HMCI's Annual Report 2023-2024

Estyn

Foreword

Welcome to our annual report. In this report you will find how the Welsh education and training sectors have performed over the year. In addition to our early insights, published in October 2024, this report will feature both my own reflections on the year but also greater detail and nuance around our findings along with some featured analysis. With over 400 annual inspections, Estyn continues to develop its ethos to one of providing accountability and supporting improvement. We will, therefore, shine a light on some of the best practice seen along with focusing on areas where we are seeing national trends that need addressing if Wales is to achieve its ambitions for all learners.

I would like to thank all the providers we visited during the year and the system more widely for their efforts and commitment to learners. The most rewarding part of my role continues to be regular visits to all types of settings across Wales, meeting learners and the passionate teams, devoted to education and training.

In addition to our thematic reports, this year we will again include some selected evaluations focusing on how well providers tackle some of the specific challenges facing learners in Wales, including:

- Towards an anti-racist Wales
- Teaching & the curriculum
- Self-evaluation and improvement planning
- Recruitment and retention
- The Welsh language

- [Attendance](#)

The outcomes of this work have been illuminating. For example, we have seen commendable efforts by schools to integrate anti-racism into their ethos and practices, although the depth and breadth of this integration vary.

The implementation of the Curriculum for Wales has progressed, but many schools still do not align curriculum development with effective teaching and assessment strategies well enough. In some cases, schools' planning for progression is underdeveloped and teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are too low.

Self-evaluation, in particular, remains a crucial area for improvement. Only a minority of providers demonstrate strong practice that drives improvement, while others do not evaluate the impact of teaching on learning closely enough and therefore struggle to plan precise and impactful improvements.

Recruitment, especially in areas such as the Welsh language, science and mathematics, has been a significant challenge, impacting the quality of education. This is particularly concerning in secondary schools. The failure to attract new entrants to the profession has impacted on the quality of teaching and learning.

While there is a need to strengthen the provision to develop learners' grasp of Welsh in all sectors, we have also observed strong practice in the promotion of Welsh language and culture, which serves as models for others.

We have again this year sought to enhance in our approaches to communicate our findings. For example, we have worked with practitioners to create podcasts that offer greater detail and reflections on anti-racism and the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales, which we hope will support progress in these areas.

Turning now to our inspections, whilst there are many strengths in the Welsh education and training sectors in Wales, there continue to be areas for improvement. The clearest themes emanating from our work this year have been:

- In too many cases, the quality of teaching and assessment is not high enough. For example, in just under a half of schools and PRUs, there are shortcomings in teaching that directly impacts learners' progress.
- There are notable gaps in how providers plan for the development of learners' literacy, numeracy, and digital skills.
- Safeguarding and well-being support are consistently strong across most schools and other providers. However, despite modest improvements, attendance remains too low, especially for learners living in poverty.
- Self-evaluation and improvement planning across the majority of sectors, including maintained schools and independent schools, remain areas of concern. These processes are often weak, with insufficient focus on the impact of teaching on learners' progress. This is compounded by governance issues, where a minority rely too heavily on information from school leaders alone. In these cases, governors are not fully equipped to evaluate school improvement priorities or assess the impact of funding on pupil outcomes.
- A minority of providers have successfully integrated professional development with broader improvement priorities, ensuring that staff training aligns with identified shortcomings in teaching.

Across the sectors we inspect, Early Years provision has continued to perform well, utilising local authority support and providing a strong foundation for learning. Provision in these settings, and in nursery and reception classes in schools, has responded well to changing needs in their communities and the readiness of children to learn.

The majority of primary and secondary schools demonstrated a strong focus on pupils' well-being and their care, support and guidance. This led to positive pupil attitudes to learning. Both sectors have made good progress in the implementation of the new additional learning needs in education act, although some variability remains in terms of schools' provision. In terms of disadvantage, although there are many challenges outside of their control, school staff continue to work diligently to mitigate the impact of poverty on educational achievement.

Attendance remains substantially below pre-pandemic levels. It showed slight improvement, increasing from 88.5% to 89.0% during 2023-2024, but pupils still, on average, lost more than one day per fortnight of school. The gap compared with pre-pandemic levels is starker in secondary schools despite their best efforts and the attendance of those receiving free school meals is a continuing concern. Whilst there is some good news that the gap is narrowing, it remains too high. Very low attendance in some of our more deprived communities is a particular concern. There continues to be too much variation in local authorities' focus and impact on improving attendance.

There is substantial variation in how well schools have developed their curriculum. Planning for curricular transition remains an issue as learners progress from primary to secondary phases.

In schools, the provision for developing basic numeracy and literacy skills has strengthened, with learners making good initial progress. However, learners do not always make enough progress in the latter years of the primary phase and beginning of the secondary phase to ensure that they develop more advanced literacy and numeracy skills. It's worth remembering that the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests for higher level numeracy and literacy skills is an area in which Wales has under-performed.

The success of the Welsh Government's School Improvement Programme will be critical in supporting the changes needed as will the role of the newly announced professional learning agency in supporting high-quality teaching and improving leadership. Local authorities have a strong professional relationship with leaders in the sectors and on-going critical support for schools is essential. High expectations, monitoring progress and improvement, under-pinned by sound evaluation coupled with subject-specific support, will be essential elements of the new school support landscape. The new collaborative model will only succeed if the purposes for collaboration are clear and evaluation robust and have a clear and sustained focus on improving learners' progress.

School leaders continue to note challenges in the system that hamper progress including finance, pupil behaviour and the availability of support services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or pupil referral services. We have already raised the fact that there is very limited capacity at pupil referral units and special schools and that too few suitable pupils return to the mainstream, limiting capacity within those specialist services to support more pupils. Special schools, specialist resource bases and PRUs are generally providing an effective, individualised curriculum, with strong care and support which fosters well-being. In a few cases, the lack of staff specialist expertise or inadequate facilities limit impact. PRUs educate a high proportion of pupils with ALN and local authorities are too inconsistent in how they use Individual Development Plans (IDPs) to facilitate Additional Learning Provision (ALPs).

Despite some evidence of strong provision in the Initial Teacher Education Training (ITET) sector, recruiting suitably qualified teachers remains a risk for the education system. The recruitment challenges were more acute for secondary education and particularly for mathematics and sciences. Worryingly for the ambition to reach one million Welsh speakers, the lack of suitably qualified

teachers able to teach through Welsh is a particular issue. ITE providers have failed to recruit a third of the target for new Welsh speakers for the past three years.

In the Post-16 education and training settings inspected, learners were engaged but often didn't receive sufficient stretch. The proportion of learners achieving higher grades in graded provision, both on vocational and A-level programmes, is too low. Common issues persist such as signposting and progression and the availability of Welsh language provision. Overall, there is still too much unhelpful competition, which impacts on the information learners get about next steps and the overall coherence and choice of pathways.

Many further education learners displayed strong subject or vocational skills and others had been re-engaged by education. Junior apprenticeships, a feature of a recent thematic review, showed significant promise for some learners aged 14-16. Youth services, an area that Estyn has recently re-commenced inspecting, demonstrated significant value in helping learners overcome obstacles, build resilience and grow confidence.

A challenge in further education was to provide sufficient stretch for learners to achieve their potential.

Work-based learning apprenticeships continued to demonstrate strengths, with most learners developing comprehensive practical skills that they could apply in work. Whilst learners developed verbal and communications skills well, the teaching and learning of literacy, numeracy and digital skills was overly skewed towards preparation for often unsuitable external assessment. Completion rates in some priority areas, such as health, public services and care and hospitality, were too low although there are several factors in play, including suitable assessment routes. The progress of apprenticeship providers in developing bilingual resources was noteworthy.

Adult community learning provided a vital path for many learners but often provided poor value for money due to large and short-term injections of unsustained funding through the Multiply programme. The strength of the relationships between tutors and their learners was a particular strength, although the provision of Welsh language services, even in predominantly Welsh-speaking areas, was poor.

The Justice sector demonstrated that, where teaching was strong, learners could develop valuable skills including literacy and numeracy skills. However, the quality of teaching was variable, and did not contribute well enough to learners' prospects on release.

Finally, the Welsh for Adults sector again demonstrated significant strength. In addition to providers, we inspected the National Centre for Learning Welsh and found a well-structured environment where learners were skilfully immersed in the language. Tutors facilitated strong learning, providing the impetus for many to continue their learning on subsequent and higher-level courses.

Overall, this year demonstrated that the Welsh education and training sectors have significant strengths but areas that continue to require improvement. Estyn remains committed to supporting improvement through our activities and we have highlighted key areas that could strengthen provision.

Teaching and the Curriculum

The majority of schools and non-maintained settings have continued to develop and refine their vision for curriculum and teaching. In around half of cases, they have considered well what this vision should look like in practice and how it can support pupils to improve their knowledge understanding and skills.

Sgwrs Podcast: Exploring the Curriculum for Wales

Listen to our podcast, Sgwrs, where we explore the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales and how schools are shaping innovative and impactful learning experiences. This episode includes practical examples from schools implementing a dynamic and engaging curriculum and advice for educators on successful curriculum planning.

The panel includes Claire Morgan (Strategic Director, Estyn) Tony Bate (HMI, Estyn) Amy Newton (Co-Acting Head, St Julian's Comprehensive School) and Judith Russell (Headteacher, Langstone Primary).

Listen on Spotify

High quality teaching

Where curriculum implementation has been most successful, leaders have kept an unrelenting focus on improving the quality of teaching as fundamental to helping teachers understand how to effectively develop and deliver their curriculum. In these cases, leaders have ensured that professional learning responds well to findings from schools' evaluation processes, in particular the aspects of teaching most in need of improvement.

In the more effective schools, leaders worked with staff to set high expectations for the quality of teaching. These schools placed a clear emphasis on engaging pupils in learning experiences that are most likely to accelerate their progress. A few schools were beginning to develop clear strategies for supporting pupils to become more independent problem-solvers by encouraging them to consider their thinking and reflect on their work critically. For instance, they promoted high-quality classroom discussions that help pupils verbalise their thinking and work through tasks collaboratively with their peers.

Cyfarthfa Park Primary

Spotlight – Effective Approaches to Oracy and Its Impact on Developing Critical Thinkers

Leaders and staff ensure that there is a shared approach to developing pupils' speaking and listening skills. This approach is well integrated into teaching in nearly all classes. Staff equip pupils with the language and vocabulary they need to become reflective learners, fostering their confidence to respectfully challenge each other's thinking. This approach is deeply rooted across many areas of the curriculum; for instance, pupils use their language skills to evaluate their own learning, engage in purposeful discussions about their reading, and articulate their ideas for solving mathematical problems.

In schools where leaders have been most successful in securing improvements in the quality of teaching, they:

- Ensured that all staff understand the importance of planning for learning in pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding
- Developed a culture of high expectations where all staff enjoy discussing teaching and curriculum development
- Supported staff to develop a clear understanding of progress in all aspects of pupils' learning
- Encouraged staff and allow them to make informed professional choices
- Created a culture where teachers frequently receive feedback about strengths and areas for improvement in teaching
- Regularly placed teaching and pedagogy as agenda items on all staff meetings
- Ensured that professional development is planned strategically
- Used research sensibly to inform the decisions and strategy for their school

In schools where teachers planned carefully for learning, they designed learning activities that are engaging and aligned with intended learning outcomes. A majority of primary schools and a minority of secondary schools have balanced the systematic development of pupils' knowledge and understanding together with their application. This has helped them to make meaningful links, where appropriate, both within and across Areas of Learning and Experience (AOLEs).

Leaders and practitioners in many non-maintained nursery settings have made strong progress in implementing the Curriculum for Wales. In these settings, staff engaged well with professional learning and developed a good understanding of child development and effective teaching in the early years.

Little Lambs Emmanuel

Spotlight – <u>Responsive Planning in Action</u>

Staff plan effectively and carefully to ensure that children's learning experiences align with the principles of the Curriculum for Wales. Practitioners have developed a strong understanding of child development and use this to respond adeptly to each child's individual needs.

For example, practitioners use the developmental pathways in the Welsh curriculum to plan carefully for learning opportunities that develop children's skills, while maintaining the flexibility to adapt to children's evolving interests. This approach ensures an effective balance between focused skill-building and ample opportunities for free play for children to develop their perseverance and confidence.

A notable strength of the setting is the way practitioners continuously adjust their curriculum to keep it engaging and accessible for all children, fostering an inclusive and stimulating learning environment.

However, in a minority of schools, curriculum design was still at an early stage of development. In these cases, there was often a weaker understanding of progression or teachers' expectations were too low. In addition, these schools have often made superficial links between subjects or AOLEs. In a minority of cases, leaders have not secured a sufficient focus on enhancing the quality of teaching and did not use evaluation and improvement processes rigorously enough to identify strengths and areas for development. In these schools, opportunities for professional learning, particularly to improve teachers' understanding of effective teaching, were underdeveloped. As a result, teachers tended to focus on planning activities without ensuring that they had a clear picture of how pupils' learning will progress. In addition, expectations of what pupils can achieve were often too low.

In a minority of schools, teachers were not supporting pupils in developing their ability to think independently well enough. In these cases, pupil engagement was often limited by adults who overly directed the learning process. This reduces opportunities for pupils to practise and apply their knowledge in more challenging contexts. However, where this was done well, staff guided pupils skilfully to apply their knowledge to solve problems with growing independence when they encounter difficulty.

St Andrew's Primary School and Nursery

Spotlight – <u>The role of the enabling adult to support effective environments and engaging experiences</u>

Practitioners adopt the notice, analyse and respond approach to observing younger pupils' engagement with learning experiences. During the 'notice' stage they seek to find out what drives pupils' curiosity and how pupils choose resources available to them. During the 'analyse' stage, practitioners interpret pupils' skills and knowledge development, assess their progress and analyse a pupil's preferred schema[1] repeated actions or certain behaviours children use to make sense of the world around them. Finally, observations are used as a catalyst for planning future learning experiences. This may include staff making adaptations to the environment, planning opportunities for pupils to refine or consolidate a skill and enrich experiences further. As a result, staff act as enablers, modelling and enhancing pupils' independence, confidence and ownership of their learning environment.

In schools where the quality of teaching has not been effective enough, generally leaders:

- Have not ensured that all staff have high enough expectations of pupils
- Have not ensured that curriculum design and teaching is centred on planning for pupils' learning
- Have not prioritised the development of teaching alongside curriculum design
- Have not ensured that pupils have access to the broad range of curriculum experiences

The purpose driven curriculum

There remains too much variation in schools' understanding of the purpose driven curriculum. In the best cases, staff understood that the purpose driven curriculum is about ensuring that all learning experiences have a clear purpose in supporting pupils to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills, which in turn supports their development towards the four purposes. In these schools, staff worked collaboratively to develop a shared understanding of curriculum design and the most effective teaching approaches to support pupils' sustained progress over time. Where this was well understood, leaders and staff thought carefully about their curriculum design and constantly challenged each other to consider how all learning experiences are benefiting their pupils and supporting them to make meaningful progress.

In a minority of schools, there has been too strong a focus on the four purposes during planning for daily teaching, rather than prioritising the specific learning outcome they want pupils to achieve. This sometimes led to teachers planning individual lessons only to 'meet' the four purposes or planning a range of activities for pupils to complete that do not progressively develop their knowledge, understanding or skills.

The development of skills

In a majority of primary schools, and a minority of secondary schools, staff planned well to develop pupils' literacy, numeracy, and digital skills across the curriculum. In the best cases, there has been a strategic approach where staff worked purposefully together to plan these skills progressively.

In many non-maintained settings, staff planned well to develop children's skills holistically across the curriculum. However, in too many schools the planning for the progressive development of pupils' skills was more limited. In these schools, teachers did not provide enough opportunities for pupils to use their skills in increasingly challenging contexts or at a high enough level. As a result, opportunities were often missed for pupils to deepen their understanding and skills. For example, opportunities for pupils to apply the full range of numeracy skills across the curriculum in schools were often limited. In addition, there were regularly not enough opportunities for pupils to develop more sophisticated reading skills in a range of areas across the curriculum.

Developing a sense of Cynefin and engaging with the community

Overall, a majority of schools and settings made good use of their community. For example, staff in non-maintained nursery settings considered carefully the learning needs of the pupils and worked closely with parents to provide support for their child's learning at home. Schools often used resources in their locality and external organisations thoughtfully. In a minority of instances, schools and settings provided beneficial opportunities for pupils to develop a sense of 'Cynefin' by incorporating the history and geography of the local area, Wales and the wider world into their teaching.

A majority of secondary schools in Wales offered a broad and balanced range of Key Stage 4 courses, including both GCSE and vocational options. However, in a minority, there was a more limited range of subjects on offer, which restricts pupils' ability to pursue their interests. A few schools were continuing to implement a three-year period of study for GCESs, despite the recent statutory guidance from the Welsh Government not to do so. This means pupils drop a broader range of subjects at the end of Year 8, limiting their exposure to a wider curriculum. This reduces their opportunities to sufficiently explore various subjects before making better-informed choices at any appropriate age in Year 9.

Supporting pupils' transition

Leaders and staff in non-maintained settings worked well with parents to support their children's early education. For example, most settings invited parents into settings during initial settling in periods. Generally, many settings and primary schools worked together appropriately to ensure a smooth onward transition. A minority of secondary schools were beginning to work with their partner primary

schools to develop a shared approach to curriculum design and teaching. These schools were beginning to consider the progress they want pupils to make in their knowledge and skills and worked together to identify how pupils' learning can be built upon as they move from primary to secondary schools. However, overall, the transition from primary to secondary education often lacked consistency, and staff across both sectors did not always work well enough together to share approaches to improving teaching and curriculum development to ensure a purposeful continuity in pupils' learning.

Developing approaches to assessment and progress

The majority of teachers used formative assessment approaches to understand how well pupils were progressing and to adapt their teaching. Where teachers have clear learning intentions, they often planned questions carefully to check pupils' understanding and develop their thinking. In a majority of cases, teachers gave useful verbal feedback during lessons to support pupils, and a majority provided helpful written feedback to guide pupils in understanding their next steps. In the best cases, teachers planned effective follow-up tasks for pupils to act on this feedback. However, in a minority of schools, teachers did not ensure that pupils had sufficient opportunities to respond well enough to feedback and make meaningful improvements to the quality of their work.

Troedyrhiw Primary School

Spotlight – The progress of learners as a result of robust assessment strategies and monitoring of pupils' achievements and next steps in learning

Quality time is spent ensuring that all staff have a clear and accurate understanding of progression in each area of learning. Staff and leaders triangulate date from feedback in pupils' books, cohort progress reviews and 'Pupil Meets' where time is spent with each pupil to discuss what they are doing well, what their next steps in learning are and how they will be supported. As a result, feedback to pupils is effective. There are timely opportunities for pupils to build on prior learning and a clear understanding of what the pupil is achieving in lessons and what they need to do to improve. This in turn informs the next steps for teachers' planning.

A minority of schools have worked well to develop staff understanding of progress across all age ranges. However, overall, across Wales schools were finding it difficult to develop a shared understanding of progression and plan precisely to support pupils' progress. Leaders indicated that they would welcome further clarification from the Welsh Government about what minimum expected progress should look like at different stages of pupils' learning and development.

Questions for reflection
- How well do our staff understand the importance of high-quality teaching and its impact on their pupils' progress?
- Have we as leaders developed a culture of self-evaluation and professional learning, where improving teaching is a high priority?
- How effectively do our teachers plan for learning, designing tasks that are both engaging and aligned with intended learning outcomes?

- How well do our staff carry out their role as enabling adults, understand pupils' needs, and skilfully adapt their teaching to support and move learning forwards?

- How well do we plan for the progressive development of pupils' literacy, numeracy, and digital skills across the curriculum?

- How effectively do we make use of their community, locality, and external organisations to enrich learning experiences?

- How well do we work in partnership to ensure that transition arrangements develop a shared approach to curriculum design, improve our understanding of effective teaching and develop a shared understanding of progression?

- How well do teachers support pupils to develop their independence?

- How effectively do teachers use formative approaches to assessment to understand how well pupils are progressing and adapt their teaching in lessons and over time?

Towards an anti-racist Wales

Towards an anti-racist Wales

In March 2021, Professor Charlotte Williams highlighted the need for every teacher and school in Wales to be equipped with the knowledge and resources to confidently develop an anti-racist curriculum in her report to the Welsh Government (Williams, 2021). Her work has formed part of the Welsh Government's Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan. This report focuses on how education providers were developing provision to support the Welsh Government's aim to achieve a Wales that is anti-racist by 2030. It draws on evidence from a sample of inspection reports published during the academic year 2023-2024, Welsh Government and Estyn data and visits to a few selected schools. The sample of inspection reports included all sectors inspected during 2023-2024.

Sgwrs Podcast: Towards an Anti-Racist Wales

Listen to our podcast, Sgwrs, where we explore how education providers across Wales are working towards an anti-racist future. This episode includes practical insights from experts on how schools and local authorities are fostering an anti-racist culture and advice for educators and school leaders on taking meaningful action.

