Engagement work

Secondary sector update
Summer term 2021

This report summarises the findings from engagement phone calls and visits made to secondary schools between the end of March 2021 and the end of May 2021. The report is based on the information discussed during in-person and remote meetings with headteachers, senior leaders, teachers and pupils. The main focus for each discussion was wellbeing, teaching and learning, the curriculum, professional learning and several sector specific matters such as qualifications and the arrangements for Centre Determined Grades. Proportions relate to the sample of schools that we contacted during this reporting period.

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Wellbeing

- Pupils are generally happy to be back in school

- Attendance is generally positive, though a few pupils haven't returned to school

- There has been an increase in referrals to children's services, CAMHS and the school-based counselling service

- Pupils in Years 11 and 13 are particularly anxious and are affected by the high number of assessments they have to complete

- Staff feel well supported by leaders but are tired

- Teachers report on the heavy workload involved with Centre Determined Grades

Groups of learners

- Specific groups of learners, such as those with additional learning needs, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those for whom English is an additional language have been particularly affected by the pandemic

- There is a general concern about the experiences for younger pupils as so much attention has been directed towards pupils in examination year groups

Pupil progress

- As distance learning does not lend itself well to certain aspects of provision, schools have identified 'gaps' in pupils' progress and skills in relation to elements such as oracy and extended writing

- Pupils who did not engage well in distance learning have regressed to a greater extent than those who did

- Schools are concerned that pupils who did not engage are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds and that the divide between the disadvantaged and more privileged will widen

- Welsh-medium schools are particularly concerned about pupils' oracy skills in Welsh

Teaching

- Pupils prefer being taught face-to-face in school, though they appreciate the improvement in the provision for distance learning during the second lockdown

- Schools intend to retain some aspects of distance learning in their future provision

- Current restrictions, such as pupils having to wear masks and teachers not being allowed to circulate the classroom continue to pose challenges

Qualifications and examinations

- Schools report that implementing the arrangements for Centre Determined Grades and appeals has created significant extra workload, stress and anxiety for pupils and staff

- Teachers are concerned that assessment materials and mark schemes are freely available on the internet and report that this is causing considerable difficulties as pupils are able to learn the content

Curriculum

- Variability between schools persists in the approaches to curriculum provision, for example, younger pupils are able to access specialised classrooms and workshops in some schools, but pupils must remain in the same room for all subjects in others

- Schools have made alternative arrangements for pupils moving from one key stage to the next, though this has proved particularly challenging for pupils choosing their GCSE options

- In general, younger pupils have experienced a more limited curriculum than older pupils throughout the pandemic. This situation continues as key stage 3 lessons are covered to release teachers to work on Centre Determined Grades

- Restrictions on extra-curricular experiences and wider learning experiences continue to have a detrimental effect on pupils' wellbeing and enjoyment of school

- Plans for implementing Curriculum for Wales vary greatly

Professional learning

- Schools have prioritised professional learning to support the Centre Determined Grades process

- Staff continue to access a much broader range of professional learning opportunities than prior to the pandemic, particularly in relation to digital skills

Leadership

- Leaders remain under significant pressure from having to manage lateral flow tests, cases of COVID-19, health and safety requirements and arrangements for CDGs and appeals

- Leaders are reflecting regularly on their practices and are identifying changes to their practices brought about by the pandemic that they plan to retain

- Variability persists in the extent and quality of the evaluation of teaching and learning and professional learning

- Leaders are concerned that, despite positive developments in some areas such as digital skills, ways of working that they worked hard to establish have waned

- Schools have continued to prepare for the implementation of the ALNET Act

Detailed findings

Wellbeing, including the return of pupils and attendance

Pupil wellbeing

Overall, pupils are happy to be back in school. Pupils interviewed during school visits said that, although they were well supported during the last lockdown, they welcomed their return to school and are feeling more involved in their learning. They are enjoying lessons, seeing their teachers and being with their friends. Pupils value how schools are working hard to ensure a safe and clean learning environment.

School staff say that they have gained a better understanding of how pupils live and the challenges some face, through live lessons, direct conversations with pupils and weekly welfare check phone calls to parents. They report that such communication has enabled them to understand better the level of poverty, disadvantage and social difficulties that some pupils face. Moreover, this has allowed school staff to understand more clearly the difference between deliberate poor behaviour and displays of emotional or attachment issues.

Some schools have responded productively to help pupils and families who need support in re-establishing routines around the school day. For example, they have used their family liaison officer to work with families to agree bedtimes and waking up times for pupils.

