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## **Engagement work:** All-age sector update – autumn 2020

December 2020



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This report summarises the findings from 19 engagement phone calls made to all-age schools between 28 September and 9 October 2020. This report is based on the information discussed during remote meetings with headteachers and senior leaders as well as findings from stakeholder surveys. Proportions relate to the sample of schools with which we have had contact.

This report has been informed by evidence from the following sources:

- Meetings with headteachers
- Meetings with senior leaders responsible for specific areas
- Findings from surveys for pupils, parents, governors, school leaders, teachers and support staff

**This report is also available in Welsh.**

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## Key findings

### Wellbeing of pupils, staff and headteachers

Schools note that pupils are happy to be return but that they require more emotional and mental support than before the pandemic.

Leaders note that staff have pulled together magnificently during the pandemic. They say that the current situation has brought staff and the school community closer together and that there is a greater sense of working as one all-age school.

Leaders and teachers have said that extra pressures to adapt teaching provision and adhere to strict regulations are placing a tremendous pressure and stress on the workforce. Teaching assistants who work with vulnerable pupils are also under extra strain managing with new arrangements such as wearing full personal protective equipment and maintaining social distancing.

Headteachers and senior leaders are constantly on-call and not had respite for several months; this continues to add significant strain on a personal and professional level. Headteachers noted the pressure of having to respond at short notice to changes in guidance and other sometimes increasing demands from local authorities and regional consortia. Many headteachers feel well supported by other headteachers through local and national network meetings or chats. A few all-age schools feel isolated and left to their own devices by local authorities and regional consortia.

### Promoting learning

All-age schools reacted swiftly to provide education for pupils when schools closed. Many all-age schools operated as hubs to provide education for children of key workers. The majority of schools continue to develop distance learning and adapt their teaching strategies to a more blended approach for when pupils have to spend more time at home. Most school leaders believe that staff have developed their information technology skills significantly over the last six months. A few schools prefer live streaming lessons when pupils are at home rather than asynchronous activities, especially for primary phase pupils. All-age schools have prioritised the sharing of good practice within their school, across phases and departments.

Since September, schools have considered what provision is required to catch up on lost learning and are beginning to plan how to close that gap.

Most schools have identified gaps in primary aged pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. In secondary aged pupils, the concern lies around achieving the right balance between the introduction of new work and consolidation of learning and revision.

Nearly all schools have targeted the recover, recruit and raise standards funding to improve all pupils' literacy and numeracy skills and support Year 11 and Year 13 pupils with their coursework and assessments.

Since September, nearly all schools have offered the full curriculum and adapted their teaching methods to suit organisational restrictions. A few schools have seized

the opportunity to accelerate their work on the Curriculum for Wales. Primary phase pupils are taught in their class as usual. Secondary aged pupils are organised in socially distanced bubbles. Delivering practical subjects is an ongoing challenge for schools. Many schools have adapted their plans for monitoring and evaluating the school's work and reduced activities significantly.

The Welsh language skills of pupils in bilingual or Welsh-medium schools have improved on returning in September through immersion and specialist support. Provision for Welsh in English-medium schools is proving to be more of a challenge under present restrictions. These schools reported that pupils' engagement with Welsh was weak during the lockdown period and, since returning, a few schools have been unable to provide Welsh language specialists to teach each class bubble.

### **Supporting vulnerable learners**

All schools have placed pupil wellbeing at the forefront of their work. Schools know their vulnerable pupils and maintained regular contact with their families. Many schools provided comprehensive support for vulnerable pupils and their families including the supply of essential items and financial advice. Attendance since September has been better than usual since pupils have relished the opportunity to meet with friends and resume their learning through direct teaching.

Many schools have extended their pastoral provision to give more time for tutors to work with their classes and pastoral leaders more time to support individual pupils. Many schools have made more staff available to deliver additional support for vulnerable pupils.

Since reopening in September, nearly all schools have worked well with external agencies to ensure continued support for vulnerable pupils. All schools note that they have continued to fulfil their statutory duties during the lockdown period and since reopening fully. A few schools have experienced an increase in the number of child protection referrals. Many headteachers are concerned about the effect of the pandemic on pupils' mental health, especially on older pupils.