The panel includes Jassa Scott (Strategic Director, Estyn), Tony Bate (HMI, Estyn), Martine Booker-Southard (Learning Links Manager, Vale of Glamorgan Local Authority), Sian Dacey (Assistant Headteacher, Kitchener Road Primary School).

Listen on Spotify

Learners' experience of racism

In most sectors, inspection provides learners with the opportunity to give feedback across a range of topics through a learner questionnaire. In primary schools, this includes asking older pupils how safe they feel and if their school encourages them to treat others fairly. In secondary schools, questions are more specific and ask pupils directly about discrimination and racism. The most recent data available from the outcomes of questionnaires is for the academic year 2023-2024. During this period, primary school questionnaires show that many pupils feel safe all or most of the time. They reported that their school helped them to treat everyone fairly. During secondary school inspections, questionnaires ask pupils directly whether they feel they have received unfair treatment due to their ethnic background. In all secondary schools, there were examples of pupils reporting unfair treatment. Overall, schools with a higher percentage of pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds showed a higher percentage of pupils reporting unfair treatment.

While we do not report on the prevalence of racist incidents directly, inspection evidence regularly includes references to instances of overt racism. In a minority of providers, staff, pupils or parents reported racist incidents such as name calling or discrimination. Racist incidents appeared to be the most prevalent in secondary schools, with these noted in around half of secondary school inspections.

It is important to note that, in a few schools, pupils told inspectors that they have not reported racist incidents they had experienced. This pattern matches the findings of the Children's Commissioner for Wales in her report on racism in schools. Research into staff and learners' experiences of racism in FE colleges identified that, although many learners and staff had experienced overt racism, more incidents related to covert racism and that staff and learners found it more challenging to identify and report these incidents.

Black, Asian and minority ethnic stories, histories and contributions

With the launch of Curriculum for Wales for pupils from the age of 3 to 16 years, the teaching of Black, Asian and minority ethnic histories and experiences as part of the history of Wales and wider world became mandatory. In response, many schools had begun to introduce the stories and contributions of prominent figures from ethnic minorities within the curriculum. This was increasingly evident in several sectors and particularly within primary and secondary schools. Pupils learnt about the achievements, challenges and experiences of key figures. However, the range of individuals represented was often limited to a few well-known role-models. Effective planning to positively and authentically represent ethnic minorities as a core part of the curriculum was beginning to take shape in about half of the schools.

Around half of all providers inspected (including further education institutions) had embraced awareness events to promote equality and begin to address racism. For example, they acknowledged Black History Month or Wear Red Day and used these as vehicles to promote and value diversity. In the best examples, events formed part of a broader programme and included opportunities to involve a wide audience in raising awareness and deepening pupils' understanding of racism. However, in most cases, events involved 'add on' activities, isolated from the rest of the curriculum. In a few instances, they were the provider's sole strategy to address racism.

It is important for all learners to see themselves, their culture, stories, histories and experiences represented positively, accurately and sensitively throughout the curriculum. To begin to address this at a local level, a minority of schools had involved pupils and parents in promoting an understanding of diversity across the school. For example, they formed pupil-led committees to lead assemblies or deliver PSE (personal and social education) lessons focusing on diversity for younger students. At its best, this work helped to raise all pupils' awareness and understanding of diverse histories, experiences and contributions of Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. However, this approach often involved one-off events that did not address issues relating to diversity beyond a superficial level. It could also place the responsibility on pupils from ethnic minority groups to educate their peers about their experiences and culture.

In a few cases, providers placed a sustained focus on involving families in contributing to the curriculum. At one independent school, staff provided pupils and parents with meaningful opportunities to share their culture with others on a regular basis. For example, they planned opportunities for pupils to model, perform or learn a variety of international traditional dances. This supported all pupils to feel a sense of belonging within the school's diverse and caring community.

A few non-maintained settings invited parents to share their culture, beliefs and experiences with pupils and staff. For example, at one nursery, parents supported practitioners to share resources and information about Ramadan with children effectively. This approach enabled all children to see their homelife valued and reflected accurately within the curriculum, supporting them to feel a sense of belonging.

Teacher recruitment and Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

In September 2022 the Welsh Government introduced The Ethnic Minority ITE incentive scheme. The scheme supports the Welsh Government's ambition for an Anti-racist Wales and aims to increase the number of ethnic minority teachers so that learners in Wales have a more diverse and representative teaching workforce.

Over the past year, the number of teachers who identified their ethnic group as Mixed, Multiple Ethnic Groups, Asian, Asian British, Black, African, Caribbean, Black British or Other ethnic groups rose from 325 to 350 (Welsh Government, 2024). This represented a small percentage increase from 1.2% of all teachers to 1.4%, although just over 7% of support staff are from these groups. These figures demonstrated an underrepresentation of minority ethnic groups in the teaching profession as almost 10% of the population of Wales are from an ethnic minority (Office for National Statistics, 2021).

When looking at leadership positions in schools, representation of the diversity within Wales reduces further. The last four years of data show that on average just 0.4 % of headteachers are from minority ethnic groups (Welsh Government, 2024). The figures are similar or lower when looking at acting head teacher, deputy headteacher and assistant headteacher posts.

While all ITE providers actively promote their courses to ethnic minority students, the most recent data shows the percentage of trainee teachers from ethnic minority groups to be between 4 and 5% (Welsh Government, 2023). This suggests that the recruitment of teachers from ethnic minority groups will remain a challenge into the future due to low numbers entering the profession.

There was a similar challenge in other education professions, for example with 3.9% of FE teachers being from Mixed or multiple ethnic groups, Asian, Asian British, Black, African, Caribbean or Black British or other ethnic groups in 2024.

Leadership and professional learning

In a few providers, leaders showed a strong drive to take an anti-racist approach to their practice and, in particular, their curriculum. They evaluated current provision and prioritised improvement and professional learning for staff effectively. In the best examples, leaders did not shy away from difficult topics and were both sensitive and pro-active in promoting positive change. As a result, staff were beginning to provide pupils with relevant experiences that gave them a direct insight into the impact of racism. For example, in one school, staff provided pupils with regular opportunities to interview prominent community figures and listen to their lived experiences. This gave pupils a deeper understanding of racism and strengthened their resolve to oppose and overcome it. A few schools encouraged pupils to use the arts as a medium for sharing their views and striving for change. For example, pupils presented their understanding of fairness through poetry or 'protest art' to promote anti-racism.

An increasing number of leaders across sectors were taking advantage of professional learning available to them about diversity and anti-racism. For example, they were working with external providers such as 'Diversity and Antiracist Professional Learning' (DARPL) and Show Racism the Red Card to deepen understanding amongst staff and improve provision. A few leaders had begun to evaluate their practice in relation to anti-racism effectively. For example, in one secondary school, leaders identified that the representation of people from ethnic minorities in the curriculum frequently covered negative aspects of history such as slavery. They recognised the need to review their

curriculum in order to represent wider contributions and histories and therefore present a more balanced picture.

Effective practice

Leaders in the Vale of Glamorgan local authority showed commitment to creating an anti-racist culture across the authority. For example, they involved 16 schools in a project through the 'Learning Links' Team. This included a range of professional learning for school staff about how to promote an anti-racist approach. They shared relevant research and highlighted the most effective practices. Officers established an action research project to help school leaders and staff consider how best to develop an anti-racist culture and to ensure that their curriculum is inclusive. Schools involved in the project had established helpful approaches to planning for a curriculum that celebrated diversity as well as educating the school community about how to be anti-racist.

As a result of their involvement in the project, many schools were beginning to strengthen their approach to anti racism. For example, leaders and staff at Victoria Primary School had deepened their understanding of an anti-racist approach and decolonising the curriculum. A pupil-led group was proactive in looking at resources across the school with a view to improving their inclusivity and how well they reflected the school community. Many pupils at the school enjoyed sharing their heritage, cultures and beliefs with their peers. As a result of this work, most pupils at the school were developing an increasing awareness of equality and diversity and the importance of treating everyone with respect.

Questions for reflection

- How well do leaders and practitioners understand anti-racism and how to approach the new mandatory elements when developing their curriculum?
- How sensitively and accurately do providers present the histories, stories and contributions of people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups?
- How accurately do providers record, report and evaluate data on racist incidents and the attendance and exclusions of ethnic minority learners? How is this information used?
- How effectively do providers respond to racist incidents?
- How well are providers evaluating the scope and impact of their work with partner agencies?

Office for National Statistics 2021 Census 2021 (Online). Available from: <u>Home – Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)</u> (Accessed 20 June 2024)

Welsh Government (2024a) Teachers (headcount) by ethnicity and secto (Online). Available from: <u>(Teachers (headcount) by ethnicity and sector (gov.wales)</u> Accessed 26 July 2024)

References

Office for National Statistics 2021 Census 2021 (Online). Available from: Home – Office for National Statistics (<u>ons.gov.uk</u>) (Accessed 20 June 2024)

Welsh Government (2024a) Teachers (headcount) by ethnicity and sector (Online). Available from: <u>(Teachers (headcount) by ethnicity and sector (gov.wales) Accessed 26 July 2024)</u>

Welsh Government (2023*) First years from Wales on ITE courses in the UK by ethnicity and year*

(Online). Available from: First years from Wales on ITE courses in the UK by ethnicity and year (gov.wales) (Accessed 26 July 2024)

Williams (2021) *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities, Contributions and Cynefin in the New Curriculum Working Group (Online).* Available from: black-asian-minority-ethnic-communities-contributions-cynefin-new-curriculum-working-group-final-report.pdf (gov.wales) (Accessed 20 June 2024)

Attendance

What the data is telling us

The following evaluation is based on data from a variety of Welsh Government releases, links to which are provided in Appendix A.

In the 2022-2023 Estyn annual report, we highlighted the notable decrease in school attendance following the pandemic. The fall was particularly large for secondary-age pupils, with the national rate of attendance falling by 6.3% points between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023. This equates to each pupil, on average, attending school for 12 days less in 2022-2023 than they did in 2018-2019. For primary-age pupils, attendance fell by 3.2% points over the same period. Figure 1 shows the trend in the rate of attendance over time, from 2013-2014 to 2023-2024. Data for the academic years 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 is not available.

Figure 1: School Attendance Statistics (2013-2024)
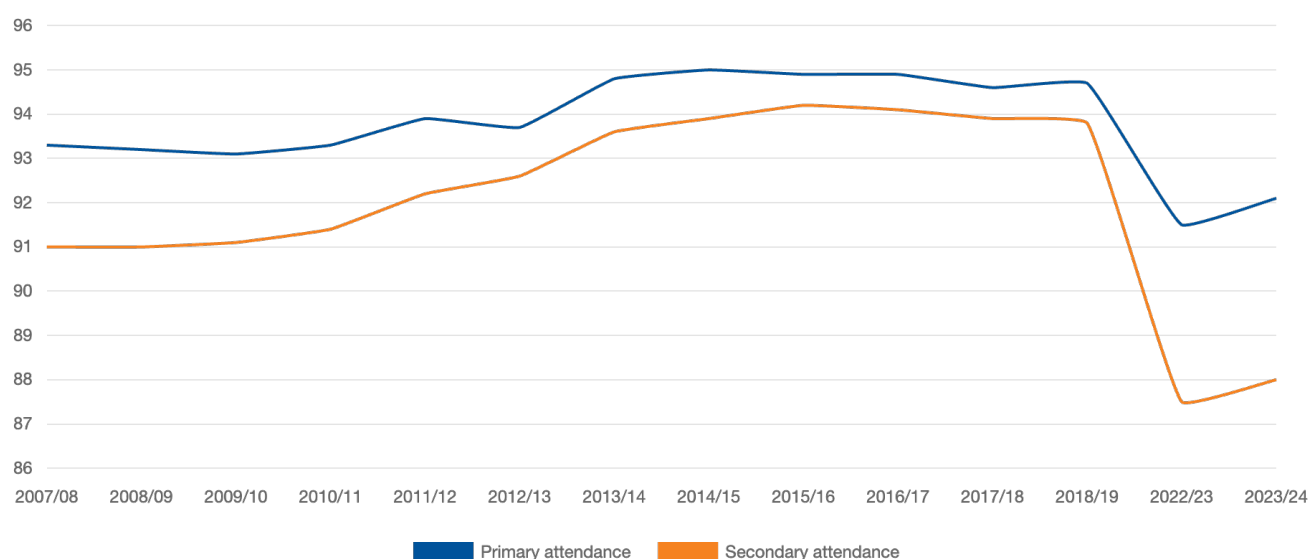
During the most recent academic year, 2023-2024, the rate of attendance for primary-age pupils has increased by 0.6% point to 92.1%, although the rate remains 2.5% points below the pre-pandemic level. For secondary-age pupils, the attendance rate has remained stubbornly low. Over the last

academic year, the rate of secondary attendance has increased by only 0.5% points and remains 5.7% points below that seen in 2018-2019. At the current rate of improvement, it would take over 10 years for secondary attendance to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

Analysis of attendance rates post pandemic also shows a much wider variation in attendance than rates prior to the pandemic. For example, in one secondary school, attendance in 2022-2023 was just 1.3% points below that in 2018-2019, whereas 10 other secondary schools saw their attendance fall by more than 10% points over the same period. There is also variation in the attendance rates between local authorities, and the quality of support offered by local authorities to support schools with improving attendance. In the most severe cases of poor attendance, local authorities have not responded quickly enough to develop bespoke arrangements to support individual schools.

When the data is considered by school Year, Figure 2 shows that the rate of attendance is fairly similar for pupils of all ages in the primary sector. However, for secondary-age pupils, the rate of attendance falls substantially as pupils get older. The data also shows that, while the attendance of Year 11 pupils increased by 0.9% points between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the increases in the rates of attendance of pupils in Years 8 and 9 were very small. This is a particular concern.

Figure 2: Attendance Rates by Year Group (2022-23 and 2023-24)
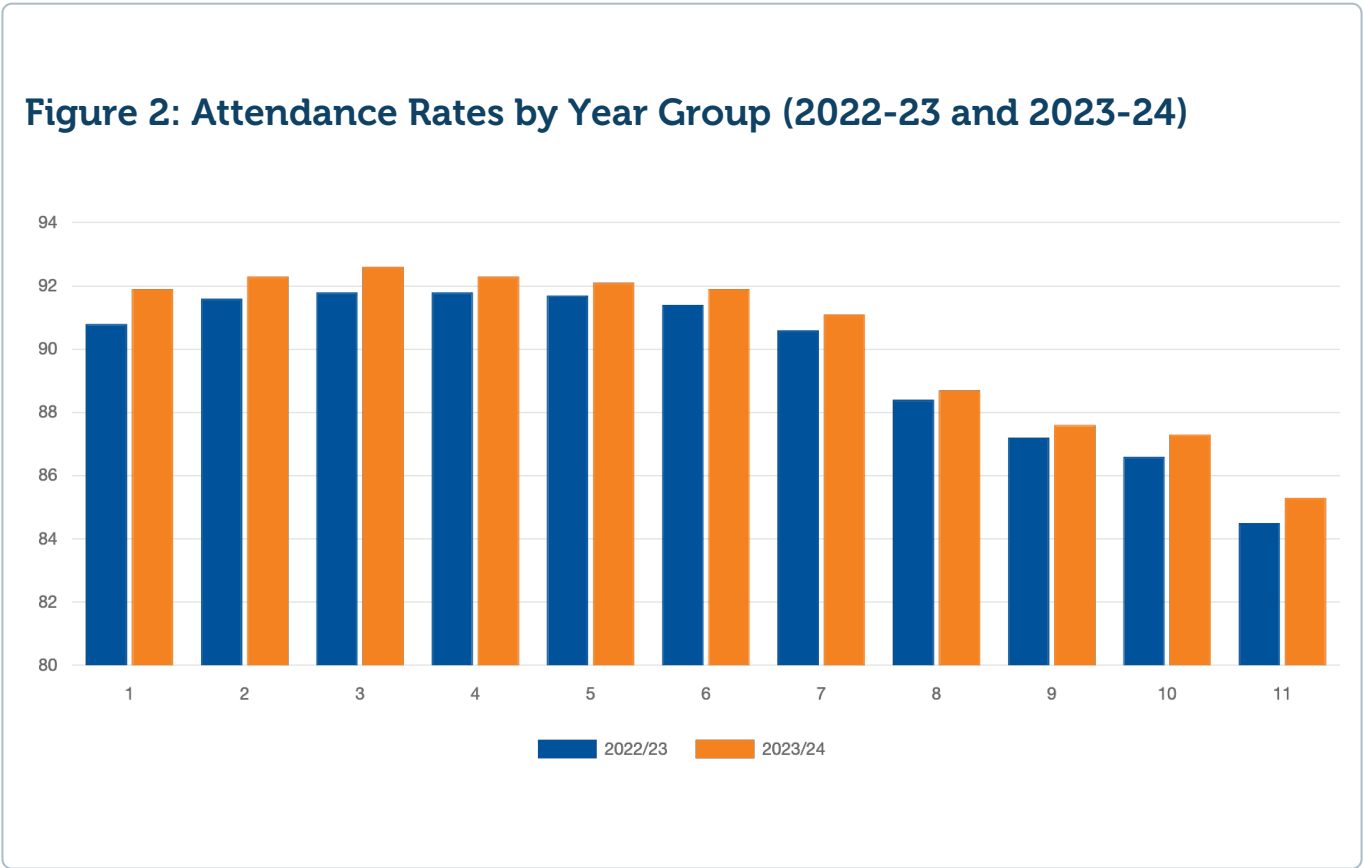
Historically, the differences between the attendance of males and females have been small. This has continued to be the case since the pandemic.

One of the groups of pupils whose attendance was most affected by the pandemic was that of pupils who are eligible for free school meals. In 2018-2019, the gap between the attendance of pupils who were eligible for free school meals and their counterparts was 3.1% points in the primary sector and

5.2% points in the secondary sector. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals fell by a notably bigger amount than that of their counterparts during the pandemic. As a result, these differences increased substantially, and in 2022-2023 the gaps were 5.8% points for primary age pupils and 10.4% for secondary aged pupils. Between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the difference between the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers grew smaller, but only by a very small margin. However, this difference is still substantially bigger than pre-pandemic levels. In the secondary sector, pupils eligible for free schools are still, on average, missing one day of school per week.

Another concern is the substantial increases in the number of pupils whose parents are electing to educate them at home. The rate of elective home educated pupils in 2023-2024 is 13.0 of every 1,000 pupils. This rate has increased every year since 2009-2010 when it was 1.6 of every 1,000 pupils.

Figure 3: Attendance by Free School Meal Eligibility
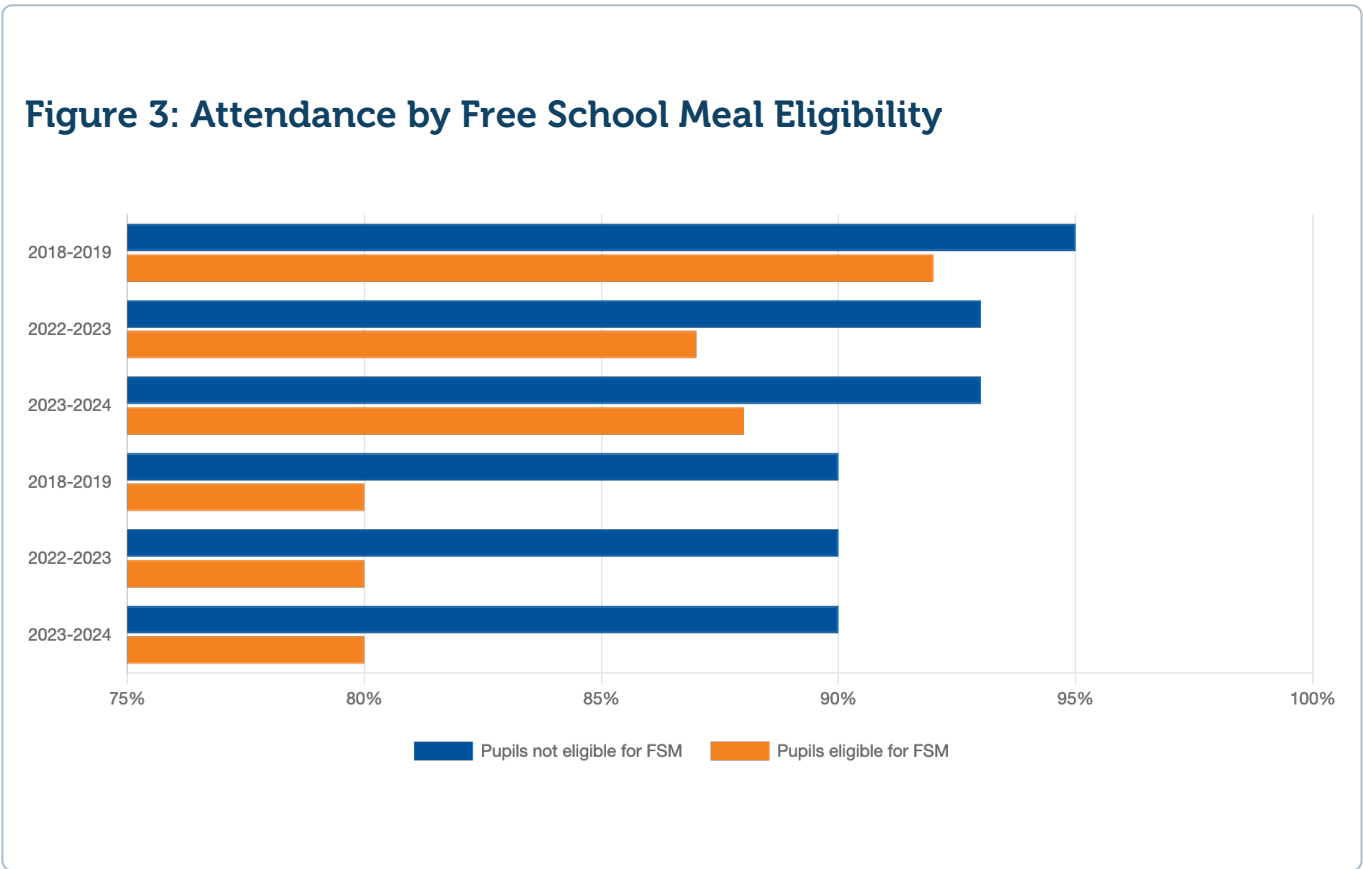
During inspection and other interactions with school leaders, they stated that there are two main reasons that attendance rates remain low:

- A substantial increase in the number of pupils who are absent on a frequent basis or refuse to attend school. This includes an increase in the number of pupils who have mental health issues and are therefore either not attending, or who are absent regularly.
- A change in the culture amongst parents, who now place less importance on their children attending schools regularly.