Schools have found that all pupils generally need more emotional support than before the pandemic. More able pupils are concerned about missing school and falling behind with their progress, in particular girls. Older pupils feel overwhelmed with the high volume of assessments and say that this is having a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Furthermore, they are anxious about the Centre Determined Grades system of assessment. Some schools note that pupils in key stage 3 were anxious about their return to school but are more settled by now. This was particularly the case for Year 7 pupils who have not had many opportunities to form friendship groups. Some schools provided 'transition' sessions for Year 10 and Year 11 pupils who were particularly fretful about returning to school due to not having engaged well with distance learning. This term, schools have provided helpful pastoral sessions and extra opportunities for pupils to discuss wellbeing issues with tutors and support staff. Some schools provide opportunities for pupils to ask for support through an online 'report a wellbeing issue' button on their website. Other schools have created a specific microsite or area within their website with information and ideas to support pupils' wellbeing.

> **Cameo – Ysgol Syr Hugh Owen**
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> Internal systems to monitor pupil wellbeing and welfare since the return of pupils to school have identified a prevalence in increased anxiety, self-injury and low mood. The school has created a special Google Classroom for mental health so that pupils can access information and activities to support them. In addition, the school has 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.

Many schools are focusing on promoting positive emotional health and wellbeing by delivering interventions normally organised for small groups to year groups across the school. For example, in one school, ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) sessions are now being delivered by teaching assistants to all pupils at key stage 3 and in other schools, support staff who have received trauma-informed school training are supporting tutor sessions.

Pupils interviewed during school engagement visits are pleased that their school has sought their views regularly throughout the period of the pandemic and has made beneficial changes to provision as a result. Pupils say that their organisational and time management skills have improved due to distance learning. In addition, in some schools, they have been encouraged to find new things to do and balance their time to include things other than schoolwork. They feel that this has helped them to preserve their wellbeing as far as possible. It is important to note, however, that pupils selected for interviews by the schools tended to be from within the more able, competent and confident groups.

Schools report that there has been an increase in referrals to external support agencies, such as the LA school-based counselling service and CAMHS. Many of these referrals are around anxiety, low self-esteem and low mood. Often, these issues have developed due to young people not seeing friends or developing social skills through friendship groups. However, schools also note a considerable increase in cases of deliberate self-harm amongst their middle and older pupils. All schools report a substantial increase in child protection referrals to children's services.

Overall, schools say that pupil behaviour is good. Changes in the order of the school day, such as staggered breaks and lunchtimes, as well as one-way travel systems and designated entry and exit points have resulted in a quieter and calmer school environment. Schools plan to keep these measures in the future when social distancing requirements will cease. Many schools who originally kept year groups together in zones and whose pupils remained in the same classroom all day have now reverted to normal with teachers regaining their classrooms. This has helped reduce the strain on teaching and support staff who had to carry their equipment and teach in different classrooms.

Attendance

Schools report that attendance rates after Easter are higher than those during the autumn term. Attendance rates were strong initially but have fallen slightly as this term has progressed, mainly due to minor illness. Promoting good attendance is a priority in many schools. As such, heads of year and pastoral leads have been given additional non-contact time to deal with wellbeing issues and to support attendance.

Although attendance rates are generally good, the main reason for lower attendance rates compared to the time before the pandemic is persistent absence of a very few pupils. These pupils have not returned to school due to concerns about their own health or that of a family member or due to unwillingness to re-engage with education. Although schools often work in partnership with local authority officers to persuade these pupils to return to school, they remain powerless to use sanctions at present due to current national restrictions.

Year	15/03/21 to 19/03/21 (a)	22/03/21 to 26/03/21 (a)	12/04/21 to 16/04/21 (b) (p)	19/04/21 to 23/04/21 (r)	26/04/21 to 30/04/21 (p) (r)	03/05/21 to 07/05/21 (p)
All Wales attendance rates						
7	15.5	28.9	93.6	92.8	90.0	90.6
8	13.0	28.8	92.2	90.5	89.2	89.6
9	12.3	27.6	91.4	90.7	89.4	88.8
10	32.3	60.5	89.1	88.9	87.6	87.6
11	82.4	78.4	87.9	87.6	86.8	84.7
12	56.5	74.4	82.3	82.6	81.2	78.8
13	74.5	71.4	75.0	76.0	73.1	67.4
Avg 7-11			90.8	90.1	88.6	88.3

Many of the small number of pupils who elected to be home educated during the first lockdown and into the new academic year have now re-enrolled at their respective schools. Local authority welfare officers have provided effective support to families who were initially reluctant to send their children to school. This has impacted positively on attendance rates.

Staff wellbeing

Staff generally feel that leaders have supported them well during the pandemic and, especially since the return of pupils from the second lockdown. In particular, they report that leaders have kept them well informed of decisions, making clear the reasons for any changes made. Middle leaders say they have been well supported by senior leaders and this, in turn, has enabled them to better support the staff in their department.