Transition for pupils with special educational needs from Year 6 to Year 7 has generally been smooth and schools ensured that support was provided according to pupils' needs throughout the lockdown and reopening.

## **Detailed findings**

### **Pupil, staff and headteacher wellbeing**

#### **Pupil wellbeing**

Nearly all schools note that pupils are happy to be back at school. However, schools also note that pupils require more emotional and mental support as the pandemic continues. Schools are particularly concerned about anxiety caused by various factors. These include uncertainty surrounding qualifications and the continuing disruption when positive cases of coronavirus affects the school community.

Attendance since returning in September has been generally high. A few schools note that attendance has declined during this term. This is partly due to pupils having to self-isolate.

### **Staff wellbeing**

Nearly all headteachers noted that the pandemic has increased a sense of togetherness across the school. Staff have worked tirelessly with each other to ensure successful provision for pupils during the lockdown and on return to school. Leaders have noted that staff have worked across all phases and this has created a deeper sense of being one all-age school. Most leaders ensured regular contact with staff and many provided opportunities for staff to socialise with regular catch-ups.

Teachers and teaching assistants have adapted their ways of working immensely during the pandemic. Teachers have to cope with continued extra guidance and pressures of maintaining social distancing and hygiene. Teaching assistants likewise have had to accustom to wearing personal protective equipment, especially when working with the most vulnerable pupils. This, according to leaders, has had a negative impact on staff wellbeing.

### **The wellbeing of headteachers and leaders**

The past eight months have been the most challenging for headteachers and senior leaders throughout their careers. They have been managing a constantly changing situation and noted the pressure of having to react to guidance at short notice and then having to convey messages to staff, pupils and parents. In addition, they have had to deal with queries and concerns raised by the school community.

Since September, organisational matters have taken up most of school leaders' time. They are managing, supervising and adapting new systems such as staggered lunchtimes, one-way systems and maintaining pupils' hygiene in wearing masks and hand sanitising. Cases of COVID-19 experienced in their schools call on leaders to react swiftly and manage a situation where staff and pupils are not in school due to isolation. Leaders are constantly on-call and have not had a significant respite since last March.

Many headteachers note that local authorities are concerned for their wellbeing but have not always been able to provide practical support. Most headteachers feel that they have been well supported by their senior leadership and through local headteacher networks, although a few feel that they have been left to respond to the pandemic by themselves.

### **Promoting learning**

#### **Distance learning**

All-age schools responded swiftly to the challenge of providing education for their pupils when schools closed in March. Many all-age schools operated as hubs to provide education for children of key workers during the initial lockdown. In a very short time, most schools developed learning materials that pupils could access from

their home and many headteachers believe that they made a reasonably smooth transition to distance learning at the start of the lockdown.

For many, the availability of resources through Hwb was vital to the school's plans. Schools produced a learning timetable for pupils and quickly found that providing short chunks of work rather than planned activities for longer periods was more manageable for pupils.

The majority of schools continue to develop distance learning as a priority in order to provide for pupils that have to self-isolate or are not required to attend due to further COVID-19 restrictions. In one school, there is a programme of resources for key stage 3 pupils to last up until Christmas whilst in key stage 4 the programme is more bespoke at subject and ability level. Pupils from the primary phase isolating at home can access resources through Class Dojo and Hwb.

Most schools stated that staff have developed their information technology skills significantly over the last six months. As time progressed, schools increasingly offered a broader range of provision for pupils. Leaders are now beginning to monitor and evaluate this provision.

Schools have identified a number of challenges associated with distance learning including pupils' access to technology, arrangements for live streaming safely and support for non-Welsh speaking parents of pupils in Welsh-medium schools.

#### **Cameo – Ebbw Fawr Learning Community**

The school noticed that, in the foundation phase, parental involvement with children's work is key when they have to remain at home. The school has supported parents to make sure that children take on tasks and follow the school's suggestions. Parents were signposted to resources online and through Google classroom. As evidence of this work, parents have sent pictures of their children at work to the school.