The Welsh Government now publishes data on persistent absences at two different thresholds, those

pupils that are absent for more than 10% of sessions, and those that are absent for more than 20% of sessions. This data highlights the severity of the challenges facing the education system in Wales regarding the attendance of pupils. Between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023, the percentage of secondary-age pupils who were absent for more than 20% of sessions more than tripled from 4.6% to 16.3%. For primary-age pupils, the rate increased from 1.8% to 4.5%. Figure 4 shows that, during the last academic year, there have been only small improvements in these rates, and that the pace of improvement is too slow. Too many pupils are persistently absent from schools. During our inspection activity and other interactions with school leaders, they stated that schools and local authorities do not have the capacity to cope with the substantial increase in persistent absence. This is particularly the case in the secondary sector. One of the most concerning statistics is that, in 2022-2023, 32.5% of secondary-aged pupils who are eligible for free school meals were absent for at least 20% of their sessions. There was a slight improvement in 2023-2024, but just under a third of this group of pupils (31.5%) continue to miss on average one school day per week.

Figure 4: Persistent Absence Rates
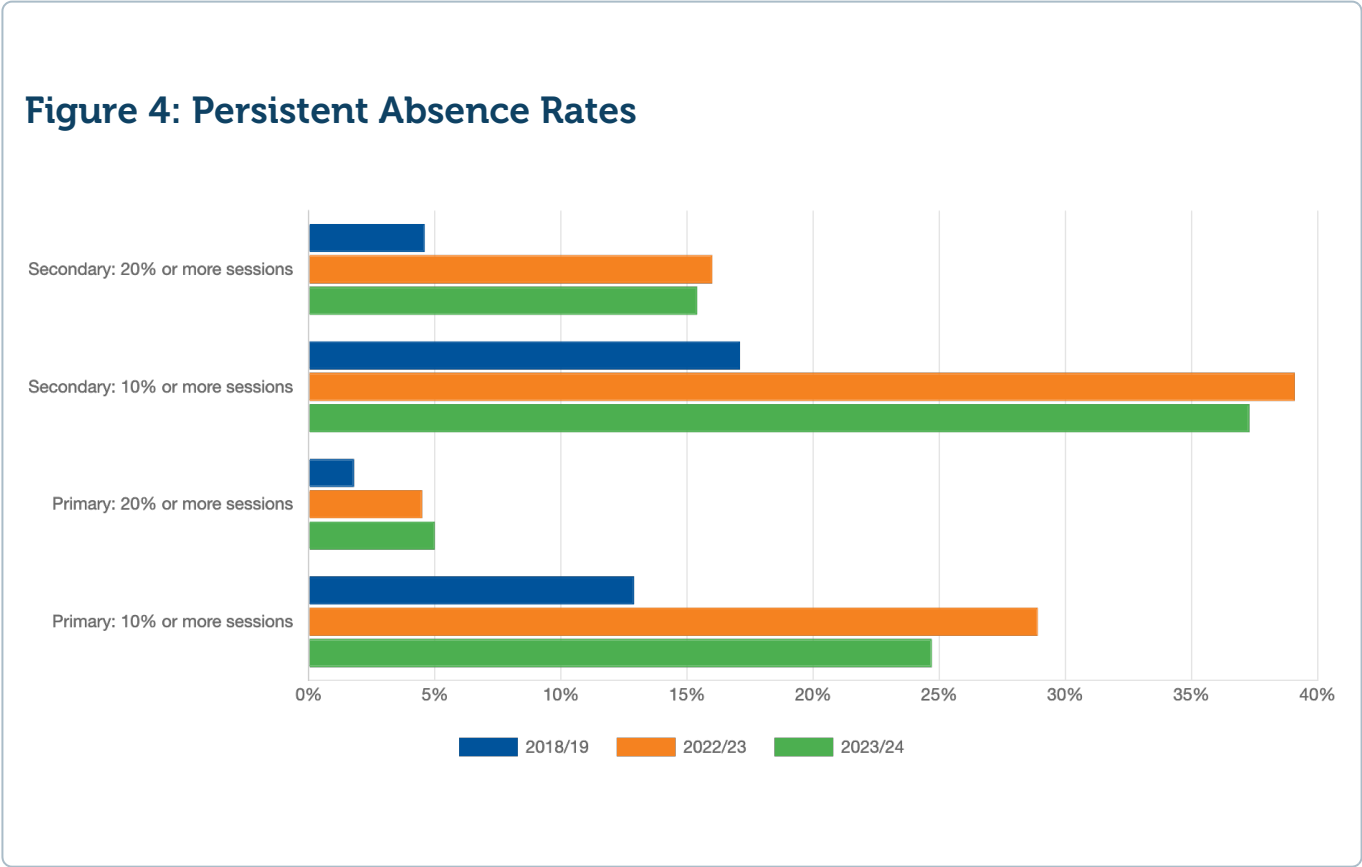
Evidence from school inspection and thematic work

During the academic year 2023-2024, most primary schools had sound arrangements for monitoring attendance and intervening when pupils were not attending regularly enough. Particular strengths were the communication between the primary school and its parents, and the strong sense of a community that these schools had built. These factors contributed to the 1% point increase seen in the attendance of primary-age pupils. In a few primary schools, the rate of recovery of attendance was too slow.

In the secondary and all-age sectors, around half of schools received a recommendation to improve

their attendance. Shortcomings in the schools' work in this area included:

- Leaders not having a sufficiently detailed overview of the work in this area.
- Leaders not using data to monitor pupils' attendance rigorously enough or not targeting their interventions sufficiently.
- A lack of effective communication with parents and carers.
- A lack of coordination in schools' approaches. For example, leaders do not always consider the links between strategies to improve attendance and those to support other aspects of the school's work. These aspects include pupils' well-being, strategies to develop community working, and the impact that improving teaching and the curriculum as well as extra-curricular activities can have on pupils' engagement in school.
- A lack of a whole school approach, with attendance being seen as the responsibility of one person or a small pastoral team rather than making connections between aspects of the school's work.
- Leaders not setting ambitious enough targets for attendance.
- Leaders being too slow to intervene when pupils' attendance falls. For example, some schools did not intervene until a pupil's attendance fell under 80%.
- Schools not working well enough in partnership with outside agencies.

A common shortcoming in these schools was that leaders did not evaluate their work in this area well enough. As a result, they did not have a clear enough understanding of which aspects of their work were having the most and least impact.

Effective practice

Inspectors reported that most schools had sound processes for first-day response to pupils' absence, and many leaders we met saw the promotion of good attendance as a priority. Where schools were effective in ensuring that rates of attendance were improving, common features of provision in this area included:

- Leaders sharing high expectations on this aspect with the whole school community.
- Leaders analysing data rigorously to look for patterns and trends in attendance. This included looking at the data by day and times, by Year group, by groups of pupils and by peer groups.
- Leaders identifying early any pupils who are at risk of not attending and putting steps in place to support these pupils.
- Schools using a graduated response with all class teachers involved in the first instance, with more severe cases being dealt with by leaders, senior leaders and then outside agencies.
- Strong work with families to support pupils to improve their attendance.
- Regular contact with parents and carers, often through effective use of technology and social media.
- Providing safe areas when pupils start to attend such as breakfast clubs, lunchtime clubs and areas where the pupils could be provided with extra support as and when they required it.
- Secondary schools working well with their partner primary schools to ensure that pupils settle quickly at the start of Year 7.
- Schools adapting the curriculum to meet the needs of pupils and ensuring that pupils are provided with high-quality learning experiences.

- Leaders regularly canvass the views of pupils on how to ensure that they were regularly attending school.
- Leaders emphasising the link between regular attendance and educational achievement to both pupils and parents.
- Schools promoting good attendance through rewarding regular attendance. This includes the use of class attendance leagues and competitions.

During the last year, Estyn published a number of case studies and cameos of effective practice related to improving attendance, which include the work of the following schools:

- Cefn Hengoed Community School
- Pontarddulais Comprehensive School
- St Teilo's Church in Wales High School
- Ysgol Emmanuel

Questions to consider when analysing data relating to attendance

The following questions could be used when evaluating the school's approaches to attendance. When analysing attendance data, it is important that leaders use the to provides lines of inquiry, which can then be further investigated.

- How has the overall rate of attendance changed over time? How well does the overall rate of attendance compare with that of similar schools?
- Is the trend in attendance in line with or different to that of other schools nationally / other schools in the local area / other schools that have a similar context?
- How often do we analyse internal data on attendance? Do we analyse data for different groups of pupils, for example by Year group, peer group, gender, eligibility for free school meals, school day, proximity of their home to the school etc? How do we use these findings to plan for improvement?
- What trends can we see in our pupils' attendance? For example, are there trends relating to the time of day, day of the week, time of year?
- Do we analyse data according to the reasons for absence? Do we use comparative data for similar schools when looking at rates of persistent absences?
- How does the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals compare to that of other pupils within the school and their peers nationally?
- How does the attendance of pupils with additional learning needs compare to that of other pupils at the school?
- Are there any Year groups where attendance is particularly strong or weak?
- Are there any other groups of pupils for whom attendance is a concern?

Questions for considering the support for improving pupils' attendance

- How well do we record and analyse attendance data, and identify areas for improvement?
- How well do we promote good attendance?
- How well do we work with families and the community to support pupils with low attendance?

- How well do we respond where pupils are absent because their well-being is adversely affected when they attend school?
- How effective is our work with other agencies to support pupils with low attendance?
- If any pupils are on a reduced timetable for school attendance, are the arrangements for their education appropriate and monitored closely?

Questions for leaders to use when evaluating the school's work to improve attendance

- Do leaders and teachers have a good overview of attendance in their areas of responsibilities?
- Do leaders and teachers have an overview of the areas for improvement regarding to attendance?
- How well do we as leaders plan for improvement in attendance?
- How well is the school using its resources to support good attendance?
- What impact has our work had in improving pupils' attendance?
- How accurate and robust is our analysis of attendance data?
- How well do we use attendance data to identify areas for improvement and to evaluate any strategies we have implemented? Do we have a good understanding of which strategies are having the most impact?

Appendix A

Sources of data:
The commentary on attendance is based on two different data sets. For secondary-age pupils we have used the annual verified data on absenteeism from secondary schools: (Welsh Government, 2023d and Welsh Government, 2024d). For primary-age pupils we have used the annual verified data on absenteeism from primary school (Welsh Government, 2023e and Welsh Government, 2024e).These are the latest in the series of annually published data that were reinstated following a three-year pause between 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 due to the disruption of the pandemic.

Recruitment and retention

In this report we have looked at both the pool of teachers in Wales and the recruitment of teachers into the profession. Whilst EWC figures suggest that the retention of teachers in the profession is relatively stable, recruitment has faced particular issues particularly in secondary schools.

The findings and conclusions are drawn from inspection evidence, meetings with school leaders, meetings with local authority representatives and data from the EWC, the Welsh Government and initial teacher education providers.

Recruitment to secondary initial teacher education programmes*.

Since 2014, the number of students on secondary programmes has declined by nearly a half. While there was a temporary increase in recruitment during 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, this was mainly due to prospective students seeking relatively more secure professions and applications from those who lost their jobs during the pandemic. Over the last two years, recruitment has declined sharply and there are significant issues in key subject areas, namely maths, science and Welsh. In the most recent year, recruitment is well below pre-pandemic levels. While there has been little research on the reasons for this in Wales, potential reasons for the lack of interest in teaching in secondary schools may include:

- perceived challenges associated with behaviour and the fact that schools are having to pick up many of the duties formerly provided by partner agencies through local authorities, CAMHS etc
- the relative buoyancy in recruitment in other graduate professions
- a perception that the arrangements for the new curriculum may lead to teaching outside one's area of interest/expertise

Some of these issues are discussed in the following paper: Research study on the attractiveness of teaching and retention of teachers | GOV.WALES. There are similar challenges in England as highlighted in this recent report by the education committee of the UK parliament.

This decline in recruitment is a significant concern.

Figures across the partnerships show that recruitment varies considerably from provider to provider. Over the last decade, none of the partnerships have succeeded in recruiting to their overall targets. These figures are particularly stark in the last two years. As a result, there are substantial shortfalls in the number of newly qualified teachers.

Recruitment to shortage subject areas, which include the Welsh language, mathematics, science (especially chemistry and physics), ICT, geography and modern foreign languages, is of particular concern. These shortages often result in teachers delivering subjects outside of their main area of expertise. The most significant shortage is in students training to be teachers of Welsh language, where the number recruited across all ITE provision has been below 25 students in each of the last

four years, which is less than a third of the target figures.

The low number of students training to teach through the medium of Welsh across secondary subjects is particularly worrying. Over the last ten years, there has been a notable decline in the number of students training to teach individual subjects through the medium of Welsh in secondary schools. The most recent recruitment figures are exceptionally low. This trend presents a significant challenge for the Welsh Government's ambition to reach a million speakers by 2050 through the expansion of Welsh-medium education and the realisation of the Welsh Language and Education Bill.

Recruitment to primary programmes

Overall, recruitment to primary programmes has remained buoyant over the last four years.

Partnerships have over-recruited primary teaching during this period. Inspection evidence suggests that one reason for this is to off-set the falling numbers of secondary students applying for ITE, to ensure the financial sustainability across the range of ITE programmes. Increasingly, the excess primary students are being recruited by secondary or all age schools. While this practice ensures that pupils have a class teacher, these newly qualified teachers (NQT) will not have been prepared specifically to teach in the secondary sector. A few of these teachers are used as supply cover and therefore do not have a very good experience as an NQT as a result.

The recruitment of students training to teach through the medium of Welsh, although more positive than in secondary provision, is still a concern with only a few students following Welsh-medium pathways.

Teacher recruitment challenges

Over time, approaches to improving recruitment have been too narrow and mainly focused on finding more recruits, rather than a more comprehensive evaluation of the system as a whole. Potential solutions should consider more varied routes into teaching as well as aspects of retention to ensure that we have enough high-quality teachers across Wales to meet the needs of our schools and their pupils. Possible approaches include:

- Ensuring that recruitment and retention strategies are considered holistically and system wide, so that programmes attract the brightest and best candidates and support them to stay in the profession.
- Changes to the design of programmes to make sure that not only do they support the development of students in the best way, but also provide enriching and exciting opportunities, such as working in a range of contexts and international placements.
- Increasing the range of routes into teaching. These need to be more flexible and varied to attract a wider range of applicants. The low recruitment to secondary subjects, especially to shortage subjects and those in the medium of Welsh, is a concern. The Open University programmes are designed to widen participation, and, although helpful, this does not go far enough to help the recruitment to shortage secondary subject areas. Alternative routes into teaching could be considered in Wales, such as degree apprenticeships (where students earn while they work towards a degree with QTS), undergraduate secondary provision and assessment-only routes.
- Create more attractive incentives, particularly for Welsh-medium applicants. Bursaries and incentives have improved recruitment, but not extensively, and the number of students recruited do not always translate into new teachers entering the profession in Wales. There may be

imaginative solutions to reimbursing degree fees for those who enter the teaching profession, or completely abolishing student fees for initial teacher education programmes. However, these have significant financial implications.

- Conditions for teachers new to the profession, especially in secondary schools, need to be more attractive. There needs to be creative solutions to ensure working in a school is seen as attractive proposition. These may include such initiatives as:

  - 'Retention payments', which have been implemented successfully in England
  - Data collected and shared centrally on reasons for teachers leaving the profession in order to inform retention strategies
  - 'Lead schools' with a track record of securing exemplary pupil behaviour to collaborate with 'partner schools' to help them diagnose issues and develop new strategies

- This combined with a rich and differentiated programme of professional learning and mentoring for teachers in their first three years of teaching is essential to retention.

Recruitment challenges for schools

During our inspections, schools across the whole of Wales reported that there has been a decline in the number of applicants for teaching posts. Secondary schools are finding recruitment especially challenging. The average number of applicants per vacancy has more than halved since 2011, while the situation in primary schools has remained relatively buoyant, see data from the Welsh Government here. This situation is particularly problematic in Welsh second language, science, mathematics, modern foreign languages, English in Welsh-medium schools and music. It is especially acute in more rural areas and in Welsh-medium and bilingual schools. Often, schools have needed to advertise multiple times to fill teaching positions. Schools and local authorities reported that there may be subtle differences in why they need to re-advertise posts.

Headteachers in secondary schools reported during inspection and in additional meetings, that in recent times, the quality of candidates is too often not up to the required standard. As a result, there are situations where schools have managed to fill positions but often needed to put additional support in place to secure an acceptable standard of teaching. In an increasing number of cases, failure to recruit teachers means that schools have to deploy staff to teach outside of their area of expertise. In the best examples, these teachers have been offered extensive professional learning, subject mentors and opportunities to observe experienced practitioners teach. Departmental leaders offer these staff high levels of support, monitor their work closely and involve them in discussions around how best to teach different aspects of the subject. In many cases, this support means that pupils receive at least suitable provision. In a minority of cases, however, the support offered by leaders was not comprehensive enough and pupils received poorly delivered, uninspiring lessons as a result.

The number of teachers leaving the profession in the first years of teaching has fluctuated over time but has never been as high as in 2022 when 127 secondary teachers left within five years of entering the profession (this has not been the case in primary schools). Worryingly, the highest number of teachers leaving the profession are teachers of English, mathematics, science and Welsh second language.

Retention

In many schools, leaders placed a high priority on retaining skilled and dedicated staff. A few schools were very successful in doing so. In these cases, leaders planned carefully to create a stable and positive work environment. They fostered a positive and inclusive school culture where teachers felt valued and respected. They ensured that teachers are involved in decision-making processes, which promoted a sense of trust, ownership and engagement. In these schools, leaders ensured that there are effective behaviour strategies, they planned carefully so that teachers have manageable class sizes, they eliminated unnecessary administrative tasks and ensured that staff have sufficient planning and collaboration time. Increasingly, school leaders have been trying to be creative in order to give staff greater flexibility and a better work life balance. In a few secondary schools, headteachers have been creative with PPA time to enable staff to have one afternoon a fortnight where they can work from home or come in to school slightly later in the morning. However, approaches like these are becoming more difficult with recent budgetary challenges.

There have also been challenges in recruiting and retaining support staff. Increasingly, support assistants with older children were no longer attracted by the benefits of school holidays and therefore they applied for other posts that offer more flexibility or hybrid working improved career pathways and better pay.

In a few instances, school leaders have articulated the benefits of partnerships with initial teacher education including professional learning opportunities for staff and enhanced recruitment opportunities. These collaborations also foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, which can contribute to improving the overall quality of education within the school.

Despite recent increases in the starting salary of new entrants to the profession, there are several underlying issues that hinder effective recruitment. These include the relative inflexibility of teachers' working conditions, a decline in the number of people aged between 20 and 25 and the poor public perception of teaching as a profession.

Data: Teacher recruitment: number of applications received by subject and year (gov.wales)

Recruitment of headteachers

Appointing to leadership positions has also become more difficult over the last few years. Recent challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and significant system wide changes such as curriculum reform and ALN reform have added to the workload pressure of headteachers and other leaders. Many headteachers felt that these issues created extra pressures over and above what they already felt was a challenging occupation. This has contributed to a few leaders expressing low morale in the role and occasionally prevented teachers seeking leadership roles.