Overall, teachers report that senior leaders are mindful of the workload, in particular the significant additional work due to the Centre Determined Grades (CDGs) process for Year 11 and Year 13 pupils. In most cases, teachers have been given clear direction and support with the arrangements for CDGs and additional time to manage their administration.

Staff value their school's careful health and safety protocols and policies and say that these have given them reassurance to return to face to face teaching. Headteachers are concerned that new staff, in particular newly qualified teachers have not had enough opportunities to collaborate and build relationships with colleagues and pupils.

Groups of learners

The impact of the pandemic on specific groups of learners has been considerable. Schools report variability in pupils' engagement with distance learning. In particular those with additional learning needs or from disadvantaged circumstances, such as those eligible for free school meals, tended to engage less than other pupils. Pupils for whom English is an additional language found it particularly hard to engage with remote learning, especially if their parents do not speak English. The disparity between those pupils who engaged with learning at home and those who did not is becoming increasingly evident. Generally, schools report that more able pupils engaged well with work at home and now have good attendance at school. For some pupils, the period of school closure has strengthened their motivation and independence making them more determined to achieve their goals despite the disruption caused by the pandemic.

In general, there is concern about the concentration skills and readiness to learn of the younger pupils in secondary schools. Teachers have found it difficult to plan interesting learning experiences to re-engage key stage 3 pupils due to the heavy emphasis on the requirements to provide Centre Determined Grades for key stage 4 pupils. As a result, pupils in key stage 3 have had a more limited diet of stimulating tasks than their teachers would have wanted. This has had an impact on their concentration and engagement with learning.

Pupil progress

Since the return to school after the Easter holidays, many schools have begun to focus on identifying gaps in pupils' learning and skills. Distance learning provision does not lend itself well to certain aspects of provision. Consequently, schools are identifying some 'gaps' that are general to many pupils. For example, most comment on the regression in oracy skills because opportunities for pupils to speak, discuss and hear others speaking were limited. Many pupils are reticent to speak on screen and therefore have not practised their oracy skills routinely. The requirement for pupils to socially distance and wear masks in classrooms has added to the challenge of engaging pupils in oracy tasks now that they have returned to school. Many schools also comment on a regression in extended writing skills as pupils tended to write more short pieces than they would have done had they been in school. Despite considerable effort by teachers to encourage pupils to write at length, many pupils found it difficult to achieve this at home. Schools have found that there has been a general decline in the richness and breadth of pupils' vocabulary as they have not heard their teachers model language as often as they would normally and many pupils are reading less. Conversely, pupils' digital skills have developed well and at a swift pace.

Many schools have identified deficits in in the literacy skills of Year 7 pupils, particularly their reading skills. Schools comment that support for pupils' literacy development through transition from Year 6 to Year 7 has been affected by the disruption to schooling caused by the pandemic.

Leaders also report their concerns about pupils' readiness to learn, their resilience and their ability to re-engage with classroom routines. However, apart from the general issues identified by most schools, 'gaps' in pupils' learning and skills vary widely between pupils and schools. They are reflective of the particular context of each pupil and each school. As would be expected, schools report that those pupils who received support for learning from their family and maintained a focus on their work have not regressed to the extent of those who did not engage effectively with remote learning. They are also concerned that pupils who did not engage are more likely to be those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In Welsh-medium schools headteachers comment that pupils' Welsh speaking skills have regressed. This is particularly the case for those pupils from non-Welsh speaking homes as they had limited opportunities to speak or hear the language. Upon their return to school, it has taken pupils time to get back into the habit of using Welsh in lessons and during their social interactions. In addition, due to specific safety guidelines, pair and group work has been more difficult to organise, which has affected pupils' communication and social skills.

Teaching

Overall, pupils are pleased with the provision for teaching and learning since December. They report that teachers adapted their approaches well during the second lockdown and were supportive of their learning and wellbeing. However, nearly all pupils say that face-to-face teaching is more effective for them. For these reasons, nearly all school leaders want to return to as much normality as possibly, within the constraints of operating safely.

Most schools report that the quality of distance learning improved during the last lockdown. They felt that teachers quickly learned to overcome the challenges of distance learning and adapt their teaching to provide a better learning experience than in the first lockdown. Pupils welcomed the provision of pre-recorded and live lessons and felt that the balance between synchronous and asynchronous learning was suitable. Pupils were found particular aspects of their learning challenging during the lockdown period. They missed working with their peers and teachers in classroom activities, such as completing science experiments but welcomed the ways in which teachers of practical subjects adapted their lessons to support their learning.

In general, teachers report that they have found it challenging to address the wide range of learning needs of pupils during the pandemic. Teachers found it difficult to plan appropriately for the needs of all pupils when they were engaged in distance learning and were unable to support pupils who did not engage with learning. Since returning to school in April, teachers want to avoid going over work completed during lockdown, as some pupils engaged well with this. However, they recognise that they still need to provide support for those pupils who did not engage effectively in distance and blended learning.