Many local authorities supported schools by providing equipment and the means to access the internet from home. A few schools report that equipment allocated by local authorities has not arrived and they have had to supply laptops and Wi-Fi dongles to pupils from their own stock.

#### **Learning from September**

Since September, schools have focused mainly on assessing pupils' skills to establish what support is required to catch up on lost learning.

In primary phases, leaders and teachers have established baselines for their pupils and plan accordingly. One school noted that teachers in its primary phase have initially planned to a level one year lower than pupils' chronological age after they resumed school. This arrangement will be reviewed regularly to ensure that provision continues to meet the needs of the most able pupils and those requiring additional support.

Most commonly, schools have noticed a gap in literacy skills. A few noted that developing pupils' oracy skills is more difficult due to restrictions regarding group work and class arrangements.

In the secondary phase, teachers have also concentrated on establishing pupils' current attainment in order to plan intervention. Many schools have used their own assessment materials as well as former national tests and examination questions.

Due to the pandemic and current guidance, a few schools are unable to offer the full curriculum to all pupils. In these cases, schools have reduced the curriculum by offering one fewer option choice at key stage 4 and concentrating on reinforcing the development of pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. In a few cases, partnership courses with local colleges have not resumed and this has caused a problem for schools with the delivery of practical courses such as construction and hair and beauty.

#### **Cameo – Ysgol Gymraeg Ysatlyfera / Bro Dur**

The school has started a programme of after school revision sessions for Year 11 and 13, delivered online. This provision has started very recently but pupils have provided positive feedback and attendance levels are high. Attendance rates are higher than previous levels for the same type of provision normally offered in school. The school serves a large geographical area and the acting headteacher believes that these new arrangements enable more pupils to attend, as they do not have to find a way home later. In addition, these sessions are recorded so that pupils can revisit the sessions or watch a session later if they cannot attend.

Although the pandemic has been disruptive to most schools' plans for improvement, a few have commented that their response to Curriculum for Wales has accelerated. They have benefited from an opportunity to consider and seek alternative ways of delivering the curriculum as well as revise its content. A few schools are now adopting new teaching styles and methods, for example developing pupils' ability to work independently.

#### **Planning for progress**

Nearly all schools have determined a baseline for pupils since returning in September. This helps staff to plan lessons and tailor intervention programmes.

Schools reported that their main concern was a deterioration in pupils' literacy and numeracy skills, especially in the primary phase. In key stage 3 and key stage 4, the concern lies around achieving the right balance between the introduction of new learning and catching up on aspects missed through lack of engagement.



### **Cameo – Christ the Word Catholic School**

The school provides targeted intervention for literacy and numeracy. They appointed an ex primary headteacher to support Year 3 and Year 4 pupils in small groups and on individual basis. This has had an impact on improving literacy and numeracy of these groups along with raising self-esteem of vulnerable pupils. The school sets standardised tests for all pupils to establish a baseline and compare outcomes with PASS survey outcomes to plan targeted interventions.

### **Blended learning**

When pupils have been at home, schools have provided pupils with a range of different learning opportunities. As staff and pupils' skills have developed, activities have become more nuanced to reflect more closely the provision at school. A few schools have adapted their teaching strategies to support pupils with distance learning at home. For example, one school has been concerned with a lack of control over what happens at home. In response, they have sought to provide more opportunities for pupils to work independently and use technology while at school.

While schools appreciated the advice and support regarding blended learning, they would appreciate more practical suggestions and examples.

A few schools prefer live streaming lessons to asynchronous activities especially for primary phase pupils. Implementing asynchronous activities in key stage 3 and key stage 4 proved successful but foundation phase pupils need to hear phonics and receive the 'live' element of teaching.

### **Cameo – Ysgol Cwm Brombil**

Set up Microsoft Teams groups for each teaching class in the same way.

Each Teams group has three Channels: General (interaction with teacher and peers), Questions (peer to peer, peer to teacher) and Work (lessons and resources).