When facing recruitment difficulties to leadership roles, and in particular to headship roles, local authorities and schools often considered potential alternatives. These were often temporary solutions until a permanent headteacher is appointed, such as another senior leader or teacher within the school taking up the headteacher role or a headteacher or leader from another nearby school acting as an executive headteacher. When the temporary solution has been exhausted, an increasing number of schools and local authorities looked to develop more long-term solutions. These include, for example, creating a federation of schools where one headteacher has responsibility for more than one school. There is a lack of research on the benefits of this practice and its impact on pupils. While

this practice notionally solves a problem, often executive headteachers found that the demands of the role are overwhelming.

* The figures that this commentary refers to are from unpublished data from the Welsh Government

The Welsh language

High quality Welsh language provision within each of the education sectors is key to achieving the Welsh Government's target of a million, confident Welsh speakers by 2050. Although we have reported shortcomings in the provision for learning Welsh in a number of annual reports over time, we have identified pockets of effective practice across a range of sectors. This report identifies some of the shortcomings we have continued to see and also provides a snapshot of the effective practice observed.

In many English-medium non-maintained settings, practitioners developed children's use of the Welsh language successfully by introducing new vocabulary regularly and actively encouraging children to respond by using Welsh words and simple sentences. They used repetitive songs and encouraged children to join in the fun of singing. Practitioners also gave simple instructions in Welsh, greeted children and praised them when they do well. In Welsh-medium settings, most practitioners planned for the development of children's Welsh effectively by immersing children in the language continuously.

Most of the recommendations in Welsh-medium primary schools were related to improving pupils' speaking skills. Leaders at Ysgol Gynradd Brynaman identified that very few children starting the nursery class had any Welsh language skills. They also identified that a minority of pupils across the school had lost confidence in speaking Welsh during the pandemic. To address this, they implemented a variety of practical strategies to motivate pupils to speak Welsh | Estyn (gov.wales) to support all pupils to become fully bilingual by the time they leave school.

There were recommendations for a minority of English-medium primary schools to improve pupils' Welsh language skills, including provision for developing these skills over time. We found that teachers' understanding of language teaching pedagogy was limited; for example, there was not enough focus on applying speaking and listening skills. Pupils' overreliance on language frames hindered their progress, limiting their opportunities to practise listening and speaking skills independently. Leaders of Undy C.P. School saw the need to improve oracy across the school and promote the use of the Welsh language outside the classroom. They succeeded in developing pupils' skills across formal and informal situations and instilled pride in being Welsh and able to speak the Welsh language: promoting enthusiasm for using the Welsh language | Estyn (gov.wales).

Teachers' limited understanding of effective language teaching continues in English-medium secondary schools. In many of these, practitioners did not have the knowledge and understanding of effective pedagogy to support pupils to consolidate and build on existing language skills. As a result, pupils made limited progress. In the few schools with effective practice, suitable professional learning strengthened practitioners' understanding of pupils' language development over time. Cefn Hengoed Community School developed and strengthened its pupils' Welsh and bilingual skills by providing high quality professional learning to develop staff skills. As a result, sound pedagogy was seen in Welsh lessons to develop pupils' skills, in addition to ensuring opportunities for pupils to use the language outside the Welsh classroom: The planning and co-ordination for the progressive development of

pupils' skills | Estyn (gov.wales).

In many English-medium secondary schools, there were not enough opportunities for pupils to speak in Welsh outside lessons, particularly as pupils progressed through the school. Pen-y-Dre High School has worked strategically to place the Welsh language at the centre of school life; they have succeeded in creating an environment where using the Welsh language is the norm every day: Creating a strong culture and appreciation of Welsh language and heritage – Estyn (gov.wales). In the very few schools with the strongest practice, leaders focused specifically within quality assurance processes on improving Welsh. This ensured a whole-school approach to improvement planning for the Welsh language.

In our thematic report: Developing pupils' Welsh reading skills from 10-14 years of age | Estyn (gov.wales) we evaluated how well Welsh and bilingual schools develop pupils' Welsh reading skills across the curriculum. The report outlines a number of strengths and areas that need to be addressed. In addition to the examples of good practice in schools, we have included specific guidelines to help schools strengthen their practices in developing pupils' reading skills.

There are strong and notable features in the bilingual teaching and learning on the main campuses of the only further education provider we inspected. However, overall across the sector, opportunities to learn through the medium of Welsh on vocational courses and in work-based learning were much more limited. There have been too few opportunities for post-16 learners to continue to study and be assessed for qualifications through the medium of Welsh. Very few further education vocational or apprenticeship learners who speak Welsh produced written work in Welsh. Providers did not do enough to ensure that learners benefit from taking part in even a small part of their work through the medium of Welsh.

Most Adult Community Learning partnerships did not provide enough sessions in Welsh or bilingually to meet the needs and aspirations of Welsh-speaking learners. On the whole, there were not enough opportunities for Welsh-speaking learners to improve their skills meaningfully through the medium of Welsh.

The way in which ITE partnerships acted to support the development of the Welsh language has been inconsistent. While there has been an attempt to provide appropriate sessions to improve students' Welsh language skills, they have not been consistent or specific enough to help students consider how to develop the Welsh language in practice with pupils in the classroom. The small numbers of trainee teachers on ITE courses, particularly those who are able to work through the medium of Welsh, is a cause for concern.

In terms of Welsh for Adults provision, highly effective practices were seen on residential courses at the national residential centre at Nant Gwrtheyrn, which provided additional rich learning experiences outside formal classes. This means that learners are equipped to use their Welsh language skills outside their courses within the local Welsh-speaking community: Using the Welsh language: purposeful and unique extra-curricular activities that support learners to speak Welsh increasingly spontaneously on the Nant site and in the local community | Estyn (gov.wales). There is more on the immersion experiences and interventions to support learners in the following case study: Effective immersion: supporting learners to make swift progress when supporting them to learn about and appreciate Welsh history and culture | Estyn (gov.wales).

All Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESP) have now been approved across all local authorities.

Ceredigion local authority, for example, had a clear vision for ensuring that pupils are ultimately confident bilingual pupils. The authority has already identified the linguistic categorisation of their schools and has equipped the authority's staff to support practitioners in schools to develop the Welsh language. Gwynedd and Anglesey local authorities worked together to develop Welsh-medium resources for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) and their families, and for language immersion – Estyn (gov.wales). Immersion education is the main method of nearly all local authorities for creating new Welsh speakers and developing learners' Welsh language skills. There is an effective example of this in the recent pilot inspection in Newport where leaders have developed a strong working relationship with various stakeholders to develop the objectives of the WESP effectively. However, some authorities continued to be slow in implementing their WESPs. They were in the early stages of implementing these plans and, on the whole, co-operation across authorities has been limited. In a minority of local authorities, recruiting staff, including teachers who teach through the medium of Welsh, was identified as one of the main challenges in terms of their provision for Welsh-medium education.

Use of the Welsh language is a strength in the pupil referral unit (PRU) at the Nant-y-Bryniau education centre, which is a unit that provides education for pupils with severe and complex mental health needs. Here, staff are supported well to develop their use of the Welsh language and, as a result, all staff are either fluent in Welsh or are confident learners who are able to use the Welsh language appropriately during teaching periods and informal discussions: Developing Welsh provision across the PRU (to be published). However, in PRUs overall the development of learners Welsh language skills remains variable.

Leaders who demonstrated a clear strategic vision and appropriate prioritisation of Welsh is a notable feature across the most successful providers in all sectors. Successful leaders have invested in training for staff at all levels, they apply a keen focus on pedagogy and recognise the need for opportunities to practise skills outside formal learning.

Self-evaluation and improvement planning

Across all sectors in the 2023-2024 academic year, the majority of providers evaluated their work appropriately, while a minority did not do so well enough.

Although there are common features that underpin effective self-evaluation and improvement planning, the context of the provision is also key. For example, non-maintained settings vary greatly across Wales. They can be very small entities, providing early years education from village or church halls that need to pack away all resources at the end of every day, to large private businesses employing dozens of staff. Leaders and practitioners working in the non-maintained sector are diverse and their level of expertise and understanding of leadership and management is varied.

On the whole, many leaders evaluate their non-maintained settings accurately. In these instances, their self-evaluation processes inform their improvement plans purposefully. Their planned actions are reasonable and realistic, and in most cases bring about the intended results. In a few settings, leaders struggle to identify the most important areas for improvement. They prioritise areas of interest to them, rather than those most in need of improvement.

Where self-evaluation was effective in schools and PRUs, leaders at all levels gathered first-hand evidence from a wide range of sources and nearly all staff were able to contribute meaningfully to these processes. Often, governors or the equivalent managerial body were involved appropriately as well. Typically, sources of evidence included observing teaching, looking at learners' work and gathering the views of staff, learners, parents and other relevant stakeholders. Leaders also carried out relevant analyses of a range of data to give a rigorous and rounded picture of provision and learner progress. Leaders ensured that they evaluated all aspects of their provision, including, for example, the impact of professional learning on teaching and learning as well as the impact of how grants were spent. In a few instances, providers used external partners, such as school improvement advisers or senior leaders from other providers, to validate and contribute to their own findings.

Within the local government education services sector, self-evaluation and planning for improvement are areas identified for improvement within all recent inspections. In 2023-2024, all local authorities inspected received a recommendation to strengthen aspects of their evaluation and improvement processes. This was also the case in 2022-2023. Improvement plans often did not set out clear success criteria to help officers consider the impact of actions on improving outcomes and provision for children and young people. Although officers monitored whether actions had been completed, they did not always evaluate the impact of their work well enough. This made it difficult to identify strengths and areas for improvement precisely enough and led to variation in the quality of self-evaluation and planning for improvement within local authorities.

Across all the sectors we inspect, we found that, where self-evaluation was embedded within the provider's culture, leaders planned a coherent programme of monitoring, evaluating and reviewing activities well in advance and shared this with all staff. The evidence gathered from effective self-evaluation processes enabled leaders at all levels to have a secure understanding of the progress

learners were making. This information was used strategically to allocate resources, for example to support aspects of learners' skills which needed targeted support to improve.

In the very best examples in the schools and PRUs sectors, leaders judged teaching by its impact on learning and teachers were reflective, evaluating their own sessions regularly and refining their teaching as a result to ensure that learners made good progress. Staff welcomed the scrutiny arising from an evaluative culture. They were open and keen to innovate and improve.

Where the provider was a partnership of organisations, effective self-evaluation included having consistent processes across the different centres and a clear mechanism for bringing this information together coherently to give an accurate and shared overview and understanding of provision and standards.

Overall, strong self-evaluation enabled leaders to know their organisation's strengths and areas for improvement well. In many cases, there was a clear link between the findings from self-evaluation, the priorities for improvement and the programme of universal and targeted professional learning to support progress towards these priorities. However, it does not always follow that effective self-evaluation ensures good improvement planning and vice versa. In a few providers, leaders evaluated thoroughly and accurately but did not make effective use of this information to tackle weaknesses in provision well enough. Conversely, a few providers had robust plans for improvement, which were having a beneficial impact but weren't focused on the aspects of provision that needed the most urgent improvement because self-evaluation was not effective enough.

Effective practice: Adamsdown Primary School

How Adamsdown Primary used distributed leadership to support successful self-evaluation processes and implement whole-school changes | Estyn (gov.wales)

In order to sustain recent improvements made, the headteacher needed to review the school's vision with all stakeholders. This included embedding a programme of monitoring, evaluating and reporting to ensure that all stakeholders were aware of the school's baseline of standards across all areas of school life, and its priorities leading up to implementing the new curriculum. A timeline was then developed to bring the vision into action. Through a series of whole-school training days, the school's stakeholders developed its aims for the next three to five years. The school vision was re-written to accurately reflect the diverse needs of learners. This process included leaders, governors, staff, pupils, parents and community links.

To support the leadership team in enacting the vision, an innovative trial to introduce a new system for grouping pupils was carried out in 2017. This was led by the assistant headteacher and teachers on the upper pay scale. Data produced from pupil progress meetings was analysed and showed that pupils made accelerated progress in the trial. Teaching and Learning Responsibility (TLR) holders analysed this data across the core subjects of maths, English and science. Supported by main pay scale teachers who led foundation subject areas, all aspects of the curriculum were reviewed.

As mentioned, across all sectors, the majority of providers planned effectively for improvements and a

minority did not plan well enough. Where improvement planning was effective, leaders identified a small number of important priorities from self-evaluation findings and worked on these alongside national priorities, such as attendance, Welsh, the curriculum and ALN reform, and mitigating the impact of poverty on well-being and attainment. Leaders applied national priorities sensibly to their own contexts. They ensured that plans were developed collaboratively, giving middle leaders, other staff and governors a sense of shared ownership. These plans included clear lines of responsibility and accountability at different levels of leadership. There were realistic timescales for achieving precise targets and an understanding by all of what success would look like and how they would evaluate or measure it.

Leaders allocated appropriate resources to support these plans and, where relevant, provided the professional learning that staff needed to improve their practice as an integral part of the process. The providers' performance management arrangements were linked to its priorities. In the best examples, improvement planning was a continuous process in which staff revisited, reviewed and amended plans at regular intervals. Leaders ensured that progress towards priorities was shared with staff and was often an important focus in meetings. Above all, effective planning had a demonstrably positive impact on the quality of teaching and on learners' progress that was understood by all staff.

Effective practice: Pontarddulais Comprehensive School

School Improvement – How an inclusive cycle of school improvement processes continually improves provision and pupil outcomes. | Estyn (gov.wales)

A distinctive feature of the school improvement cycle is the annual 'School Improvement Launch', a collaborative session involving staff, governors, and pupil representatives. This inclusive process ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, fostering shared ownership of strategic priorities. This session shapes the School Development Plan (SDP), a dynamic tool guiding the entire school community towards shared goals.

The SDP triggers the planning phase of the school improvement cycle, which includes Area Development Plans (ADPs) that are similar in style and content to the SDP, though they are also designed to serve their context at an area/subject level. In turn, performance management objectives are natural outcomes of the SDP and ADPs. Aligning these processes ensures synergy and collegiate responsibility for school improvement. The SDP is RAG-rated by the Extended Headship Team, which includes senior and middle leaders, and regularly scrutinised by governors, ensuring a clear understanding of progress and areas that require additional attention. Members of the Extended Headship Team lead on individual strategies, providing a continuous feedback loop within fortnightly link meetings.

Across Wales, a minority of schools and PRUs were given a recommendation following inspection to improve their self-evaluation and improvement planning. These recommendations highlighted three main areas of weakness. Firstly, in a few providers, leaders did not focus self-evaluation well enough on identifying strengths and areas for improvement in teaching. Secondly, when evaluating teaching, a few providers did not consider its impact on learning. Thirdly, in a few providers, leaders did not focus their improvement planning on the aspects of provision that needed the most urgent improvement. In a very few providers, there were other specific weaknesses, such as not gathering

the views of learners or excluding governors from self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. Also, in a very few providers, there were broad weaknesses with these processes, which were either too bureaucratic and time-consuming, or lacked rigour, or were too piecemeal to be useful, or were at an early stage of development.

Unsurprisingly, providers that go into a statutory category nearly always have recommendations to strengthen their self-evaluation and improvement planning processes since the inability of leaders to identify important weaknesses and plan effectively for improvements are highly likely to be factors that are causing them to perform badly. It is, therefore, often the case that providers across sectors that come out of statutory categories have made significant changes to their processes to make them more collaborative, rigorous and transparent. In schools and PRUs, for example, leaders have ensured that the focus of self-evaluation is on the quality of teaching and its impact on learners' progress. They have then ensured that improvement planning focuses precisely on those aspects of teaching and learning requiring most attention and that there is a coherent programme of professional learning to support this. Here are two examples of providers that have been removed from statutory categories in 2023-2024 in this way:

Monitoring report St John Lloyd Catholic Comprehensive School 2023 (gov.wales)

Monitoring report Dewstow Primary School 2024 (gov.wales)

Questions for self-reflection

- What are the best sources of evidence for evaluating any specific aspect of our provision?
- How might we involve learners, staff, parents, governors and the wider community meaningfully in evaluating what we do and planning for improvement?
- What is the balance in our self-evaluation work between first-hand evidence and summative outcomes? Do we rely too heavily on one or the other when evaluating provision and learner progress?
- Are there any important aspects of our provision that we currently do not evaluate? Should we be evaluating them? How often?
- To what extent do we evaluate our work by its impact on the quality of teaching and the progress that learners make?
- Overall, how rigorous, honest and accurate is our self-evaluation? How confident are we that we know our strengths and areas for improvement well? How consistent is our self-evaluation at different levels of leadership?
- To what extent do our priorities for improvement flow naturally from the evaluation of our provision and learner progress?
- How will we measure whether we have made (enough) progress or not in meeting our improvement targets? Are our success criteria precise and measurable?
- Are there clear lines of responsibility and accountability within our plans? How realistic are our timescales for achieving our priorities?
- Have we allocated sufficient resources to achieving our priorities?
- To what extent do our programme of professional learning and our performance management arrangements support our improvement plans?
- How manageable and sustainable are our self-evaluation and improvement planning processes for

senior and middle leaders and other staff?

There is a wide range of useful self-evaluation resources for providers to use here.

Non-maintained nurseries

Total number of settings providing funded education

569

January 2019

546

January 2020

537

July 2021

529

August 2022

543

May 2023

527

August 2024

Core inspections

Autumn 2023: 30 inspections

Spring 2024: 27 inspections

Summer 2024: 33 inspections

No. of inspections: 90

Follow-up

Placed into Estyn review follow-up category: 1 during 23/24
Removed from follow-up category: 1 from 22/23
Remained in Estyn review follow-up category: 0 from 22/23

Case studies

Requested: 20

Published on website: 17

Summary

Where practitioners provided rich opportunities through well-planned activities and learning areas, most children developed skills holistically across different contexts. Practitioners effectively captured children's curiosity, immersing them in awe and wonder about the natural world. They offered purposeful learning experiences based on the children's immediate environment, allowing for long periods of play where children could deeply engage in their interests. However, in some settings, the use of assessments and observations to respond to individual children's needs was still developing. A minority of practitioners did not effectively use observations to plan the next steps in learning. Additionally, some settings did not plan purposefully enough to develop children's skills, particularly in outdoor areas.

Settings provided good levels of care, support, and guidance, positively impacting children's well-being. Regular, predictable routines helped children feel secure and comfortable, allowing them to form strong bonds with peers and practitioners. These children displayed high levels of enjoyment and confidence in their play and learning. Nearly all settings promoted healthy lifestyles and safety, with many having procedures to support children with additional learning needs. However, in a few instances, risk assessments were generic or not regularly reviewed to reflect the current situation.

Leadership was strong in many settings, with leaders having a clear vision for providing worthwhile experiences in safe and nurturing environments. Effective self-evaluation processes informed improvement plans, leading to positive changes in provision and outcomes for children. However, in some settings, leaders did not prioritise key areas for improvement, focusing instead on areas of interest.

Teaching and learning

In nearly all settings inspected, most children made at least good progress from their individual starting points and developed a wide range of skills through their play.

Overall, many settings implemented the Curriculum for Funded Non-maintained Nursery Settings successfully. Practitioners in these settings provided rich opportunities for children to develop a wide range of skills within carefully planned areas and activities. For example, many practitioners provided beneficial opportunities for children to handle books and listen to stories in all areas of the setting.

Most practitioners promoted children's communication skills effectively. They encouraged children to ask and answer questions and provided thought provoking comments that encouraged children to think for themselves. Most children spoke confidently to adults and to their peers. They used a suitable range of vocabulary during spontaneous and structured play to explain basic ideas and to describe what they were doing. Many children listened carefully and with understanding to practitioners and followed their instructions willingly.

In Welsh-medium settings, most practitioners planned for the children's Welsh language development effectively. They immersed the children in the Welsh language and, as a result, the children's understanding developed well. In the most successful settings, practitioners worked together beneficially, ensuring that these practices were consistent and had the best possible effect on the children's understanding and linguistic progress.

In many English-medium settings, practitioners developed children's use of the Welsh language successfully by utilising opportunities throughout the session to introduce and consolidate children's learning and understanding. In the strongest practice, practitioners spoke clearly and took every opportunity to introduce new vocabulary to children, encouraging them to respond to simple words and phrases in Welsh. However, in a few settings, practitioners did not always use Welsh consistently enough to support the children's development of their Welsh language skills.

Many practitioners planned a good balance of adult-led and child-initiated learning. They ensured that resources were easily accessible to children so that they could make purposeful choices about where and how they wanted to play. This meant that children engaged well in activities and had many opportunities to follow their own interests and develop their skills.

Many practitioners provided a wide range of well-planned opportunities for children to develop their physical skills successfully. For example, they encouraged children to use planks and balance equipment provided to build their own obstacle courses. Many children developed fine motor skills and manual dexterity effectively through activities such as using tweezers, threading beads and manipulating dough.

