemented from 2022. More information about our inspection arrangements, including our follow-up inspection activity, can be found at the following link:

<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/inspection-process/inspection-explained>

We also provide advice on specific matters to the Welsh Government in response to an annual remit from the Minister for Education and Welsh Language. Our advice provides evidence of the effect of Welsh Government strategies, policies and initiatives on the education and training of learners.

We publish examples of effective practice based on inspection evidence. We have a unique and independent view of standards and quality across all aspects of education and training in Wales, and this contributes to the policies for education and training introduced across Wales.

HM Chief Inspector has prepared this Annual Report in accordance with the requirements of Section 21 (1) (a) of the Education Act 2005 and Section 50 (1) of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.





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