Providing separate Channels for social interaction and Work has provided opportunities to increase peer support and social interaction – two elements that have a significant impact on pupil engagement in remote learning.

Tabs in each subject Teams have ensured that links to frequently used websites are kept within the Teams group, thus ensuring that pupils and parents do not need to operate several platforms for learning. This means that pupils who usually access in class support have been able to continue to access this level of support.

Blended learning is different now when compared with lockdown when 'reinforcement' work was offered. The school now has a remote learning plan through teams. Each teacher has Teams set up with class.



## **Pupil engagement**

Most schools kept a record of pupils' engagement with activities during the lockdown period. Pupils were contacted and supported where engagement levels were lower than expected. In one case, the headteacher estimated that around 70% of pupils across the school engaged with the online activities. This increased to 100% of pupils in the foundation phase, 100% in primary, 67% overall in secondary, with 100% in Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9. The lowest engagement was in Year 10 (pupils now in Year 11). This appears to be a common pattern of engagement across all-age schools.

Many schools sought the views of pupils and parents through regular phone calls.

The phone calls were used to encourage engagement in distance learning. Schools identified that many pupils were having difficulty gaining access to online provision. In response, many schools produced weekly packs that they posted to homes.

A few headteachers noted that some pupils have blossomed during the lockdown period and, since returning, have been fully engaged in tasks and projects. However, other pupils have fallen into a daily pattern that is having a more negative impact on their education for example, a daily routine of being late to bed and showing signs of tiredness after weekends.

Attendance at school since September is reported as being better than usual except where pupils have had to stay at home to isolate.

## **Quality assurance and monitoring**

The current pandemic has reduced substantially the amount of time leaders have available to plan strategically. Many schools have reduced their monitoring and evaluation activities significantly in response to concerns about overburdening staff and because of a lack of time to focus on these aspects. However, they have plans to resume quality assurance of provision in some from as soon as possible.

A few schools have resumed monitoring and evaluation activities such as learning walks and scrutiny of pupils' work. This has been done in agreement with staff. Other schools, due to their own context and situation, are concerned about the impact of resuming monitoring on staff wellbeing and morale.

A few schools have developed approaches to quality assuring distance learning provision and the work that is set. One school has appointed a senior leader to oversee teaching and learning specifically in the primary phase, an additional responsibility to the previous leadership structure and a direct response to a need arising from the pandemic.

## **Operational arrangements, including health and safety**

Nearly all schools have placed primary phase pupils in their usual classes with one teacher and teaching assistants where relevant. Key stage 3 pupils are generally in a class, band or year bubble. They stay in the same classroom and area of the school with teachers moving between lessons. In most all age-schools key stage 4

and sixth form pupils are also placed in bubbles but move around the school to access specialist classrooms.

Leaders are concerned that practical subjects are not able to operate fully and have requested more guidance in order to resume work as soon and as safely as possible.

Most schools have retained their normal timetable structure but have reorganised the school day. Staggered break times and lunchtimes ensure that pupils are able to maintain social distancing between their bubbles. However, because of this reorganisation, staff have been required to be on duty for long periods of up to three hours. This places an extra burden on senior leaders in particular and reduces the time they have available to prioritise the more strategic aspects of their role.

Since reopening, pupils across many schools have had to isolate following a positive case of COVID-19 in their bubble. Leaders have responded well following the guidance of Public Health Wales and local authorities.

A few schools have experienced issues around ICT equipment and accessibility. Local authorities in general supported schools well in ensuring that all pupils had access to devices and access to Wi-Fi. A few schools have purchased equipment to supply pupils since those ordered by the local authority are not available until January.

School leaders noted that local authorities have supported them well with matters relating to health and safety. Examples of the support include generic risk assessments, site visits, and follow up advice as appropriate.

### **Accelerating learning (Recruit, recover, raise standards grant)**

Overall, most schools have received information about the Welsh Government's 'Recruit, Recover, Raise standards: the accelerating learning programme', from their local authority and regional consortia. However, the support offered to schools to help them plan how to use and monitor the grant funding has varied across Wales.