Overall, practitioners planned experiences that captured children's curiosity well. In the best examples, they ensured that the children were immersed in awe and wonder of the natural world and

the way things develop and grow. They also used these activities to develop children's skills holistically. For example, practitioners involved children in gardening activities to develop children's mathematical language in real life contexts. This allowed children to develop their numeracy and problem-solving skills successfully as well as their physical skills.

In the strongest practice, practitioners provided children with extended periods of play, where they could revisit activities that they were interested in and allowed time for them to engage deeply in their learning. They responded positively to children's interests and fascinations. They used this information effectively and adapted their planning to further engage the children in their learning, for example by providing cooking activities in response to children's interests in making biscuits in the role play area.

Generally, settings provided children with valuable opportunities to be creative and to experiment with ideas, materials and equipment. As a result, most children developed their creative skills well through art activities or by experimenting with musical instruments and dancing expressively. Nearly all children developed their digital skills well. In the strongest examples, practitioners encouraged children to understand the effect of digital devices on their lives through activities such as weighing items on digital scales, recording voice memos, or using voice activated technology to find information.

Most settings continued to provide suitable opportunities for children to become familiar with, and experience Welsh culture. For example, practitioners arranged visits and activities such as walks to local shops, libraires and parks, or journeys on local service buses to amenities that were a little further afield. Most settings celebrated and planned activities around a few important cultural dates such as Chinese New Year and Diwali, but opportunities for children to develop an understanding of cultures they were not familiar with remained limited. This meant that children did not always learn about the diversity of Wales.

In many settings, where teaching was strong, practitioners had a secure understanding of child development and they offered children a wide range of rich play opportunities based on the principles of the Curriculum for Wales. Practitioners provided activities indoors and outdoors that encouraged children to take risks and to develop their social and collaborative skills purposefully. They created nurturing learning environments, which created a strong sense of belonging amongst the children and supported the development of their skills, knowledge and understanding well. Many practitioners questioned children skilfully to support and extend their learning. They used open questions skilfully to draw out children's ideas and encouraged them to think more extensively.

In the most effective practice, practitioners recognised when they needed to intervene, and when to step away to encourage children to think and work things out for themselves. For example, practitioners allowed children the freedom to examine how things work, such as wheels on toy trucks. They then introduced tools and other materials to enable the children to fix problems for themselves.

However, in a few settings, practitioners did not plan purposefully enough to develop children's skills, especially in the outdoor areas. In these examples, children often played with no real focus or purpose and practitioners tended to over-direct children's learning, hampering their chances of finding things out for themselves.

Over the year, an increasing number of settings adopted the Assessment Arrangements for Funded Non-maintained Nursery Settings. This helped practitioners to better understand progression in

children's learning and to apply the principles of progression in practice.

Tiggys Day Care Day Nursery

In Tiggys Day Care Day Nursery, practitioners use observations proactively to write down children's interests and fascinations as they play. They place their written notes on a planning board that is then used by all practitioners to plan experiences and adapt environments to be meaningful and relevant to children's interests. For example, when children are observed pretending to fix a cupboard in the role play area, practitioners enrich the area the following day with tools relating to carpenters, plumbers and electricians.

In a minority of settings, the use of assessments and observations to respond to individual children's needs and to deepen and extend their learning were still in the early stages of development. In these instances, practitioners did not always make worthwhile use of observations and assessments to plan and teach the next steps in children's knowledge, understanding and skills development well enough.

Care, support and guidance and well-being

Settings continued to provide effective levels of care, support and guidance to children that impacted positively on their well-being. Many children engaged happily with peers and adults in their settings. Those settings that established regular, predictable routines provided children with a sense of security, enabling them to feel comfortable and at ease. These children settled well and formed strong bonds with their peers and practitioners. They displayed high levels of enjoyment. In these instances, children often made confident choices and decisions about their play and learning. They moved freely between easily accessible activities that interested them and made meaningful choices in their play. They often played with a wide range of interesting resources and used these to construct their own play and to develop their ideas effectively. In the many settings where this was the case, most children expressed themselves well because they knew practitioners valued their opinions and feelings.

Many practitioners supported children skilfully during play and daily routines that kept children safe, whilst also encouraging their independence and respecting their privacy.

Little Explorers

In Little Explorers, children thrive at the setting and respond very well to the numerous opportunities to develop independence. They serve themselves at snack time, peel and cut their fruit, pour their own milk and take their plates to the sink. Older children find their name cards to write their name on their pictures and all children learn to put on their waterproofs and boots before outside play.

In nearly all settings, practitioners followed their setting's policies and procedures that encouraged healthy lifestyles and promoted children's safety and well-being. In these settings, practitioners were

clear about their responsibilities in relation to dealing with child protection concerns and any child's medical needs. They provided well-balanced food and drink options and were successful in encouraging parents to provide healthy packed lunches. In the best examples, practitioners supervised children well and completed all relevant records in relation to accidents, incidents, existing injuries and medication appropriately. They undertook regular reviews and analysed any trends. However, in a very few instances where practice was not as strong, leaders adopted generic risk assessments that lacked specific details about the setting, or they did not review risk assessments regularly to reflect the setting's current situation.

Most practitioners managed children's interactions very well. Through clear explanations and calm discussions, they helped children to develop a sense of right and wrong sensitively. They used praise to celebrate the positive things children did and these actions often helped children understand how their actions affected others. This resulted in many children using good manners and showing kindness to one another when playing with their peers.

In nearly all settings, practitioners developed warm relationships with children and treated them with care and respect. They knew the children well and were responsive to their individual needs and offered a good level of support. In the best examples, practitioners obtained useful information from parents and carers about children's likes and dislikes. This supported practitioners to gain a better understanding of individual children before they entered the setting. In these settings, practitioners regularly amended their practice to reflect and consider changes and developments that occurred both within the setting and the child's home life.

Many settings had sound procedures to support children with additional learning needs (ALN). Where practice was effective, settings undertook valuable training to support them in their roles and to better meet the needs of children identified as having ALN. Practitioners took the time to evaluate the impact of their approaches and they identified further amendments thoughtfully. As a result, those settings knew children's individual targets well and had a strong understanding of how they could support them to make progress. In the strongest examples, settings created an inclusive environment for all children. For instance, in a few examples, staff used signs and gestures alongside spoken words successfully to help develop children's language and communication skills.

Leadership

As last year, leadership in most settings remained strong. Leaders had a clear vision for their settings and were passionate about providing worthwhile experiences for children in safe and nurturing environments. Nearly all settings placed a clear emphasis on the well-being of all children. Where leadership was strong, leaders communicated their vision clearly through their actions and through establishing and maintaining strong relationships with children and their families.

Many leaders evaluated their practice accurately, considering all aspects of their setting. They developed valuable self-evaluation processes that fed purposefully into the setting's improvement plans. They identified their strengths and areas for improvement accurately and set appropriate actions to bring about those desired improvements. Where practice was particularly strong, settings used external agencies' advice and practitioners' views well to develop and improve their provision and support children's learning. In the best examples, leaders evaluated improvements in provision by considering the impact on children's learning and well-being. However, in a few settings, leaders did not always prioritise the most important areas for improvement well enough, tending to focus on areas of interest rather than key areas for improvement.

Leaders in many settings had high expectations and invested purposefully in their staff. They completed regular, worthwhile appraisals and supervisions with their practitioners. They created and maintained a strong team ethos. In these settings, staff felt valued and empowered to develop professionally through good quality training that supported the setting's priorities and practitioners' individual aspirations. However, in a few settings, leaders did not always provide practitioners with suitable appraisals. As a result, practitioners did not always know what was expected of them, or what actions they needed to take to secure improvements and to comply with regulations. In a very few settings where supervision and appraisal procedures were ineffective, they were not always implemented consistently or formalised.

Many settings established and maintained strong partnerships, as they understood the positive effect this had on the children in their care. They supported families to understand their children's development and gave them ideas on how they could help at home through activities such as sending regular video clips and messages on social media channels, and face-to-face meetings to discuss their children's well-being and progress.

Chuckles Day Care

Leaders at Chuckles Day Care have established exceptional links with a range of partners. They work closely with local schools through activities such as forest school sessions and sports day visits. Leaders work with the local authority early years advisory teacher to improve standards and share good practice with other settings. Leaders plan family and parent workshops throughout the year, focusing on local community needs and priorities, such as a healthy food workshop and cooking days. They provide food and menu cards for families to use at home. The setting has close involvement in transition projects, supporting children and families moving from the nursery into the local schools.

In most settings, leaders made worthwhile use of available grants. They ensured that their settings were well resourced, and they spent wisely, such as to purchase new resources when needed. Most settings that were provided directly with the Early Years Development Grant used it efficiently to make a positive impact on outcomes for disadvantaged children. Leaders identified eligible children and purchased resources to support those individuals, such as maths resources or reading books to take home.

Most settings provided a rich environment that supported children's learning and development effectively. In the best examples, leaders created environments that sparked children's curiosity, empowered them to investigate and allowed them to make independent choices both indoors and outdoors.

Homestead Nursery

Leaders at Homestead Nursery provide purposeful resources that support children's holistic development in an exciting and innovative way. They consider children's development well and ensure appropriate access to activities that build upon individuals' abilities very effectively as they move through the setting. They use vintage furniture, plants and mirrors creatively and successfully to create a warm and homely environment where children, practitioners and visitors feel relaxed. The environment is further enhanced with a range of imaginative resources that stimulate children's senses extremely well. For example, fresh and dehydrated fruits, real fresh herbs and musical areas with a disused piano with its functions exposed are used effectively to inspire curiosity.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023 – 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected 90 non-maintained settings.

38 (42.2%) settings were given a recommendation to improve their practice in some way. Of those, 26 settings were given a recommendation to provide or expand opportunities to improve children's skills; half of those recommendations were to develop children's Welsh language skills.

23 (25.6%) settings were given a recommendation to improve or develop use of observations. About half of those recommendations were about using observations to help plan the next steps in children's development, the others were variously focusing on ensuring children make progress, supporting children's learning and development, and using observations to plan experiences that meet each child's individual needs.

16 (17.8%) settings were given a recommendation related to health and safety, including completion of risk assessments and ensuring parents/carers sign accident/incident forms.

15 (15.6%) settings were given a recommendation about outdoor area, to either make more use of or develop or improve the quality of outdoor resources.

10 (11.1%) settings were given a recommendation to address areas of non-compliance.

Nine (10%) settings were given a recommendation about staff appraisals, and nine (10%) were given a recommendation about staff development.

Primary

Schools

1,216

No. of schools 2024

1,219

No. of schools 2023

1,225

No. of schools 2022

Pupils

258,038

All pupils

447

No. of pupils nursery age

59,717

No. of pupils under 5

197,853

No. of pupils aged 5-10

21

No. of pupils aged 11 and over

21.8%

eFSM (Aged 5-15)

19.2%

eFSM (All pupils)

7.1%

EAL A-C (Aged 5-15)

11.0%

Able to speak Welsh (Aged 5-15)

11.1%

Pupils with additional learning needs (Aged 5-15)

Follow-up

No. in FU September 2023

SM: 16 SI: 6   ER: 34

No. removed 2023-2024

SM: 9   SI: 4   ER: 17

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 259

Interim visits: 4

Welsh-medium: 92

Bilingual:

English-medium: 171

Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 44

Published on website: 39

No. went into FU after core inspection 2023-2024   Faith: 29

SM: 10   SI: 8   ER: 14

Total in FU August 2024

SM: 17   SI: 10   ER: 31

Engagement visits

No. of visits/calls: 5

Welsh-medium: 2

Bilingual:

English-medium: 3

Faith: 2

Summary

During 2023-2024, primary schools worked effectively with families to address any barriers to learning or well-being of pupils from low-income households. A majority of schools improved pupils' attendance levels. However, in schools where attendance is still below pre-pandemic figures, the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals was significantly lower than that of those who were not eligible for free school meals.

A majority of schools made strong progress with their implementation of Curriculum for Wales. Leaders and teachers trialled and revised their curriculum designs to combine knowledge, skills and experiences cohesively. Many schools continued to focus on developing their understanding of how learners should progress. However, over a third (40%) of schools did not develop a secure enough understanding of the role of progression in supporting pupils to build on their learning coherently.

Leadership was effective in many schools with leaders having a clear vision and strategies for school development. They focussed their self-evaluation activity closely on pupils' well-being and progress and invested in staff through professional learning opportunities linked to school and national improvement priorities. However, in a third of schools, self-evaluation processes did not focus clearly enough on pupil outcomes and did not identify key areas for improvement in teaching and learning.

Teaching and learning

Building on the previous year, a majority of schools made strong progress with their implementation of Curriculum for Wales, trialling and refining their curriculum designs to combine knowledge, skills and experiences. A very few schools fully embedded their curriculum during the year and began to

see its beneficial impact on pupils' learning and progress. Leaders and staff in these schools developed a strong vision that included securing high-quality teaching and assessment to ensure that pupils' learning experiences were appropriately engaging, challenging and equitable. Read how Langstone Primary School in Newport responded to curriculum reform to meet the needs of learners.

In the best cases, schools planned learning experiences effectively and evaluated how well teaching supported pupils to make progress. Teachers implemented effective pedagogies to support pupils to deepen their learning, and to transfer skills and knowledge in meaningful and increasingly sophisticated ways across the curriculum. Read how Y Bont Faen Primary School in the Vale of Glamorgan used a strong creative focus to improve pupils' language and communication, creativity and independence.

Around a third of schools inspected were still at an early stage of curriculum reform. In a minority of these schools, leaders did not have a clear strategy for developing pedagogy or a curriculum that met the needs and interests of their pupils. Many of the schools in the early stages of curriculum development did not evaluate well enough the impact of teaching and assessment on pupils' outcomes. In these schools, the curriculum often focused on highly structured coverage of concepts and did not engage pupils' interests or reflect the local community well enough.

Around a third of schools inspected received a recommendation to address inconsistencies in the quality of teaching. Often, in these schools, teachers did not provide purposeful feedback to pupils to help them understand the how and why of learning as well as the what. Misconceptions around progression in relation to Curriculum for Wales resulted in teachers assessing pupils too narrowly against descriptions of learning rather than planning learning that enabled pupils to deepen their knowledge and understanding over time.

Pupils began to influence what they learn, often by contributing their ideas to topics. In a few instances they also influenced how they learned. Schools that placed high value on pupils' input successfully incorporated their interests into their learning, often making good use of topical issues that resonated with pupils' own experiences. They used stimulating activities to develop pupils as independent learners from a young age, ensuring that they were clear about the purpose of their learning, what they do well and what they needed to do to improve. However, in a minority of cases, schools did not provide effective opportunities for pupils to develop their independence well enough. This was often due to staff providing too much direction, stifling opportunities for pupils to make decisions, and to work things out for themselves.

A very few schools developed highly effective learning experiences for the youngest pupils. Leaders and teachers developed pedagogy based on the principles of child development and often created learning experiences aligned to *the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings*[1] Welsh Government (2022) Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings. [Online]. Available from https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/curriculum-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings , recognising the essential role of enabling adults, engaging experiences, and effective environments in high-quality early education.

Overall, many pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN) and those from low-income households, made at least appropriate progress in the cross-curricular skills during the year. Pupils' oracy and basic reading skills, such as reading with appropriate fluency and accuracy, continued to develop well. In a few schools, pupils' language and communication skills were exceptional. In the best cases, the oldest primary pupils often used inference and deduction skilfully to develop their

understanding of a wide range of texts and to form a sophisticated knowledge of characters through their motivations, emotions and actions. However, schools do not always plan for progression in pupils' advanced reading skills well enough to enable them to respond with confidence and understanding to a range of texts. Although in many schools pupils made good progress in writing, teachers did not always provide opportunities for pupils to strengthen their work well enough, for example by addressing repeated errors or by allowing pupils the time to craft their work effectively for authentic audiences and purposes. Most schools continued to support pupils to acquire secure mathematical knowledge and understanding. In a minority of schools, teachers did not plan effective opportunities for pupils to develop their numeracy skills well enough.

Many pupils developed positive attitudes towards improving their Welsh language skills. Overall pupils' Welsh language skills were strong in Welsh-medium schools. Read how Ysgol Brynamman in Carmarthenshire motivated pupils to speak Welsh. In a few English-medium schools, pupils developed as confident Welsh speakers. However, pupils' Welsh oracy skills remained weak in English-medium schools with just over a quarter (26%) receiving a recommendation to improve pupils' Welsh language skills. Read how Undy Primary School in Monmouthshire promoted enthusiasm for the Welsh language.

In general, schools continued to develop relationships and sexuality education (RSE) purposefully. A few began to weave RSE effectively through areas of learning and experience to support pupils' understanding. Schools began to provide opportunities for pupils to learn about the unique character of Wales. Where this work was most effective, learning experiences reflected the diverse nature of Wales including gender, disability, and race. Teachers linked learning successfully to human rights, creating meaning for pupils, for example when exploring equality through the stories of LGBTQ+ people. A few schools remained in the early stages of developing their RSE curriculum, and although they focused well on developing values and personal relationships, they did not consider a wide enough range of relevant influences. Often, their learning experiences lacked relevance and depth. Too often, pupils were not encouraged to share their lived experience or to see themselves reflected in their learning environment. Our anti-racism report contains examples of effective practice.

Care, support and well-being

During the year, inspectors found that pupils' well-being, their attitudes to learning and the quality of the care primary schools provided was strong. Most pupils developed a secure sense of belonging and were proud of their school. They were often eager to learn and engaged enthusiastically during lessons. In a few cases, pupils made choices that supported them to take responsibility for their learning. However, similarly to last year, lessons were often too structured. Over a third of schools (36%) received a recommendation related to developing pupils as effective independent learners. In these schools, teachers did not give pupils the space to develop as curious, critical and creative thinkers, able to identify the purpose of their learning and to recognise what they need to do to improve their work.

Most schools continued to embed ALN reform effectively. School leaders often demonstrated agile and flexible approaches to adapting to pupils' needs. Many schools adjusted provision in creative ways, implementing thoughtful and targeted intervention, and improving the learning environment. They created additional provision to develop pupils' ability to regulate their emotions, helping them feel ready to learn. Read about how Ysgol Cae'r Gwenyn in Wrexham identified a whole-school strategy to develop the communication skills of pre-verbal pupils.

Schools continued to develop meaningful opportunities for pupils to contribute to the life and work of the school, including evaluating the quality of teaching and learning. These contributions enabled leaders to make improvements to learning experiences in response to pupils' feedback. Pupils often used their leadership skills to benefit their local community, for example by promoting sustainable practices such as planting apple trees and protecting wildlife.

Most schools continued to create opportunities for pupils to learn about the people, places and histories that shape their personal identity. Pupils developed a good understanding of what it means to be an ethical citizen and the importance of human rights and justice, for example comparing similarities and differences between workers campaigning for equal pay in Wales and those fighting for better working conditions globally. A few schools began to develop pupils' knowledge of religion and values. However, too often, there were limited and often narrow experiences for pupils to develop a meaningful appreciation of culture and diversity in their communities, of Wales, and the wider world.

Many schools invested in family engagement, and the valuable relationships they formed helped improve outcomes for pupils in many ways. Schools were mindful of the impact of poverty on pupils' attendance and overall well-being. Many thoughtfully considered how to ensure an equitable school experience for all pupils and used the pupil development grant to reduce any barriers. In a few of the best cases, schools worked closely with a range of agencies to support pupils and their families. For example, schools ran meal planning and budgeting workshops and began the day with a 'soft start' to reduce anxiety. Our thematic report on Support, provision and transition for early education contains cameos and case studies of effective practice.

A majority of schools had returned to pre-pandemic attendance levels. Some of the most successful schools in improving attendance for all pupils were those that provided engaging learning experiences for pupils and where the quality of teaching was high.

However, in a minority of schools, attendance was still below pre-pandemic figures, and the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals was significantly lower than that of those who were not eligible for free school meals.

View resource

Leading and improving

Leadership was effective in many schools. In the best examples, leaders had a clear vision for their schools and formed coherent strategies for school improvement. They established effective leadership teams, strengthening the schools' capacity for improvement. These schools were highly responsive to their pupils' and families' needs and, as a result, functioned as an integral part of the local community. Read about how Dolau Primary in Pontyclun developed leaders at all levels to secure resilient leadership. During a year when national priorities presented new challenges to schools, successful schools demonstrated agility and flexibility in their response to reform, recruitment and the changing social climate. In the very few schools that went into a follow-up category following inspection, a common cause was that leaders were not focusing effectively on the most important areas for improvement in their schools.

Governors played an active role in school life, often using their experience and expertise well to support their schools. In a few cases they considered pupils' views when evaluating the impact of any

school improvement work. Governors allocated grant funding appropriately but did not always measure the impact of grant funding on pupils' outcomes. Whilst governors met regularly, in a few cases there was still an over-reliance by governors on information from school leaders rather than from first-hand evidence. In these schools, governors were not well informed enough to support and challenge leaders effectively when identifying and measuring school improvement priorities. Troedyrhiw Primary near Merthyr created beneficial governor improvement groups to improve their governing body's capacity to support senior leaders.