Schools report that they plan to retain some aspects of their distance and blended learning provision in the future. Overall, both teachers' and pupils' confidence and creativity in using digital technology to support learning and teaching has developed considerably. For example, many schools plan to develop their use of recorded spoken feedback as they recognise it has reduced workload and has had a positive effect on the engagement from pupils.

Most teachers and middle leaders have found the current restrictions difficult when teaching face-to-face. In particular, they are concerned about their limited ability to circulate the class to intervene and support pupils. Senior leaders are finding creative ways to overcome current restrictions. For example, Ysgol Y Moelwyn established an outdoor learning space where teachers can conduct drama lessons or oral tasks to help pupils improve their speaking skills.

Qualifications and arrangements for Centre Determined Grades

School leaders and teachers report that setting and marking assessments and collecting evidence for the Centre Determined Grades (CDGs) process has created considerable extra workload. They also report that it is a significant source of stress and anxiety for staff and pupils.

Generally, teachers have used all of Year 11 and Year 13 teaching time this term to prepare pupils for the assessments or to carry them out. Schools say that the high volume of assessments has also put a substantial strain on pupils and is having a negative impact on their wellbeing. Many pupils are overwhelmed with the volume of work and are not enjoying their final weeks at school. A few more able pupils conclude that, while completing a high volume of assessments has been challenging, the preparation work and working under pressure has been a beneficial experience for sitting examinations in the future.

Schools have created a policy and procedures for staff around the allocation of Centre Determined Grades, and these have been shared with parents and pupils. In most schools, the focus of all professional learning since February has been around ensuring that staff understand the procedures for allocating grades.

Cameo – Ysgol y Moelwyn

The school has provided virtual meetings for parents that include a series of presentations explaining the arrangements for the awarding of qualifications this year. The meetings provided helpful opportunities for parents to ask questions. The school is hopeful that this will lead to parents having a better understanding of the process and that this, in turn will lead to parents only appealing where there are genuine grounds to do so.

Headteachers say that they understand the difficulties of creating a process for awarding qualifications this summer and why plans were revised plans during the year. However, they state that guidance has not always been shared or updated in a timely manner, and that this has been very stressful for school staff.

Leaders who directed teachers at the start of the academic year to gather and build on assessment evidence throughout the year find that this has been beneficial.

Nearly all schools have provided opportunities for their departments to meet and standardise the assessment work of their pupils. Staff say that while the standardisation processes implemented by schools have been valuable in terms of professional learning and development, they have significantly increased teacher workload.

Cameo – Meirionnydd area standardisation meetings

Secondary schools in the Meirionnydd area are very small and many of the school's non-core subject departments consist of only one subject teacher. Because of this, headteachers made arrangements for all these teachers to meet virtually to standardise the pupils' work. This has provided an additional layer of quality assurance for pupils' grades and has also provided the teachers with valuable professional learning.

Schools are critical of the fact that the materials provided for schools to use for assessment purposes are mostly past papers, for which mark schemes are available freely on the internet. This has often led to pupils revising the mark schemes rather

than working to improve their skills and their knowledge of the subject. Some school leaders feel that this benefits pupils who come from supportive families who have a good understanding of how to obtain these materials and mark schemes rather than those from deprived or difficult homes. Many headteachers state that they would have favoured the exam boards using the 2020 and 2021 exam materials as these have not been released to schools nor mark schemes published.

Senior leaders are concerned about the appeals process and the potential workload associated with this. For example, a school with a cohort of 100 pupils in Year 11, will be grading around 1000 qualifications and preparing a portfolio of evidence for each one. Even with only a small proportion of pupils appealing their grades, this work will be substantial for a school. Schools are concerned that, given the availability of past papers and mark schemes on the internet, pupils are performing better in the assessments than expected and that this performance does not accurately match the grade they believe the pupils would achieve under normal circumstances. Schools are concerned that this may lead to an abnormal inflation of learners' grades as, in the case of an appeal, the assessment material would support the higher grade rather than the grade awarded by teachers. They are fearful that the Centre Determined Grades process this year may lead to grades that are more inflated than those seen in 2020.

A few headteachers are critical of schools who inflated pupils' grades in 2020 under the Centre Assessed Grades procedures. They say that the actions of these schools have led to a general lack of trust in teacher assessments and to a need for extensive assessments. They state that there has been a missed opportunity to move away from the extensive use of formal assessments and examinations to determine pupils' ability and knowledge in order to award qualifications.