All-age schools have planned to use the grant in various ways. Nearly all have targeted the funding to improve pupils' literacy and numeracy skills and to support Year 11 and Year 13 pupils with their coursework and assessments.

Many schools have recruited higher level teaching assistants to work with small groups of pupils or individual pupils. In a few instances, teachers have been appointed to help plan and deliver catch up programmes. For example, one school has allocated a teacher for the primary phase and another teacher to the secondary phase. Headteachers are eager for this funding and new activities to impact well on the wellbeing and self-esteem of pupils as well as on their progress in learning. A few schools note difficulties in recruiting staff with one school having failed to appoint a teaching assistant despite three attempts.

A few schools have been more creative in their approach and use of the grant. This includes investing in a private tuition firm, increasing the contract hours of part-time staff and appointing youth workers.

### **Cameo – Ysgol Nantgwyn**

The grant will be used to run virtual Saturday morning school for Year 11. Year 11 will also have additional teaching time in tutor time and two evenings of extra teaching per week. During this time, they will have support for English, mathematics and science.

This provision will be staffed by new staff as well as existing staff. The school foresees that recruitment for virtual teaching will be easier in the local area than for physical teaching.

For all other ages, there will be a focus on developing pupils literacy and numeracy skills. This will again be virtual with three or four pupils in a group for a short time period on a Saturday morning. This has benefits as parents will learn alongside the pupils.

### **Professional learning**

Nearly all schools had to react quickly to the pandemic and adapt their professional learning offer to focus on developing teachers' digital skills. Staff with expertise in this area developed workshops and exemplar videos to share with their colleagues. Headteachers believe that staff's digital competency has increased significantly since schools went into lockdown and see the benefit of this when pupils returned full-time in September. Many schools have continued with research projects and provide online professional learning opportunities that staff can access at home. Leaders have said that they have been mindful of not overloading staff with new initiatives and training. They believe that the current period has instigated a readiness in teachers to experiment and try out new teaching strategies.

All-age schools have benefited from sharing good practice across phases in their schools. Opportunities have arisen to share good practice within their cluster of schools and across the national all-age network.

Support for professional learning from local authorities and regional consortia has been variable across Wales. A few schools felt well supported with relevant and timely advice especially regarding blended learning.

### **Welsh**

Welsh-medium and bilingual schools reported that pupils ability to communicate through the medium of Welsh had declined, especially those from non-Welsh speaking homes. Once back in school these pupils have caught up quickly through immersion in the language and/or specialist support where required. Live streaming lessons to pupils at home has been an important factor in limiting the decline of pupils' Welsh language skills.

Provision for Welsh is more of challenge for English-medium schools. While pupils continue to have Welsh lessons it is not always possible for specialist staff to work through all key stages due to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 and the

'bubbling of staff'. This has led to a reduction in the number of pupils who can follow full course Welsh provision at ley stage 4.

### **Qualifications and assessment arrangements**

Many headteachers expressed concern for their current Year 11 and Year 13 pupils, in particular concern about how practical subjects such as music, drama and technology can be delivered safely.

### **Supporting vulnerable learners**

#### **Promoting wellbeing**

All schools contacted said that they have placed pupil wellbeing at the heart of their work. All schools reported that they maintained contact with parents and pupils through various means during the lockdown period. Nearly all schools persisted with this practice after schools reopened. Most schools had strong procedures to identify vulnerable pupils and their families. Schools identified pupils who became vulnerable due to the pandemic through regular phone calls and work with external agencies such as the police and social services. A few schools note a significant increase in the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals and vulnerability caused by rising unemployment. In response, schools have increased contact with parents and leaders note that working relationships with parents have improved significantly.

Wellbeing teams in schools followed up on pupils' wellbeing once they returned to school. Many schools have extended pastoral sessions to allow time for tutors to work on wellbeing with whole classes and individuals. A few schools have timetabled more time for pastoral leaders to work with vulnerable pupils.