Leaders worked effectively to reduce the impact of poverty on pupils' well-being. They developed various approaches to tackling barriers to learning, making effective use of grants such as the pupil development grant. Many schools worked effectively to support families during the financial crisis, for instance providing access to food and fuel vouchers and subsidising the cost of school events and residential visits. A majority of schools recognised the vital link between attendance and learning in securing positive outcomes for pupils but, where practice was less effective, the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals and those from low-income households remained too low.

Many schools provided a range of useful professional learning opportunities linked to school and national improvement priorities. Effective schools focused on achieving high-quality teaching through carefully planned high-quality professional learning activities, including research and collaboration. Leaders dedicated the time needed for staff to engage in purposeful enquiry that resulted in improved provision and outcomes for pupils. Schools often worked successfully with other schools to share practice and to develop and enhance their work.

Many parents were positive about the clear and timely communication between their school and home. They valued opportunities to be involved in their child's education and the sensitive way schools dealt with their queries and concerns. Staff built strong relationships with families, including the families of pupils with ALN to establish consistently effective approaches to care and support. Schools that evaluated provision accurately and shared good practice effectively supported pupils to make strong progress in their learning. Where schools provided specialist provision, staff understood pupils' complex needs and implemented highly effective strategies to meet their needs, to give them a secure sense of belonging and to support them to make strong progress towards their individual targets.

Many schools had robust arrangements in place for monitoring, evaluation and review and, in the strongest examples, leaders involved all staff in a thoughtful programme of activities that focused closely on pupils' well-being and progress. During the year, over a third of schools inspected received a recommendation to improve aspects of leadership. Often these recommendations related to self-evaluation processes that were not focused clearly enough on pupils' outcomes and did not identify key areas for improvement in teaching and learning.

Overview of recommendations from inspections

In the 2023-2024 academic year, Estyn inspected 259 primary schools.

- 83 (32%) primary schools received a recommendation related to providing or improving opportunities for pupils to develop or apply their skills, particularly numeracy, writing, reading or digital skills. Forty-six schools were given a recommendation to provide or improve opportunities to develop pupils' independent learning skills, and 21 were recommended to support pupils to be more involved in decision-making about their own learning.

- 49 (18.9%) schools were given a recommendation about development of Welsh language skills, including 13 Welsh medium schools. Out of those 49, nine received a recommendation to improve the provision of Welsh teaching.
- 47 (18.2%) were given a recommendation to ensure that teaching sufficiently challenges all pupils, and 48 (18.6%) were given a recommendation related to providing appropriate feedback, including providing opportunities for pupils to respond to feedback, ensuring that feedback helps pupils to identify and work towards the next steps in their learning, or to improve their work.
- 46 (17.8%) primary schools received a recommendation related to improving the effectiveness of self-evaluation and school improvement activities, which variously focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning, attending to the most pressing priorities for improvement, and pupils' progress.
- 26 (10%) of primary schools were given a recommendation about improving attendance. Ten of these providers had an outcome of either Estyn review, significant improvement or special measures from their inspection.
- 9 (3.5%) primary schools received a recommendation about addressing health and safety issues identified during inspection, and seven were given a recommendation to address safeguarding concerns.

Secondary

Schools

176

No. of schools 2024

178

No. of schools 2023

182

No. of schools 2022

Pupils

172,818

All pupils

154,347

No. of pupils of secondary age (compulsory education)

18,471

No. of pupils in sixth form

20.4%

eFSM (Aged 5-15)

19.0%

eFSM (All pupils)

3.6 %

EAL A-C (Aged 5-15)

16.0%

Able to speak Welsh (Aged 5-15)

11.2%

Pupils with additional learning needs (Aged 5-15)

Follow-up

No. in FU September 2023

SM: 6   SI: 4   ER: 6

No. removed 2023-2024

SM: 2   SI: 1   ER: 3

No. went into FU after core inspection 2023-2024

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 31

Interim visits: 2

Welsh-medium: 8

Bilingual:

English-medium: 25

Faith: 2

Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 12

Published on website: 15

SM: 2   SI: 2   ER: 6

Total in FU August 2024

SM: 7   SI: 4   ER: 9

Engagement visits

No. of visits/calls: 6

Welsh-medium: 2

Bilingual:

English-medium: 4

Faith: 0

Summary

There were notable strengths in teaching and learning in a minority of schools. However, shortcomings in lesson planning, verbal and written feedback, the strategic development of literacy, numeracy, Welsh, and digital skills hindered pupils' progress in too many cases. Implementation of the Curriculum for Wales was inconsistent, with challenges in ensuring sufficient subject depth and effectively promoting the Welsh language. Care and support for pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), were generally strong, but the impact of efforts to improve attendance varied, and rates of attendance remained significantly below 2019 levels. In schools with effective leadership, there was a clear focus on equity and teaching quality. However, the majority of schools faced challenges in conducting accurate self-evaluation and implementing impactful improvement planning.

Teaching and learning

Improving teaching and learning was a priority within most schools' improvement plans. However, there was substantial variation in how schools approached these areas and how precise they were in identifying the aspects of teaching and learning that required strengthening. Consequently, there was a marked difference in how successful schools were in securing improvements. High-quality teaching was seen consistently in only a very few schools. While there were strengths in the majority of schools, shortcomings in teaching were seen too frequently. Consequently, the majority of schools received recommendations to improve teaching quality.

In the very few schools with consistently high-quality teaching, thoughtful planning led to excellent pupil progress. Teachers set clear goals, monitored progress closely, and adapted learning accordingly. They questioned pupils effectively to deepen understanding, develop oracy, and foster independence. The most successful teachers provided rigorous challenges for all pupils, supporting those with weaker skills without over-managing. Their enthusiasm and expertise resulted in high levels of pupil engagement and strong progress in subject knowledge and skills, particularly in oracy

and independent learning.

In the majority of schools, positive teaching features enabled many pupils to make suitable progress in subject knowledge, understanding, literacy, and, where relevant, numeracy. Effective practices included:

- Creating or sourcing appropriate resources
- Planning sequential steps and engaging learning activities
- Giving clear instructions and explanations
- Regularly questioning pupils to check understanding

However, at least a minority of lessons had shortcomings, leading to pupils' under- achievement. The main shortcomings included:

- Weak lesson planning, including activities that keep pupils busy but do not promote progress
- Insufficient consideration of pedagogical approaches and learning objectives
- Over-scheduled activities lacking developmental value
- Misaligned challenge and pace relative to pupil abilities
- Inadequate modelling or insufficient support to ensure pupils' understanding
- Over-supporting pupils, hindering the development of their independence
- Low expectations for pupils' engagement and effort
- Acceptance of under-developed oral and written responses from pupils

The quality of feedback from teachers varied within and across schools. The most useful examples involved meaningful evaluations and precise improvement advice, with clear expectations for pupil responses. Conversely, a few schools had burdensome marking systems focused on the frequency of marking rather than the overall impact of feedback on learning.

A minority of schools had clear strategies for developing literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, resulting in compelling pupil progress in applying these skills across contexts. An example of a school that develops these skills well, Cefn Hengoed Comprehensive. The majority of schools, however, lacked strategic approaches for developing these skills, prompting recommendations for improvement in 21 out of 31 inspected schools. In many cases, they did not use the helpful frameworks for literacy, numeracy and digital competence. Many schools rightly focused on improving oracy, which had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, often leaving pupils reluctant to engage in discussions or provide extended responses. However, a minority of schools provided insufficient opportunities for pupils to develop their speaking and listening skills.

Many teachers effectively developed basic reading skills suitably within subjects, with regular reading tasks that enhanced subject knowledge. However, the development of more advanced reading skills was often neglected, with over-reliance on language departments to do this. Similarly, opportunities for extended writing in subjects other than English or Welsh were inconsistent. Where writing development was strong, pupils progressed substantially, but inadequate development involved overuse of poorly designed worksheets that limited pupils' responses. A significant minority of pupils frequently made spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors, with handwriting and presentation having deteriorated since the pandemic.

The majority of pupils displayed secure basic numeracy skills but meaningful opportunities to apply these skills were often lacking. A minority of schools effectively planned for progressive numeracy development across the curriculum. These schools generally ensured that science, geography and design and technology provided increasingly challenging tasks in authentic contexts. Read about Ysgol y Creuddyn's numeracy strategy here.

In a very few schools, leaders had well-considered strategies for developing digital skills, resulting in rich opportunities across subjects. Read here about Blackwood School's approach to developing pupils' digital skills. However, many schools offered insufficient digital competence practice outside computing or IT.

A few English-medium schools provided beneficial opportunities for pupils to develop their ability to converse in Welsh. Read here how Pen-Y-Dre School creates a strong culture and appreciation of Welsh language and heritage. However, in many schools, teachers offered pupils mundane tasks and did not provide enough opportunities for them to speak and listen to the language. Often, pupils' exposure to Welsh history and culture was limited to narrow events such as the school eisteddfod. Recruitment of Welsh teachers remained a challenge for most schools.

Welsh-medium and bilingual schools offered pupils strong cultural opportunities but often had low-expectations of pupils' use of the language. In a minority of cases, teachers had low expectations for language accuracy and did not challenge pupils' use of English in class nor support them sufficiently to express themselves in Welsh.

Most schools have a generally broad curriculum. See how Ysgol John Bright approach this. However, a minority had a three-year Key Stage 4 which narrowed the range of experiences for pupils and limited subject continuity at the end of Year 8. Effective curriculum planning in the best schools met nearly all learners' needs. The majority provided strong support and guidance for future learning and careers, with a few beneficially reintroducing work experience placements for Years 10 and 12. However, only a minority of secondary schools take full advantage of opportunities to work with local colleges to enhance their curricular offer. In addition, they do not always offer pupils impartial guidance regarding their future choices.

With the Curriculum for Wales becoming statutory for Years 7 and 8, most schools made broadly adequate arrangements. Partner primary school collaboration ensured learning continuity, but repetition and low levels of challenge were common. Often, schools' attempts to broaden the curriculum led to a lack of depth and cohesion in some subjects, particularly the humanities subjects. In these cases, the curriculum has become too fragmented with pupils moving from topic to topic too quickly without developing a required depth of understanding. In some cases, schools' attempts to broaden learning experiences by providing short units of work on 'new' subjects, such as taster units in other modern foreign languages resulted in learning that was too shallow or disintegrated and resulted in issues with sequencing of learning as pupils moved up to study these subjects at Key Stage 4. In the most effective cases, Curriculum for Wales developments were aligned closely with leaders' vision for developing teaching and learning. In general, schools' strategic approach to planning for progression and their assessment of knowledge and skills was at an early stage.

Many schools provided suitable opportunities for understanding Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic and LGBTQ+ experiences, often through the curriculum, assemblies, and visiting speakers. Celebrating achievements and diversity was a positive focus, though a few schools' provision in this area is under-developed.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

In general, schools' care, support, and guidance for pupils remained strong, with most schools offering beneficial enrichment activities that supported pupils' development, including concerts, theatre productions, and sports and music competitions.

Early in the autumn term, we conducted a national thematic review of attendance (Read about it here), identifying ongoing concerns, particularly in secondary schools where attendance rates remained significantly below pre-pandemic levels. Despite a slight national increase, secondary school attendance did not recover quickly enough, especially among pupils from low-income households and those with persistent absence. About half of the inspected schools were recommended to improve attendance. Most schools made considerable efforts to engage parents, carers, and pupils, emphasizing the importance of regular attendance. The majority also identified groups of low attenders and offered support or mentoring. However, where attendance improvements were minimal, leaders often failed to thoroughly analyse data to identify patterns and did not strategically review the effectiveness of their approaches. Read about how staff at Pontarddulais School improved attendance.

The majority of schools had clear, well-understood systems to address poor behaviour and celebrate positive behaviour and attitudes. Schools with a strong ethos of inclusivity often provided targeted programs and support in internal centres to help pupils modify their behaviours., In general, many pupils behaved appropriately. They concentrated well, responded appropriately to tasks, and developed independence and perseverance when given the opportunity. In a minority of schools, some pupils exhibited disruptive behaviour. These schools noted an increased need for advanced and specialist support due to the complex nature of pupil behaviour. However, staff were concerned about the lack of availability of such external support.

In most schools, pupils had valuable opportunities to influence aspects of school life, particularly in health and well-being, and to develop leadership skills through groups and committees. In the best cases, leaders ensured that pupils from specific groups, such as those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) or eligible for free school meals, could contribute their opinions. However, many schools did not systematically gather pupils' opinions on important areas like teaching or empower them to be part of strategic decisions.

Support for pupils with ALN was strong in the majority of schools, with leaders making good progress toward compliance with the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (ALNET). Many schools had enhanced transition programs for ALN pupils and other vulnerable learners, helping them settle well into schools. ALN teams provided teachers with information and guidance, such as one-page profiles, to support planning. In the best cases, teachers effectively used this guidance to adapt their teaching. However, there was too much variation in how well teachers in mainstream classes planned for ALN pupils and understood the required support. Many schools offered intervention programs for pupils with weak basic skills or low scores in reading, spelling, and numeracy, but these programs often lacked clear entry and exit criteria. Common shortcomings in ALN provision included insufficient tracking of ALN learners' progress and inadequate monitoring of the effectiveness of interventions.

There were notable strengths in local authority specialist resource bases hosted by schools. These bases were nurturing, calm, and supportive environments where pupils with moderate or specific needs thrived socially and, where appropriate, academically. Many pupils integrated successfully into

mainstream classes and participated fully in school life. Pastoral leaders and staff in many schools worked purposefully with families and external agencies to support learners needing additional help due to social, emotional, behavioural difficulties, or health and family issues. In the most effective cases, staff ensured effective communication with parents and carers, as well as regular contact with statutory agencies to address concerns promptly. Many schools provided tailored interventions and support programs by trained staff, which helped pupils overcome barriers to learning. A few schools offered particularly effective support groups and facilities for vulnerable pupils and those affected by poverty, including clubs run by external organizations and after-school programs offering hot meals.

Most schools offered support for vulnerable learners, including those adversely affected by poverty, and those with behavioural and emotional needs. Many schools had specific areas where anxious or insecure pupils could receive support for their learning. Vocational subjects and tailored courses were available in many schools to keep pupils at risk of disengagement and exclusion engaged in education. These efforts contributed significantly to the inclusive and nurturing nature of schools, enabling vulnerable pupils to continue their learning. Read about how Mary Immaculate School helps vulnerable learners.

Many schools effectively promoted pupils' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development, especially in the younger years, through tutor sessions, health and well-being lessons, and assemblies. Read here about how Ysgol Maes y Gwendraeth does this particularly well. They provided comprehensive personal and social education programs exploring themes such as mental health and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. The best schools addressed current and relevant issues, such as vaping, and responded promptly to specific local concerns. Guest speakers and experts were often used to bring expertise and authenticity to pupils' experiences on topics like equality and diversity. However, in most schools, there were few opportunities for older pupils to deepen their understanding of important topics like sexual health and healthy relationships. Many schools encouraged pupils to develop as ethical citizens through fundraising, links with charities, and volunteering, particularly in the sixth form.

In most schools, there was a strong safeguarding culture. Many pupils reported feeling safe and could identify staff members they could approach for support. Generally, pupils felt that staff responded appropriately to bullying and harassment incidents. Nearly all schools ensured that staff at all levels received suitable training in safeguarding and child protection, including identifying children at risk of radicalisation and issues of violence against women.

Leading and improving

Leaders in all schools prioritized equity and inclusion, often focusing on raising the aspirations of all pupils. In cases where leadership was inspirational, leaders built trust with their staff, provided clear direction, had a strong sense of moral purpose, and maintained high expectations. These schools fostered a culture of continuous improvement, driven by the understanding that effective teaching was central to their mission. Leaders in these schools ensured that professional learning was purposeful and relevant, helping staff meet pupils' needs despite ongoing challenges. However, it was concerning that many of the recommendations given, were similar to those from previous years. Common areas needing improvement included self-evaluation, improvement planning, teaching, assessment, and the progressive development of pupils' skills.

In most schools, performance management systems were sound, but objectives were often not closely tied to pupil progress or measurable outcomes. In the few schools where line management

was particularly effective, discussions consistently focused on strategic matters, with a clear emphasis on teaching and learning. However, in schools requiring follow-up, overlapping leadership roles and inequitable responsibilities hindered progress and created a lack of clarity around accountability.

Professional learning led to positive changes in teaching practices in a minority of schools. However, in too many cases, leaders did not systematically evaluate the impact of professional learning on teaching quality or pupil standards. In the best schools, there was a strong culture of professional learning where teachers' practices were informed by evidence and research, supported by professional trust, and fostered through collaboration with peers. These schools encouraged staff to pursue their professional interests, collaborate, innovate, and learn from one another.

Governors generally fulfilled their responsibilities suitably, showing support and pride in their school communities. They diligently carried out their duties, particularly in areas like safeguarding and promoting healthy eating. Governors also supported schools in managing budgets and planning grant spending. However, only in a few schools were governors actively involved in setting the strategic direction. Often, they lacked sufficient information to effectively understand school performance and hold senior leaders accountable.

There was variation in how well leaders integrated national priorities into their improvement plans and daily operations. This may be in part though due to the number of current priorities . Nearly all schools demonstrated a strong culture of safeguarding. However, in terms of Welsh language development, a lack of ambition and low expectations persisted in a minority of schools. The provision for developing pupils' literacy and numeracy skills remained weak, leading inspectors to recommend improvements in two-thirds of the secondary schools inspected. The implementation of the Curriculum for Wales in Years 7 and 8 was inconsistent. Systems to assess pupil progress were still in the early stages in most cases. Staff recruitment was a significant concern across all schools, particularly the shortage of qualified teachers in subjects like science and Welsh.

In many schools, leaders were acutely aware of the challenges facing pupils affected by poverty, social deprivation, and other negative factors. Schools worked sensitively to remove barriers to learning by providing material support and ensuring that pupils had access to enrichment activities to broaden their horizons. Read about Llanishen High school's work in this area. Stronger schools established links with local communities, food banks, and charities, maintaining productive relationships with families. These schools employed various strategies to engage parents and ensure they supported their child's learning. In a few cases, high expectations and comprehensive approaches to mitigating the impact of poverty were embedded in policies and systems, ensuring these schools were particularly effective in raising the attainment and attendance of disadvantaged pupils. Read about Cefn Hengoed Comprehensive school's work to mitigate the impact of poverty on achievement here.

The quality and effectiveness of schools' self-evaluation and improvement planning varied and were not sufficiently impactful in the majority of schools. As in previous years, improving this aspect was the most common recommendation given to schools. A key shortcoming was the lack of a systematic approach to evaluating the impact of teaching and other provision on pupils' academic and personal progress. The use of attendance and attainment data was often insufficient, and first-hand evidence was not systematically used or triangulated to evaluate the effectiveness of provision. Evaluation activities frequently focused too narrowly on pupils' attitudes and teachers' compliance with classroom strategies, rather than on the quality and impact of teaching and assessment. As a result,

leaders often had an overly positive view of teaching quality, and their evaluations lacked the precision needed to plan for necessary improvements.

In the most successful schools, improvement priorities were clear, manageable, and well-understood by all staff. Leaders consistently focused on these priorities, using data, information, and grant spending to accurately assess the effectiveness of their strategies. (Another very good para above)

These schools made regular, use of this information to drive improvement. In the very best schools, there was a tangible commitment to continuous improvement, supported by strong professional learning cultures and a clear understanding that effective teaching is central to their success. Read about Pontarddulais Comprehensive School's approach to school improvement.