Most school leaders are concerned about the assessment arrangements for next year and how they will be adjusted to compensate for the loss of learning experienced by the pupils who are currently in Year 10 and Year 12. A minority of leaders expressed concern about Year 12 in particular as they feel that these pupils were likely to sit external examinations next year, having never done so before.

Curriculum

There continues to be a high degree of variability in the approaches that leaders have taken in preparing for the full return to school. In a number of schools, key stage 3 pupils continue to be taught in class bubbles in one classroom with seating arranged in rows. They have limited access to practical facilities and teachers move between classrooms. In most schools, key stage 4 and sixth-form pupils have been placed in year bubbles and move around the school so that they can access specialist classrooms. Schools regularly amend and update guidance and risk assessments to allow practical subjects to proceed safely. In some schools, leaders have made the decision to offer a full curriculum to all on return with all practical subjects available but with modified schemes.

Schools working in partnership continue to provide a broad range of academic and vocational courses in the sixth form. Before the pandemic, pupils routinely travelled between schools during the day. Since the pandemic, live lessons have been offered online to minimise contact and reduce travel.

Most schools have altered their arrangements to support pupils to progress from one key stage to another. For example, they have produced visual information such as videos, online presentations and virtual tours for pupils moving from key stage 2 to key stage 3. Some schools feel that there have been limited opportunities for pupils to experience a range of option choices before they select their final key stage 4 pathways. This has particularly been the case where pupils are making their choices in Year 8 as they have had very little experience of 'usual' schooling since starting secondary school. Most schools have adapted their guidance around option choices at key stage 4 and in the sixth-form, for example through virtual interviews and assemblies. Leaders report that they have seen an increase in the number of Year 9 pupils choosing practical subjects for their GCSE options. Many schools were planning to run an interim timetable following the Whitsun half term, but the uncertainty of when Year 11 and 13 are due to finish their studies have put these plans on hold.

A number of school leaders note that additional staff have been brought in to cover teaching in key stage 3 in order to free up time for staff/teachers to provide extra lessons for pupils in Year 11 and the sixth form in preparation for Centre Determined Grades (CDGs). Although this approach allows schools to provide pupils with regular, additional lessons, many note that doing this is compromising the quality of the provision offered to pupils in key stage 3.

Schools have seen the need to offer a further range of interventions for pupils in need of additional support. A number have assigned additional learning support staff to work with individual or small groups of pupils as well as additional staff to focus mainly on pupils' wellbeing. Schools have introduced or extended initiatives intended to support pupils to improve their literacy skills. These include targeted programmes, usually in key stage 3, to improve listening and speaking skills. In addition, schools are using reading programmes that are intended to help teachers diagnose specific difficulties pupils might be experiencing.

In general, school leaders continue to air concerns about the restrictions on extra-curricular activities and limited wider learning experiences. They all note that this is having a detrimental effect on the development of pupils' personal and social skills.

Curriculum for Wales

Plans for implementing Curriculum for Wales continue to vary greatly within the secondary sector. In the summer term, schools indicate that plans have been put on hold as they have been dealing with Centre Determined Grades and internal assessment arrangements and have had less time to plan strategically.

A majority of schools have continued to work further on their vision for Curriculum for Wales and implement plans to coordinate the work across the school. These schools have identified developments brought about by the pandemic that are useful in developing Curriculum for Wales plans, for example, digital learning and cross curricular work. This collaboration has continued with the return of pupils.

A few schools have jumped rapidly into the areas of learning and understanding before truly exploring their vision for their curriculum and the quality of teaching at a whole school level. In a few schools, leaders have chosen to defer preparations for the new curriculum for the time being.

Professional learning

Nearly all secondary schools have prioritised professional learning time to guide staff through the Centre Determined Grades (CDG) process. As well as offering support from senior and middle leaders within the school, nearly all teachers have been able to access bilingual materials shared by the WJEC, though this training is time consuming. Most teachers understand the broad expectations of the process, but find the execution demanding and are anxious to carry out their assessments fairly and equitably in the best interests of their pupils.

Over time schools have developed 'libraries' of support for digital skills which are still available to teachers and easily accessible online. Many schools consider that digital tools and platforms will be embedded in teachers' planning going forward. They anticipate that teachers' recently developed expertise will continue to ensure a richer and more varied experience for pupils. For example, they will use online learning for post-16 pupils accessing courses across different providers and when pupils are learning outside school time, including homework activities and revision sessions.

A majority of schools have continued to offer professional learning opportunities focused on teaching and readiness for a Curriculum for Wales, although the focus is predominantly on CDGs. With regard to other national priorities, many schools have supported staff to deepen their understanding of the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal Act (Wales) and to help them respond to the changing needs of all pupils.