#### **Attendance**

Nearly all schools reported high attendance rates when pupils returned to school in September. Attendance of vulnerable pupils was particularly high. Schools report that pupils are happy to be back at school and adapted well to new arrangements and procedures. A very few schools noted that attendance is lower than usual but that they are aware of the reasons behind absences. A very few parents have elected to educate their children at home due to anxiety about the pandemic.

Local authorities have supported schools well with pupil attendance. For example, one authority provided extra transport and rescheduled school buses in order to bring most vulnerable pupils to school in September.

#### **Groups of vulnerable pupils**

Having identified groups of vulnerable pupils, schools provided specific support through working with the families and specialist services. Many schools provided comprehensive support for families, including advice on financial issues, supply of clothes and stationery, referrals to foodbanks and practical advice on accessing welfare support.

### **Cameo – Tonyrefail Community School**

The school supported many families in hardship due to furlough or lost employment. New families were unable to access free school meals payments for six weeks. Local businesses donated food (for example, pubs and rugby clubs donated food that would be out of date by the time they re-opened, local shops donated food). The school teamed up with local churches and the food bank and prepared packed lunches at school. The probation service then helped to deliver the food with up to 1,700 deliveries every week. Community participation and feedback was very positive. This strengthened relationships and created a sense of trust between the school and its partners.

Many headteachers are concerned about the effect of the pandemic on the mental health of pupils. One school raised concern about the mental health of sixth form pupils in particular with anxiety about examinations and completing courses.

Nearly all schools identified groups of pupils who were unable to engage with work online. This was partly due to families being unable to afford equipment or internet access. A few schools noted that pupils were accessing work on their mobile phones and did not benefit from the whole range of tasks available to them. In a few cases, pupils and their parents did not understand how to access work on line. Many schools provided equipment and advice on using digital devices.

### **Specialist services and multi-agency working**

Since the full reopening of schools in September, nearly all schools have worked well with external agencies to continue provision for vulnerable pupils. Schools and agencies have adopted a joined-up approach to identify vulnerable pupils and provide timely support.

External agencies such as social services, CAMHS, the police and speech and language therapists have remained in contact with schools throughout the pandemic period. Since September, many services have resumed face-to-face contact with pupils. Schools have agreed risk assessments for all visitors and many have a designated room for such working in which it is easy to maintain social distance and to keep clean.

Feedback from leaders notes that educational psychologists and SEN departments at local authorities have provided helpful guidance. Schools have generally seen an increase in demand for emotional support for mental health. Educational psychologists have shared useful guidance with schools, such as for dealing with bereavement. However, a few schools note that, due to other pressures, health services have not been able to respond to requests for help with pupils' emotional health when cases had arisen.

Many local authorities have increased the counselling service available for schools. Education welfare services are praised for their continued effort in engaging with families and conducting visits to homes of vulnerable or reluctant pupils. Overall, schools are confident that vulnerable pupils are cared for and that parents are very grateful for their care and concern.

### **Statutory process and referrals**

All schools note that they have continued to fulfil their statutory duties during the lockdown period and since returning in September.

Most schools did not receive any new referrals for statement of SEN during the lockdown period but they are expecting an increased demand for assessments following many queries in this respect from parents. A few schools have experienced an increased number of child protection referrals especially regarding domestic issues.

Schools' statutory assessments and annual reviews of statemented pupils have continued through regular meetings online. With the support of local authorities, schools have managed to carry out most annual reviews as planned. Reviews of support for looked after children also continued virtually.

Transition for SEN pupils ran smoothly. Schools ensured that all pupils who have a statement have received the support outlined in their individual plans wherever possible.

### **Professional learning to support vulnerable learners**

Many schools offer training and development opportunities for key staff that support vulnerable learners. Many schools access the wellbeing focused professional learning offer from the local authority and regional consortium. This included online training on the requirements of the ALN reform process for schools and updated safeguarding training. Many teachers benefited from time to network with colleagues and share good practice on online learning and meeting the needs of pupils. Many schools revisited training on topics such as adverse childhood experiences and closing the gap.