Overview of recommendations

- In the 2023 – 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected 31 secondary schools.
- 21 (68%) secondary schools were given a recommendation to strengthen and refine their self-evaluation and/or improvement planning processes. 9 of these providers were advised to focus on teaching, learning, and pupil progress.
- 20 (65%) secondary schools were given a recommendation regarding the progressive development of pupils' skills. This was through improvement of teaching, provision, planning, and/or co-ordination. Of these providers, some of the recommendations given advised they focus on one or more specific areas of the curriculum: 10 providers were advised to focus on developing pupils' numeracy skills, 8 on pupils' literacy skills, 6 on pupils' Welsh Language skills, and 4 on pupils' digital skills.
- 16 (52%) secondary schools received a recommendation regarding the improvement of teaching. 7 of these recommendations placed emphasis on pupil progress and 6 on the challenging of pupils. 3 of these providers received a recommendation that focused on the quality of teaching and assessment. 5 additional providers received a recommendation that also related to assessment and feedback
- 15 (48%) secondary schools were given a recommendation to improve attendance.
- 10 (32%) secondary schools were given a recommendation regarding the improvement of their Welsh language provision. Of these, 6 providers were specifically given a recommendation to improve pupils' Welsh language skills, as previously mentioned. 2 of these providers were also advised to improve pupil understanding of Welsh culture and heritage.
- 9 (29%) secondary schools were given a recommendation on leadership, with recommendations issued incorporating themes of role, responsibility, accountability, strategy and improvement.
- 3 (10%) secondary schools were given a recommendation regarding the strengthening and development of the role of the governing body.
- Other recommendations issued to providers advised on themes including health and safety, pupil behaviour, exclusion, additional learning needs (ALN) provision, pupil well-being, communication between parents and pupils and staff, budget and quality assurance

All-Age

Schools

29

No. of schools 2024

27

No. of schools 2023

23

No. of schools 2022

Pupils

28,959

All pupils

6,064

No. of pupils of primary age

18,957

No. of pupils of secondary age
(compulsory education)

2,031

No. of pupils in sixth form

18.5%

eFSM (Aged 5-15)

17.0%

eFSM (All pupils)

2.2%

EAL A-C (Aged 5-15)

31.7%

Able to speak Welsh (Aged 5-15)

8.6%

Pupils with additional learning
needs (Aged 5-15)

Follow-up

No. in FU September 2023

SM: 1   SI: 0   ER: 1

No. removed 2023-2024

SM: 0   SI: 0   ER: 1

No. went into FU after core
inspection 2023-2024

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 5

Welsh-medium: 0

Bilingual: 3

English-medium: 2

Faith: 1

Case studies

No. of case studies: 1

Names of schools with case
studies: Ebbw Fawr Learning
Community

SM: 0   SI: 0   ER: 3

Total in FU August 2024

SM: 1   SI: 0   ER: 3

Engagement visits

No. of visits/calls: 0

Welsh-medium:

Bilingual:

English-medium:

Faith:

Summary

During 2023-2024, all-age schools have continued to focus strongly on pupils' well-being and developing a culture of belonging and ethos of being one school. Strong working relationships between teachers and pupils were notable features in these schools. This ensured that most pupils were well supported, felt safe and developed positive attitudes towards their work. The quality of teaching varied mainly due to differing expectations and inconsistencies in the level of challenge provided. Schools are at different stages of development in delivering Curriculum for Wales, especially for pupils of secondary age. In all schools inspected, planning to develop pupils' skills progressively and systematically was not co-ordinated well enough. As a result, pupils did not build well enough on previous learning. In particular, schools did not provide enough worthwhile opportunities for pupils to develop their writing skills, higher order reading skills or digital skills as they enter the secondary phases. In general, leaders have implemented a cycle of appropriate activities to evaluate the school's work and identified suitable priorities for improvement. However, when evaluating teaching, leaders did not focus on the impact on pupils' progress well enough.

Learning, teaching and learning experiences

Across the schools inspected in 2023-2024, many pupils, including those eligible for free school meals, made at least suitable progress over time. A few made strong progress. Pupils with additional learning needs generally made appropriate progress from their starting points.

Most teachers had positive working relationships with pupils that helped create a pleasant learning environment. In the few best cases, teachers planned and adapted work that met the needs of nearly all pupils. They engaged pupils in their learning through valuable experiences that related to their everyday lives and allowed them to apply their skills. Teachers provided interesting activities to gain pupils' curiosity and assist them to develop as independent learners. These teachers ensured an appropriate pace to learning and had high expectations.

In a minority of cases, where teaching was not effective enough, teachers did not consider the needs of all pupils suitably when planning, including for pupils with ALN. They did not have high enough expectations, nor did they provide suitable challenge. As a result, pupils did not make as much progress as they could have and became disengaged with their learning. Most pupils in sixth forms made sound progress and displayed extremely positive attitudes towards their learning.

When given the opportunity, most pupils applied their literacy, numeracy and digital skills appropriately in their work across the curriculum, particularly in the primary phases. In general, the development of pupils' oracy and numeracy skills was stronger than the development of their reading, writing and digital skills. However, in nearly all cases, schools did not plan for the progressive development of pupils' skills well enough.

A few schools successfully created a Welsh ethos that enabled pupils to make strong progress in their Welsh language skills. However, in general, schools did not provide enough authentic opportunities for pupils to apply their Welsh language speaking and listening skills.

Many schools offered pupils an appropriately broad and balanced curriculum and catered well for individual needs. They developed an appropriate vision for Curriculum for Wales that was well understood by most staff. This was delivered suitably throughout primary phases. In a minority of schools, delivery of Curriculum for Wales was less well developed in the secondary phase. As a result, pupils from Year 7 upwards, often from partner primary schools, do not benefit from sufficient continuity in their learning.

In a majority of schools, the curriculum included valuable opportunities to promote pupils' understanding of equality and diversity. This included opportunities for pupils to learn about discrimination and prejudice against Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities. However, a minority of schools offered too few opportunities for pupils to consider the experiences of these communities.

Care, support, guidance and well-being

In each school inspected, well-being and care support and guidance have been strong.

They have developed a wide range of provision to support pupils in an inclusive and supportive environment. This has contributed to pupils feeling safe and having a positive attitude towards their learning. Most pupils across the schools were proud of belonging to their community and were respectful and polite to each other. Most pupils in the sixth form, where applicable, showed extremely positive and mature attitudes towards their work. Overall, most pupils behaved very well in lessons and around the school.

All the schools inspected promoted pupils' spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development suitably through a combination of activities. These included assemblies, reflection time, cultural events and health and well-being lessons.

A minority of schools provided numerous opportunities for pupils to take on leadership roles. Pupils at these schools benefited from being able to influence positively the work of the school. In general, schools provided suitable opportunities for pupils to participate in extra-curricular activities including educational visits, clubs and performances.

All schools recognised the importance of promoting good attendance and communicated this well with parents and pupils. However, despite having improved significantly over the last year, in many schools, attendance at the time of the inspection remained lower than before the pandemic. *

In a minority of schools, care, and support for all pupils, particularly the vulnerable and those with additional learning needs, was a notable strength. Staff understood the well-being needs of pupils and, as a result, most pupils felt well supported and safe. Schools have developed a positive safeguarding culture and arrangements. Staff understood their responsibilities in keeping pupils safe. However, in a minority of schools, there were a few matters relating to health and safety that needed addressing.

Leadership and improvement

In many schools, leaders continued to develop a culture of operating as all-age schools. As a result, pupils have benefited from being part of one school, for example when primary-aged pupils perform alongside their older peers in school productions. These leaders have successfully established a close-knit community and established productive relationships with parents and families. Headteachers in

these schools have set a clear vision, which has been communicated well with staff, pupils and parents. In a majority of cases, leaders have shown particular resilience and determination in developing their schools as learning organisations and overcoming hurdles as they become more established. However, in a minority of schools inspected, leaders have not been strategic enough to establish a clear vision or consider the future needs of the school.

Many leaders addressed national priorities appropriately. For example, leaders have successfully created a strong safeguarding culture across the school and ensured that pupils generally feel safe and supported. In a few schools, leaders work well strategically to mitigate the effect of poverty on pupil well-being and attainment. Read the case study supplied by Ebbw Fawr Learning Community regarding the impact of the whole-school approach to remove barriers to learning.

In the majority of schools, leaders' responsibilities were distributed equitably and were understood by staff. However, in a minority of schools, expectations and lines of accountability were not clear enough.

In general, leaders have introduced and established a suitable cycle of activities to evaluate the school's work and identified appropriate priorities for improvement. While leaders identified strengths and weaknesses in provision, in all schools, self-evaluation processes did not focus sharply enough on the impact of teaching on learning. In addition, improvement planning processes were not always clear or specific enough to ensure timely progress.

Many leaders have established a culture of professional learning that matches the needs of the school and focuses suitably on teaching and learning. Staff benefited from opportunities to undertake enquiry-based research and collaboration with colleagues, other schools and the all-age sector forum. In the strongest cases, this had a positive impact on pupils' learning, for example when teachers worked with partner schools to successfully implement a joint vision for the curriculum. Governors were very supportive of their schools. Overall, they had a sound understanding of the strengths and areas of improvement of their schools, were suitable critical friends and monitored progress against the school's improvement priorities appropriately. Overall, they managed budgets carefully and understood their statutory roles regarding safeguarding and promoting healthy eating and drinking. In a few cases, these were not always informed well enough to make long term strategic decisions to benefit pupils.

Follow-up

One school in Estyn review from the last academic year was reviewed in a panel with the local authority and had made sufficient progress to be removed from follow-up. One all-age school has been in special measures since May 2022. It has been monitored each term where progress was found to be insufficient and it remains in special measures.

Five all-age schools were inspected this year. Two schools did not require follow-up but three recently established schools required Estyn review. The main reasons for this level of follow-up were that leaders did not have robust enough self-evaluation and improvement processes and that planning for the progressive development of pupils' skills was not co-ordinated well enough. Additional factors such as variable levels of accountability and inconsistencies in the quality of teaching also contributed to the decisions regarding follow-up.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023-2024 academic year, Estyn inspected five all age schools.

- Four providers were given a recommendation to improve the development of skills, and one to provide more opportunities to develop writing skills.
- Four providers were recommended to strengthen or refine their self-evaluation standards.
- Three providers had recommendations related to leadership.
- One provider had a recommendation to strengthen monitoring of and boost attendance levels.
- One provider had a recommendation for staff to implement behaviour strategies consistently.
- One provider was recommended to address shortcomings in teaching to improve pupils' learning and progress.
- One provider was given a recommendation to strengthen the effectiveness of planning for improvement.
- One provider was recommended to address safeguarding issues raised at inspection.

All Wales Core data sets 2023-2024

Maintained Special

Schools

39

No. of schools 2024

39

No. of schools 2023

40

No. of schools 2022

Pupils

6,025

All pupils

303

No. of pupils under 5

4,772

No. of pupils 5 to 15

950

No. of pupils aged 16 and over

45.7%

eFSM (Aged 5-15)

44.1%

eFSM (All pupils)

Follow-up

No. in FU September 2023

SM: 1   SI: 0   ER: 2

No. removed 2023-2024

SM: 0   SI: 0   ER: 2

No. went into FU after core inspection 2023-2024

SM: 0   SI: 1   ER: 1

Total in FU August 2024

SM: 1   SI: 1   ER: 1

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 10

Welsh-medium: 1

Bilingual:

English-medium: 9

Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 4

Published on website: 6

Summary

Overall, maintained special schools continued to provide very effective education for pupils with a wide range of additional learning needs. The care, support and guidance provided by the sector continued to be a particular strength and was underpinned by strong relationships between staff and pupils based on mutual trust and respect. Over time, with sensitive and skilled support from staff, nearly all pupils learnt to embrace diversity and show tolerance towards one another. Most pupils made at least appropriate progress in developing a range of skills and older pupils received robust support to access a broader curriculum, including vocational and work-related experiences that lead to recognised accreditations. Overall leadership continued to be a strength and was exceptionally strong in a minority of schools.

Teaching and learning

Most special schools had high expectations for all pupils, with staff possessing exceptional understanding of their needs. This fostered strong, respectful relationships between staff and pupils, positively impacting their progress, attitudes to learning, and overall, well-being.

Most pupils made appropriate progress relative to their starting points. Many special schools ensured that their communication systems matched pupils' needs well, boosting their confidence and improving their communication skills. However, a few schools did not plan well enough for pupils to develop writing skills.

Many pupils developed numeracy skills well, using mathematical operations with increasing confidence. They handled data and presented information in graphs and tables. Over time, they used numeracy skills beneficially in real-life contexts such as calculating travel times, budgeting, and calculating change.

Many pupils developed their digital skills suitably. Pupils with complex needs used tablets and other devices to communicate with increasing confidence They learnt about left and right and made marks with a pen on the screen to indicate the direction of travel. More able pupils logged onto devices, composed emails, researched online, and presented data in graphs and tables. Additionally, pupils created videos and QR codes, and a few even prepared scripts and presented on local radio.

Many pupils developed their Welsh language skills appropriately, recognising common words, days of the week, and colours, and confidently greeting people and following instructions in the language. A few schools did not provide enough worthwhile opportunities to develop pupils' knowledge and understanding of Welsh culture and heritage.

A very few special schools had notable strengths in pupils' creative, physical, and digital skills. We noted that the creative skills of pupils at Ysgol Maes Y Coed, for example, were a particular strength.

Pupils developed valuable independence skills, from managing schoolwork to practical life tasks like budgeting, cooking, and using public transport. Schools increasingly collaborated with local further

education colleges, with about a third establishing satellite bases at these colleges. These partnerships allowed pupils to access tailored vocational sessions, supporting their transition to further education that matched their needs and abilities. For those with more complex needs, links with independent specialist colleges were also strengthened.

By the time pupils left school, many had completed both academic and vocational courses, which prepared them well for the next stage of learning. As a result of the guidance from their schools, a significant number progressed to further education. In a few schools, pupils made extremely strong progress in developing these skills, which was clearly linked to a well-planned curriculum and high-quality teaching. At Maes Ebbw School and Pen-Y-Cwm Special School, teaching was a notable strength.

In the most effective special schools, there was a clear rationale to the curriculum offer that included, for example, parents and pupils. These schools provide a broad curriculum that is enjoyed by pupils. Staff create relevant opportunities for pupils to influence their day-to-day experiences. At Heronsbridge School, for example, the broad, stimulating pupil-centred curriculum was robustly planned and involved the whole staff team, pupils and parents.

A few special schools needed to collaborate better with local authorities to improve the learning environment. We noted inconsistent access to hydrotherapy. Rising pupil numbers were also leading to the loss of specialist rooms and independent learning areas and we issued a safeguarding letter to one school for inadequate adapted space.

Despite teaching strengths, we made recommendations in the majority of schools. These related to the need for better planning for skill development, improving curriculum and teaching methods, and reducing variability in teaching quality.

Care, support and guidance and its impact on pupil well-being

Special schools generally maintained exceptionally secure arrangements, providing highly effective care, support and guidance. This created an environment where most pupils enjoyed school and felt safe. Nearly all schools had a strong safeguarding culture and educated pupils on personal safety.

Strong relationships between special schools and other professionals and agencies ensured tailored support for individual needs. Visits by health professionals mean that pupils do not have to leave school to attend appointments. Additionally, many schools developed their own arrangements to support families over time. Ysgol Hen Felin's Wellbeing Centre, for example, has enhanced community engagement through a variety of initiatives.

Most schools effectively tracked and supported pupils' emotional needs and attendance through dedicated staff teams who worked closely with parents, partner agencies and school staff. We commented very favourably on the behaviour and attitudes of nearly all pupils in special schools, noting their curiosity, friendliness and pride in their achievements and community.

Although attendance improved post-pandemic, historical comparisons were challenging due to a lack of current national data for maintained special schools. Pupils in leadership roles thrived and talked enthusiastically about taking on responsibilities, participating in school events, and contributing to local and national charities. At Ysgol Penmaes, for example, pupil voice is a strength of the school.

Nearly all schools provided valuable opportunities for pupils to learn about diverse cultures and religions. Staff in special schools created inclusive environments where pupils embraced differences, recognised strengths in classmates, and developed compassion and empathy.

Despite these strengths, half of the inspected schools received recommendations for improvements in care, support, guidance, and pupil well-being. In a minority of schools, we noted the need for schools to work with their local authority to improve the condition and suitability of school accommodation. A few schools did not provide adequate access to hydrotherapy provision and there was lack of understanding of the role of the school nursing service. This limited the benefit of the service to pupils and their families. In one school we noted that staff have an insufficient understanding of the reasons for challenging behaviour and this, in part, contributed to poor attendance.

Leading and improving

Overall, the leadership in maintained special schools was a strong feature in nearly all schools and an exceptionally strong feature in a minority of them. We highlighted the caring, thoughtful, compassionate and exceptional leadership in this sector.

Where leadership was particularly strong, leaders established a clear, shared vision focused on improving outcomes for all pupils. These leaders were highly visible and passionate, valuing parents as partners in their children's education. Roles and responsibilities were well understood, with staff feeling trusted and supported in their development as leaders. Effective leaders listened to their staff, fostering loyalty, building trust, and enhancing pupils' learning experiences. The most successful special schools developed a strong community identity, where pupils and staff felt a sense of belonging and thrived within a supportive culture.

Overall, leaders and governors had a deep understanding of their schools and maintained systems to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Governors effectively acted as critical friends to headteachers. Self-evaluation and improvement planning were robust in the most effective schools, focusing on enhancing teaching, learning, and pupil outcomes.

Leaders created opportunities for staff innovation and provided valuable professional learning, which staff appreciated, with Heronsbridge School being notably strong in this area.

Leaders made effective use of pupil development grants, positively impacting attendance and well-being. However, recommendations in the majority of schools primarily concerned improvements in self-evaluation and planning. Concerns included insecure evidence gathering or insufficient analysis of information, and in a few schools governing bodies not effectively supporting and holding headteachers accountable.

Follow-up

Two schools inspected in this academic year were placed in a follow-up category.

Three schools are currently in follow-up. One school remains in special measures and has been in this category since its core inspection in 2022. It has been monitored every term and progress has been found to be insufficient to remove it from special measures. Of the remaining schools, one is in need of significant improvement and the other is in Estyn review.

Two schools, placed in Estyn review in 2023, were found to have made sufficient progress to be removed from follow-up.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023 – 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected 10 maintained special schools.

5 schools were given a recommendation about improving or strengthening their self-evaluation and improvement planning.

3 schools were given a recommendation about providing opportunities for pupils to develop skills, such as writing, independent living, and literacy skills.

Two schools were given a recommendation to improve attendance.

Two of the weaker schools were recommended to strengthen or improve teaching.

Two schools were given a recommendation about leadership.

Other recommendations included working with partners, addressing safeguarding concerns, strengthening the role of the governing body, and strengthening assessment processes.

Independent ALN specialist schools

Schools

47

January 2024

Core inspections

This year, we inspected 12 independent special schools as part of a core inspection.

Monitoring visits

We also visited 16 schools as part of annual monitoring visits.

Independent School Standards

In independent schools, we inspect the extent to which the school complies with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024.

Independent school visits

In addition to our core inspections, we also carry out a range of other visits to independent schools:

Five initial registration visits, to register a new independent school

Two follow-up to registration visits, to ensure that a newly opened independent school continues to comply with the Independent School Standards

16 material change visits, to provide the Welsh Government with advice regarding a change in circumstances of an independent school

Nine responses to action plans where a school does not meet the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024

17 regular follow-up visits to the schools who did not meet the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations to check their progress

One announced focused visit to visit a school at the request of the Welsh Government with a particular focus on the welfare, health and safety of pupils

Summary

In 2023-2024, compared to the previous academic year, the proportion of schools that were compliant with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024 increased.

Overall, inspectors found that independent ALN specialist schools provided a nurturing environment where staff foster positive relationships with pupils. These relationships and an understanding of pupils' needs, abilities and interests enabled staff to engage pupils and deliver a balanced curriculum.

Around half of the schools inspected and a minority of schools visited for monitoring visits during 2023-2024 had experienced recent leadership changes. The majority of these schools did not meet the requirements of the Independent School Standards during their core inspection. Additionally, schools continued registering to provide additional learning provision (ALP) in response to ALN reform, although around half did not provide details of their ALP to the Welsh Government.

Independent schools, like maintained special schools, reported a change in pupil profiles, noting an increase in referrals of pupils with complex mental health needs.

Teaching and learning

Many pupils at independent ALN specialist schools had previously experienced significant educational disruptions, but the strong support provided by most staff enabled many students to make suitable progress from their starting points. Many pupils generally developed good social and communication skills. They interacted confidently with staff and visitors, and took pride in their schools.

Progress in literacy was notable in many schools, although a few schools provided limited opportunities for developing pupils' progressive reading skills and extended writing. Numeracy skills were sound overall, with many pupils effectively applying mathematical concepts in practical contexts such as when budgeting or planning trips. While the majority of pupils made appropriate use of ICT within learning tasks such as word processing and online research, the development of pupils' digital skills across the curriculum was insufficient in many schools.

Many pupils gained a range of relevant qualifications, from entry level to A levels, along with additional accreditations in various fields. However, in a few schools the accreditation opportunities were too limited. The curriculum generally addressed individual pupil needs, their interests and their abilities well. However, a few schools had weaknesses in subjects like science, humanities, and digital skills.

The effectiveness of teaching varied. In the most effective schools, teachers demonstrated strong subject knowledge and effective questioning, setting clear learning objectives. However, in a few schools, staff offered inconsistent challenge, and limited opportunities for pupils to develop as independent learners, with a minority of pupils relying excessively on support staff. Feedback practices also varied, with verbal feedback often used effectively, while written feedback in a few schools lacked clear guidance on how pupils could improve. Most schools used assessment information to inform planning and track progress, but a few did not use assessments effectively to ensure that pupils developed their skills progressively over time. Enrichment through external visits and partnerships enhanced pupils' life skills and social confidence. However, a few schools did not meet all Independent School Standards due to poorly tailored learning experiences and ineffective lesson planning and time management.

Care, support and guidance and its impact on pupils' well-being

Overall, schools focused well on creating inclusive and supportive environments to address pupils' needs. This approach led to nearly all pupils feeling safe and knowing whom to turn to with concerns. Most pupils displayed good behaviour and enjoyed learning, while staff generally fostered strong, respectful relationships with pupils. Many pupils demonstrated improved attendance over time, although low attendance from a few pupils negatively affected their progress and well-being. In a few schools, inadequate tracking of attendance, punctuality, and behaviour hindered the evaluation of strategies that were intended to improve pupil attendance.