The local, national and international professional learning offer continues to be extensive, open to all and accessible due to the removal of the need to travel, and often free of charge. Staff can access flexibly a wide range and variety of

professional learning opportunities. These include participation in local and national networks and the opportunity to attend webinars from leading educationalists provided, for example, by the regions and the EWC and follow up sessions to Estyn thematic reports. The regional consortia and local authorities have continued to provide support in a range of areas. In general, schools have found the available support to be helpful. A minority of schools have continued to support teachers to engage in professional enquiry.

Schools have provided beneficial experiences for newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and for initial teacher education (ITE) students. Leaders believe that colleagues beginning their teaching career during the pandemic will require more support and nurture as a result of their disrupted introduction to the profession.

Leadership

In secondary schools, leaders remain under significant pressure. In addition to the usual work of running a school, leaders have to manage lateral flow tests for all pupils, COVID safe practices and, to varying degrees, continued cases of pupils having to self-isolate and the associated TTP procedures. Managing and taking responsibility for the CDG process and preparing for appeals has contributed substantial additional workload and stress and has impacted on leaders at all levels.

Most schools have provided increased support for middle leaders through training for the CDGs and giving them additional time. However, training is time consuming and any additional time means that other classes are not being taught and work has to be set for them.

In general, schools have continued to hold leadership, middle leader and governing body meetings. In the main these have been virtual but are gradually transferring to socially distanced face to face meetings. Schools have found many benefits to holding virtual meetings, particularly where those meetings involve external partners. For example, schools report that attendance at governors' meetings has been better on digital platforms. In addition, schools have found it easier to collaborate and learn from other schools as they have been able to meet virtually to share ideas. Digital platforms enable schools to engage beyond regional and geographical boundaries and meet more frequently.

A notable feature of the approach to leadership in light of the pandemic is an increased focus on reflection and re-evaluation of practices. Leaders report that the pandemic has forced them to think differently about everything that they do, question long-established ways of working and act swiftly to change things. Despite the significant challenges of the pandemic, many leaders display a positive attitude to moving forward and see the benefits of some of the changes forced upon them.

In general, schools have increased the opportunities for a range of stakeholders to share their views about the school's work through surveys, polls and focus groups. Overall, schools have acted more swiftly than they would normally have done to make changes in the light of feedback from pupils, parents and staff in particular.

Variability persists in the extent and quality of the evaluation of teaching and learning. This has been a particularly challenging area of work for schools under

COVID-19. Many leaders have observed online lessons and are increasingly returning to in-person lesson observations. However, they have been unable to fully evaluate the impact of the lessons by interacting with pupils and looking at their work as they would usually. In other examples, there has been limited evaluation of teaching and learning. In addition, teachers have found it difficult to accurately assess pupils' progress when they were learning from home as they couldn't tell how much help pupils had been given or to what extent they had used the internet, and some pupils did not engage at all. This has meant that schools have not had accurate assessment data for all pupils.

The move to digital platforms has meant that a very wide range of professional learning opportunities is now available to schools. In general, the professional learning provision in nearly all schools is more extensive. However, there is far less consistency in terms of the evaluation of the impact and appropriateness of professional learning provision. In some cases, there seems to be a lack of strategic planning and direction behind the professional learning programme.

Most school leaders feel that their schools have moved forward in some ways and backwards in others. For example, nearly all school leaders feel that their schools have made significant positive progress in terms of pupil and staff's digital skills and their schools' digital infrastructure. On the other hand, many leaders are concerned that valuable ways of working that they had worked hard to establish and embed, such as whole-school approaches to literacy and numeracy or reading schemes, have been diluted during the pandemic and will take a long time to re-establish.

ALNET Act

Overall, schools welcome the fact that the ALNET Act will only apply to Years 7 and 10 from September, but are concerned about the complexity and workload involved in running two systems at the same time. In general, and despite the challenges of the pandemic, schools have continued to prepare for the implementation of the Act, though plans are at varying stages of development. 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 ALNCo. Schools appreciate the support offered by local authorities, though are concerned that there will be less support available as ALN secondments to support the implementation of the act come to an end.

RRRS and other grant funding

Leaders appreciate the grant funding that has been given to schools. They have used this funding to pay for additional teaching and support staff and to offset the cost of adaptations they have had to make such as increased cleaning. However, much of this funding is time-limited and therefore it is difficult for leaders to make any sustainable changes or appointments. In addition, all grants have different conditions and different expectations around the follow-up. In many cases, grant funding has arrived very late in the financial year, which has made it challenging to spend the money before the next financial year begins. It has also been challenging to recruit staff at short notice, especially in the Welsh-medium sector and in specific geographical areas.

Operational arrangements and changes to the school day

Many schools have retained their usual timetable structure. A few schools have increased the length of lessons to minimise movement around the school. Many schools have continued with split break and lunch times, which generally means that staff and pupils have shorter lunch and break times. While this brings benefits in terms of queuing and congestion, it has a negative impact on lunchtime clubs and the time available for staff and pupils to interact socially. A few schools have continued with a shorter day and limited breaks for pupils and staff, with some ending the school day before 2.00 p.m.

