

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.

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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.

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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.