Safe environment

Schools continue to do their best to provide a safe environment for staff and pupils. They report that hygiene routines are well understood and implemented. In addition, between 35% and 90% of pupils in individual schools are engaging with lateral flow tests.

Movement around the school

Arrangements in an increasing number of schools are beginning to focus on allowing pupils to move around the school with staff remaining in their own specialist rooms. Schools report that this is having a positive effect on the wellbeing of pupils and staff. They note that this has been possible due to the fact that routines such as one-way systems and designated entrances are well understood and implemented by pupils.

Effect of operational changes on disadvantaged pupils

Some schools have noted concerns about the effect of operational changes on disadvantaged pupils. For example, in some schools there is a lack of inside space for pupils to eat their lunch. As a result, pupils do not have the opportunity to eat socially around a table. Schools are concerned that for some pupils, school lunchtime is the only opportunity they have to experience this.

COVID Keepers

During the summer term, many schools have begun to evaluate the adjustments that were made during the first and second lockdown and identify their 'COVID Keepers'.

Transport

Traffic management systems and registers on buses have worked well to reduce the need for full buses to isolate when there is a positive case. In addition, some schools are considering keeping these arrangements in the future due to the positive effect they have had on behaviour.

Communication with parents and online parents' evenings

A 'COVID keeper' for some schools is the hybrid approach to parents' evenings. Schools report that they have been able to engage with a wider audience by holding some parts of parents' meetings virtually and at times of the day that allow a greater number of parents to engage. This, along with digital communication with parents, is something that they intend to continue in the future.

School bells

Some schools, such as The John Frost School, have removed the bells during the school day. Once the lesson has finished, staff judge the optimum time to release their class into the corridors. This has enabled pupils to follow social distancing guidelines in corridors that are less congested. The school also note the calmer atmosphere that has resulted from this approach. They intend to continue with this in the future.
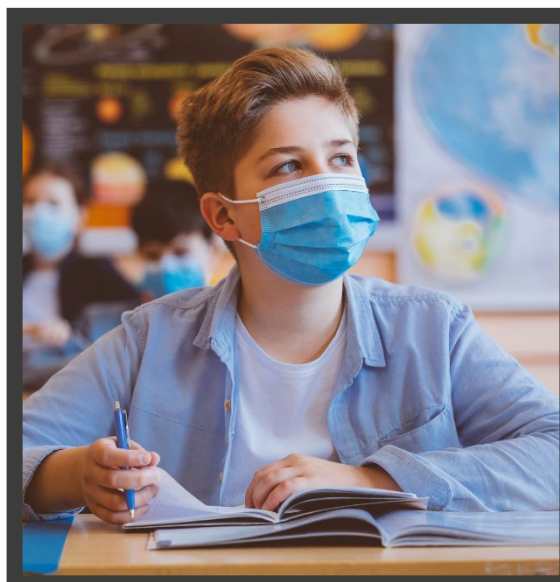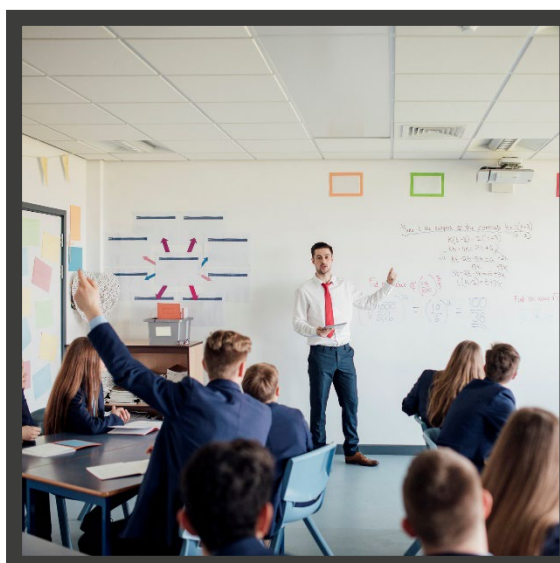
Increased use of surveys

Many schools have increased their use of online surveys for parents, pupils and staff. During the pandemic, they have used these surveys to glean stakeholders' views on a wide range of topics and plan to continue with this approach in the future. Schools have found that response rates to surveys have been better than in the past and that they offer a quick and efficient way to gain stakeholders' opinions.
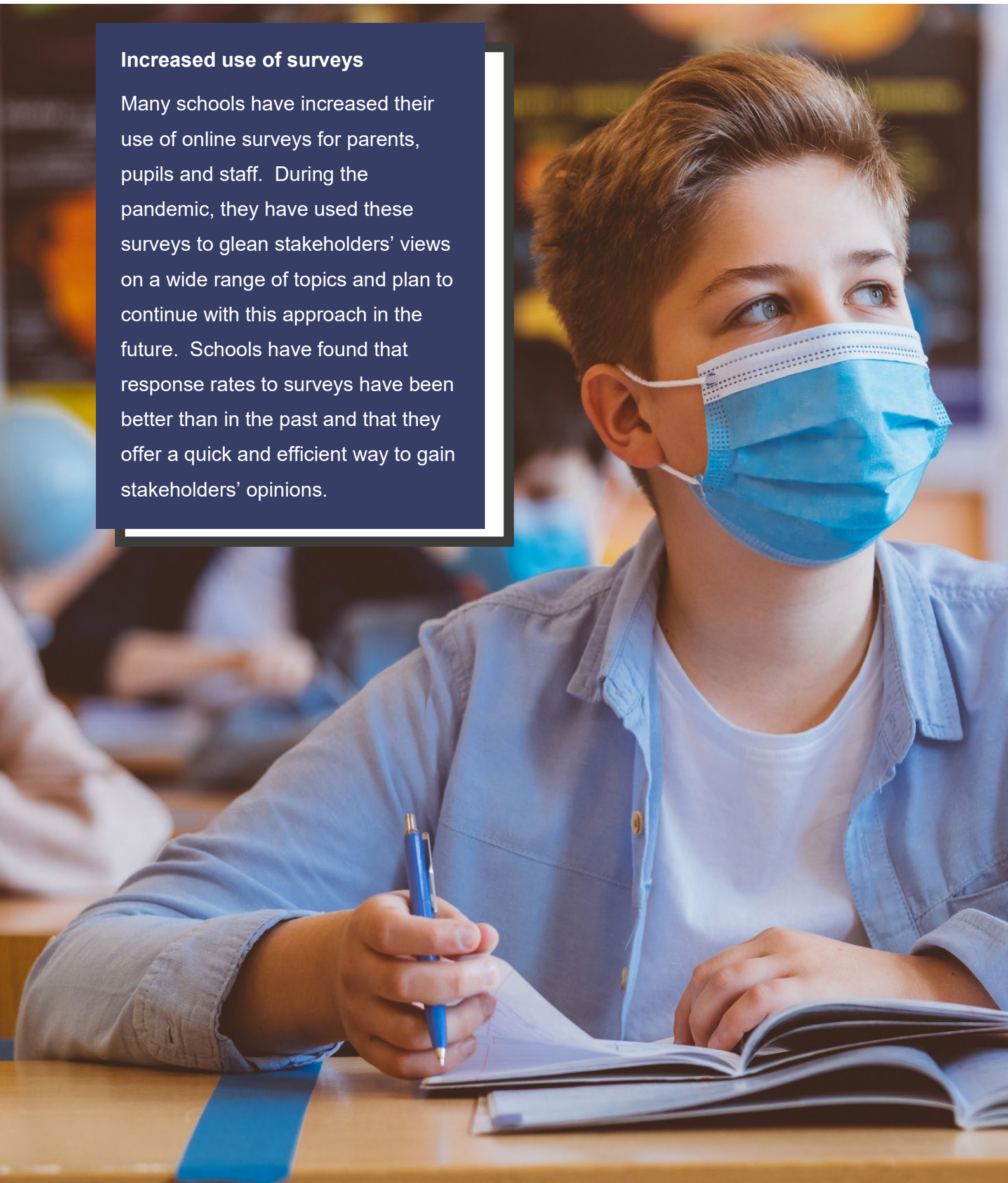
Appendix: Number of engagement visits/calls during the academic year 2020-2021

Consortium	Local authority	Schools
CSC	Bridgend	9
	The Vale of Glamorgan	7
	Rhondda Cynon Taf	13
	Merthyr Tydfil	4
	Cardiff	18
	Total CSC	51
EAS	Caerphilly	11
	Blaenau Gwent	2
	Torfaen	6
	Monmouthshire	4
	Newport	7
	Total EAS	30
ERW	Powys	10
	Ceredigion	5
	Pembrokeshire	5
	Carmarthenshire	13
	Swansea	14
	Total ERW	47
GwE	Isle of Anglesey	5
	Gwynedd	14
	Conwy	8
	Denbighshire	6
	Flintshire	12
	Wrexham	7
	Total GwE	52
	Neath Port Talbot	5
All secondary providers		185
FSM benchmark (3YA FSM 2018-2020)		
Up to and including 10%		41
Over 10% and up to and including 15%		54
Over 15% and up to and including 20%		34
Over 20% and up to and including 30%		44
Over 30%		12
Information Unavailable		0
Total		185