Most schools created valuable documents to support pupils with ALN and set relevant targets linked to individual development plans (IDPs). However, a minority of schools had underdeveloped systems for tracking progress against these targets. Support for ALN was mostly appropriate, with a range of services available, including therapeutic and outreach teams. At Ysgol Tŷ Monmouth, staff recognised that many of the pupils lacked the vocabulary to clearly express their feelings to adults. The therapies team supported the pupils to contribute to their behaviour plans and develop symbolised behaviour strategies. Pupils had a say in how they would like staff to behave in response to any 'big feelings' they were having. This improved pupils' social skills, peer relationships, empathy and overall well-being. However, many schools did not effectively evaluate the impact of these interventions on pupils' well-being and attitudes to learning.

Most schools placed an appropriate emphasis on developing pupils' life skills and their preparedness for the future, with some excelling in transition planning. Many pupils progressed to further education, employment, or training. Further, in a few schools with residential provisions, care staff effectively collaborated on career development opportunities, including work experience. However, a few schools had insufficient career guidance and planning.

Most schools provided a good range of experiences to develop pupils' spiritual, moral, and social understanding, with a few also enhancing their Welsh identity and culture. Opportunities to explore equality and diversity were less developed. A few schools offered limited chances for pupils to contribute actively to school life, affecting their development as responsible citizens.

Safeguarding was a high priority in most schools, but a few lacked formal policies and procedures, weakening their safeguarding practices. Three schools received recommendations to improve safeguarding management. In addition, seven schools were evaluated as non-compliant with the Independent School Standards in relation to Standard 3: The welfare, health and safety of pupils. In around half these cases, the school had not paid appropriate regard to Welsh Government guidance on keeping learners safe.

Leading and Improving

Effective leadership was common, with strong community cultures and clear visions. However, in a few cases, recent changes in leadership affected quality assurance processes, leading to a lack of robust evaluations of teaching effectiveness and additional learning needs.

Most schools lacked a comprehensive quality assurance culture or processes, which impacted on leaders' understanding of strengths and areas for improvement. Performance management processes in a few schools did not adequately consider teaching effectiveness. Professional learning opportunities for staff were generally provided, with notable examples of strong development

programs, which linked well to school improvement priorities. At Bryn Tirion Hall School, for instance, we reported on their effective collaboration with clinical professionals and other schools to enhance staff's skills and develop a new curriculum. However, very few schools with linked residential provision provided educational training for care staff working in school.

Challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff were significant in a minority of schools, affecting teaching quality and improvement priorities. Learning environments were mostly supportive and well-designed to meet individual pupil needs. Notable improvements included adding new spaces like sensory rooms and art galleries. However, a few schools faced severe issues with their learning environments, prompting safeguarding concerns, which required immediate actions.

Follow-up

In 2023-2024, a greater proportion of schools were compliant with the Regulations compared to the previous academic year. In the majority of non-compliant schools, learning experiences were not matched well enough to the needs of pupils, especially those with IDPs. A few schools failed to meet the standards in relation to ensuring the suitability of staff and a very few failed to meet the standards in relation to the provision of information.

Where schools failed to comply with all of the Regulations, key shortcomings also related to the quality of education and teaching. Whilst the Regulations do not specifically cover leadership, weaknesses in school leadership, a lack of strategic oversight and the lack of robust quality assurance were key features in the shortcomings of these schools.

There are currently a total of nine schools (19.1%) who do not comply with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024 and are currently in a follow-up category.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023 – 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected 12 independent special schools.

11 (91.7%) providers were given a recommendation to establish or refine their quality assurance processes and improvement planning, 7 of which recommended focusing on pupil progress.

Seven providers (58.3%) were given a recommendation to comply fully with ISS (Wales) Regulations 2003, and one was given a recommendation to ensure the pupils' additional learning needs comply with their registration category.

Four providers (43.3%) were given a recommendation to strength or develop their curriculum, to either improve provision for careers, spiritual, moral, social and cultural education (SMSC) and personal social education (PSE), support pupils to follow their desired learning pathways, ensure that programmes of study are supported by appropriate schemes of work and assessment to develop pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital skills progressively, or to provide opportunities for pupils to learn in real life contexts and follow their desired learning pathways.

Three providers were recommended to strengthen the management of safeguarding and address shortcomings identified during the inspection.

Three providers were given a recommendation to strengthen planning to improve the development of pupils' skills.

Three providers were given a recommendation to refine roles and responsibilities of staff.

Two providers were given a recommendation to improve the quality of teaching.

References

Welsh Government (2022) *Keeping learners safe: The role of local authorities, governing bodies and proprietors of independent schools under the Education Act 2002*. Cardiff: Welsh Government. Available online: Keeping Learners Safe (gov.wales) (Accessed 4th October 2024)

Welsh Government (2024) *The Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024*. Available at: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/wsi/2024/27/contents/made (Accessed 1st November 2024)

Independent mainstream

Schools

38

January 2024, including 10 boarding schools

New registrations 2023-2024: Cardiff Muslim High School (Feb 2024)

Schools closed 2023-2024: Castle School (August 2024)

Schools deregistered by Welsh Government 2023-2024: none

Independent School Standards

In independent schools, we inspect the extent to which the school complies with the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2024.

All schools inspected this year complied with these standards.

Independent school visits

In addition to our core inspections, we also carry out a range of other visits to independent schools:

One initial registration visit, to register a new independent school

Two follow-up to registration visits, to ensure that a newly opened independent school continues to comply with the Independent School Standards

Eight material change visits, to provide the Welsh Government with advice regarding a change in circumstances of an independent school

Core inspections

This year, we inspected five independent mainstream schools.

Three schools are all-age, one is a secondary school and one has only has pupils in Key Stages 4 and 5.

Summary

Pupils at independent mainstream schools inspected this year achieved exceptional examination results, consistently surpassing national averages. These schools emphasised pupil well-being and offered a broad and enriched curriculum, particularly individualised for older students. Support for

accessing future destinations, such as UK or international universities, was a significant strength. However, in all schools, a few leaders' quality assurance activities lacked sufficient focus on the impact of teaching on learning, leading to missed opportunities for improving school provision.

Teaching and learning

Across the inspected schools, pupil attainment was notably strong, with public examination results significantly above national averages. Nearly all pupils demonstrated high oracy and communication skills, confidently presenting and debating with a broad vocabulary tailored to different contexts. Most pupils developed effective reading skills, applying phonics to decode unfamiliar words and progressing to summarising, sequencing, and making inferences from texts. Many pupils also read for pleasure and valued reading for learning. Writing skills were similarly well developed, with younger pupils quickly advancing and older pupils producing sophisticated written arguments for various purposes. However, in two schools, a minority of pupils' work presentation lacked neatness.

Mathematical skills were generally strong, with most younger pupils grasping concepts well and most older pupils applying advanced skills across the curriculum. However, in a few instances, pupils either did not apply these skills at the expected level outside mathematics lessons or were not expected to do so. In one school, many pupils' mathematical skills were underdeveloped.

Digital skills varied across the schools, although pupils generally used technology confidently to support learning. In one school, digital skill development was particularly strong due to the range of integrated learning opportunities.

Staff across the schools were dedicated, fostering a culture of ambition and high expectations. Teachers built strong relationships with pupils, provided well-matched lessons and resources, and offered valuable additional support. Most teachers excelled in preparing pupils for public examinations, although in some cases teaching was overly directed, limiting independent learning.

In all schools, the curriculum was broad and supported knowledge acquisition and personal development. Four schools offered an extensive, individualised curriculum for older pupils, aligning well with their future aspirations. Three schools provided an extraordinary range of co-curricular activities, enriching pupils' educational experience.

Care, support and guidance, and their impact on pupils' well-being

The schools inspected this year demonstrated a strong commitment to pupil well-being, fostering positive relationships between staff and students. This supportive environment created a strong sense of belonging among pupils, who showed pride in their school and respect for everyone involved. Nearly all pupils' behaviour and attitudes were exemplary, with most pupils displaying high levels of concentration and enthusiasm in their lessons. Leadership opportunities were extensive, contributing to pupils' responsibility and self-confidence.

A particular strength across the schools inspected was the advice and support pupils received when considering their future destinations and careers. Cardiff Sixth Form College provided highly effective support for university entry and future career planning through a well-developed and extensive co-curricular programme.

All schools excelled in promoting pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, offering

various opportunities for community involvement through volunteering and charitable activities. This fostered a deep understanding of the importance of helping others. At Monmouth School for Boys, we reported that the library is a large, friendly and inclusive space blending modern resources with historic values, which supported reading, literacy, and well-being for the entire school community.

Support for pupils with additional learning needs was robust, with early identification and effective strategies to help pupils succeed academically. Safeguarding practices were well established. There were rigorous recruitment processes and comprehensive training for staff and governors, often exceeding statutory requirements.

Two out of the five schools needed minor policy adjustments to fully comply with Welsh Government legislation, which were addressed during the inspections. Overall, the schools provided nurturing, respectful, and well-supported educational environments ensuring the well-being and development of all pupils.

Leadership and improvement

For one of the schools inspected, this was their first core inspection since registering as an independent school. Across all the schools inspected, leaders were well established, although one long-serving head was absent due to illness, and another had recently been promoted from headteacher to principal. One school inspected was undergoing significant strategic reorganisation through a merger with two other schools within its 'family'. All schools fully complied with the Independent School Standards.

Leaders in all the schools inspected this year had a clear and ambitious vision for their school and for the development of pupils' knowledge, skills and character. They were well respected and led by example to build strong and cohesive school communities. As a result, most staff in these schools felt valued and were highly loyal, working collaboratively in the best interests of pupils.

Governance arrangements in four of the five schools inspected were robust and effective. In these schools, governors provided leaders with an appropriate balance of challenge and support. They reviewed policies and procedures robustly and managed the schools' finances at a strategic level appropriately.

Leaders in all schools inspected actively promoted safeguarding and placed a high regard on the well-being of all members of the school community, particularly pupils and staff. In four of the five schools inspected, pupil attendance over time was extremely high.

Leaders in four of the five schools inspected analysed a range of data, particularly public examinations results, to understand pupils' attainment. In three of the schools inspected, systems and approaches to tracking individual pupils' progress over time were underdeveloped or at a very early stage of implementation. In four of the five schools inspected, leaders undertook a suitable range of quality assurance activities and had used this information to inform their school improvement plans. However, lesson observations did not focus upon the impact of teaching upon learning sharply enough or identify subtle aspects of teaching practice that may benefit from improvement. In one school, leaders had, in part, suspended the usual arrangements for quality assurance and consequently had an incomplete overview of the quality of teaching and learning across the school.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023 – 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected five independent mainstream schools.

4 providers were given a recommendation to refine quality assurance or self-evaluation processes, particularly in terms of the quality of teaching.

2 providers were given a recommendation to build on existing practice to improve consistency across the school.

2 providers were given a recommendation about leadership:

- Strengthen the school's current practices to ensure that roles and responsibilities at directorate and governing body level are clearly defined
- Ensure that the leadership team effectively distil available information to develop a coherent overview of teaching, learning, attendance and the curriculum across the whole school

Other recommendations provided to independent mainstream settings included improving attendance, ensuring teachers' expectations are appropriately high, making best use of assessment data to inform/enhance pupil progress, and sharpening monitoring and improvement work to focus on pupil outcomes.

Pupil Referral Units

Schools

22

No. of schools 2024

22

No. of schools 2023

21

No. of schools 2022

Pupils

1,077

Single registered pupils 2023-2024

969

Single registered pupils 2022-2023

857

Single registered pupils 2021-2022

Follow-up

No. in FU September 2023

SM: 1   SI: 1   ER: 1

No. removed 2023-2024

SM: 0   SI: 1   ER: 1

No. went into FU after core inspection 2023-2024

SM: 0   SI: 1   ER: 0

Total in FU August 2024

SM: 1   SI: 1   ER: 0

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 3

Welsh-medium:

Bilingual:

English-medium: 3

Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 0

Engagement visits

No. of visits/calls: 2

Welsh-medium:

Bilingual:

English-medium: 2

Overview

In the 2023-2024 academic year, 2,597 pupils accessed education outside of school (EOTAS)[1]Pupils educated other than at school: September 2023 to August 2024 (revised) [HTML] | GOV.WALES. That is 5.5 of every 1,000 pupils in Wales which is up from 5.1 of every 1,000 pupils in 2022/23.

There are 2,279 EOTAS pupils mainly educated outside school. That is 4.9 of every 1,000 pupils in Wales which is up from 4.0 of every 1,000 pupils in 2022/23 and the highest rate since data has been calculated in 2009/10.

The number of EOTAS pupils mainly educated outside school appears to be trending upwards, having doubled proportionately since 2009/10. The percentage of EOTAS pupils mainly educated outside school is 87.8%, up from 42% in 2009/10.

In 2023/24, there are, proportionately, significantly more pupils with SEN or ALN mainly educated outside school than in the general pupil population. The largest number of pupil enrolments (44.7%) are in pupil referral units, followed by independent schools (18.4%) and individual tuition (16.0%).

This year, three PRUs were inspected: two under a new pilot inspection framework, all serving multiple sites. Two PRUs supported pupils aged 11-16, and one served ages 7-16, with pupils registered ranging from 33 to 76.

Summary

Where teaching is effective, pupils make good progress in their learning from their initial starting points in PRUs. The high quality of care, support and guidance available to pupils in PRUs impacts positively on their social, emotional, behavioural and mental health needs well. Where leadership is effective, leaders, the management committee and local authority have a clear vision for the role of the PRU in the local authority.

Follow-up

This year, two PRUs were removed from follow-up categories due to strong progress, while one remains in statutory follow-up. One out of the three PRUs inspected this year was placed into significant improvement.

Teaching and learning

In the most effective PRUs, the curriculum offered was broad, balanced, and tailored to the specific needs and interests of the pupils. These PRUs had well-established plans for delivering Curriculum for Wales, with a strong emphasis on pupil well-being and the integration of the four purposes of the curriculum into both planning and teaching. This approach provided pupils with enriching educational experiences. The flexibility of the curriculum allowed for individualisation, which resulted in most

pupils making significant progress from their starting points, with a few making exceptional gains. However, there were inconsistencies in the quality and impact of Curriculum for Wales development across different PRUs.

The curriculum in many PRUs was relevant to pupils' diverse needs, ages, and abilities, addressing important social issues such as understanding Black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities, as well as LGBTQ+ people. Most PRUs effectively identified and provided targeted interventions and support for pupils with additional learning needs, ensuring that all pupils could access the curriculum effectively. A strong emphasis on developing pupils' social and life skills was also evident, preparing them well for their future steps. For example, at Gorwelion Newydd, many pupils engaged well with a range of lunchtime clubs, including fantasy strategy games and music, and with an after-school gaming club once a week.

In the most effective practices, there was a well-embedded development of pupils' skills across the curriculum, with clear pathways for progression. However, the development of digital and Welsh language skills was variable. For older secondary pupils, PRUs offered a valuable range of qualifications and vocational pathways, tailored to individual needs. These PRUs also maintained strong links with Careers Wales, helping pupils to understand their future opportunities.

The most effective PRUs had robust tracking systems to monitor and evaluate pupil progress, using detailed baseline information on pupil attainment and well-being well to inform learning opportunities and address additional needs. Despite this, there was variability in the quality of assessment across PRUs, limiting staff's ability to accurately identify progress and effectively target interventions.

Where teaching was effective, learning was purposeful with clear intentions, engaging contexts, and successful skill-building over time. Highly organised planning and purposeful assessment practices supported effective progress tracking, ensuring that pupils made meaningful progress. In these PRUs, pupils gained confidence, re-engaged with education, and responded positively to high expectations, developing resilience, and a positive self-image as learners. At Carmarthen Secondary Teaching and Learning Centre, many staff used questioning techniques skilfully to engage, challenge and support pupils.

In PRUs with a strong culture of pupil-centred practice, supported by collaboration with external agencies, staff developed a shared understanding of pupils' complex needs and used appropriate strategies successfully to support pupil progress.

Care, support and guidance and its impact on pupil well-being

In nearly all PRUs inspected, many pupils had experienced long absences from formal education, negatively affecting their attendance and engagement. However, staff developed strong, trusting relationships with pupils, making them feel safe and well-cared for. At Powys Pupil Referral Unit, the positive and respectful relationships that staff had established with pupils were a strength of the work of the PRU.

Where pastoral support plans are used effectively, rigorous processes are in place to monitor their use. The return of pupils to full-time education is most effective when they actively participate in the processes and can identify the potential barriers they face.

Nearly all PRUs had robust safeguarding practices, fostering a positive culture that improved pupils'

behaviour and attitudes. Most pupils showed significant behavioural improvements, and exclusions and physical interventions were low, reflecting the success of tailored behaviour strategies.

Staff in PRUs were well-trained in addressing pupils' social, emotional, and mental health needs. Professional learning in these areas was prioritised, recognising the growing needs across pupils. Effective PRUs had strong processes for monitoring attendance, with pupils playing a central role in improving their attendance. Despite this, overall attendance rates remained a concern. The use of part-time timetables varied, with some pupils spending too long on reduced schedules.

The most effective PRUs employed skilled additional learning needs co-ordinators (ALNCos) who identified and addressed pupils' learning needs, including an increase in pupils with autistic spectrum conditions. Effective PRUs also fostered a powerful sense of community and offered opportunities for pupils to engage in issues related to equality, diversity and inclusion. At Gorwelion Newydd, of notable strength were the arrangements for school councils, but across all the PRUs inspected there was variability in how well pupils could express their views and influence their learning.

Reintegration rates into mainstream education were low, with few pupils returning successfully, particularly older pupils. PRUs effectively support pupils and families, minimising barriers like poverty and disadvantage, and maintained strong partnerships both with parents, carers and external agencies. These partnerships included communication, social events, and bespoke training to better manage the needs of pupils, leading to more joined-up service provision for families.

Leading and improving

In the most effective PRUs, leaders had a clear, co-constructed vision with the local authority, defining the PRU's role and function within the authority. Strong communication of this vision ensured well-established processes for pupil entry and exit, with mainstream schools understanding referral processes and their supportive roles. However, this clarity varied across local authorities.

Effective PRU leaders fostered robust communication, high expectations and strong working relationships among staff, who actively contributed to improvement planning. A strong culture of high expectations for learning, well-being and attendance was established, with clear communication of these expectations to pupils, staff, parents and carers. Professional development was prioritised, aligned with PRU development plans, and effectively monitored, although the quality of learning opportunities varied.

Nearly all PRUs had robust safeguarding procedures, with regular, relevant staff training. The curriculum was inclusive, focusing on safety and informed decision-making, helping pupils understand their rights and how to stay safe. Leaders also promoted strategies to address poverty, ensuring equitable curriculum access and minimising barriers for disadvantaged pupils through effective partnerships with external agencies.

In the most effective PRUs, leaders shared responsibilities across their staff team in line with their improvement priorities and all staff clearly understood their roles. For example, in Gorwelion Newydd, the pastoral managers at each site significantly strengthened the working relationships with parents and carers to support their child.

Where practice was most effective, the management committee and local authority discharged their responsibilities securely. As a result, there was robust challenge and support, and leaders were held

to account well.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023 – 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected three PRUs.

Two were given a recommendation to improve attendance.

Two were given a recommendation to clarify the roles and responsibilities of leaders.

Two were given a recommendation to work with the local authority, one to establish a strategic vision and one to improve the quality of the learning environment.

Independent specialist colleges

7

No. of independent specialist colleges July 2023

8

No. of independent specialist colleges July 2024

2

Well-being letters issued 2022-2023 academic year

0

Well-being letters issued 2023-2024 academic year

Inspection activity undertaken this year:

- 1 core inspection
- 5 monitoring visits
- 4 initial registration visits
- 2 changes to arrangements visits

Spotlights:

- Aspris South – coffee shop
- Aspris South – partnership working for transitions

Initial registration visits

Where a provider is seeking to receive local authority funded placements it needs to make an application to the Welsh Government to be included on the list of approved independent special post-16 institutions. In considering an application for inclusion on the list, the Welsh Government requests that Estyn review the additional learning needs (ALN) provision and provide a report with a recommendation.

During 2023-2024 we provided four reports to the Welsh Government on the quality of additional learning provision proposed by applicants.

Strengths:

- In nearly all of the applications, leaders had a suitable vision for the purpose of the provision,

guided by clear values and experience supporting learners with additional learning needs.

- Nearly all applicants demonstrated a secure understanding of the importance of a learner-centred approach.

- In one setting, curriculum and assessment plans focused on learners developing beneficial skills and accrediting learning where this is appropriate.

- In one setting, leaders planned an individualised approach to meeting the needs of learners and made arrangements for learners to benefit from access to wide range of high-quality resources.

- In one setting, leaders established a therapeutic team to support the needs of learners.

Areas for improvement:
- In three providers, there was a limited curriculum offer or planned approach to assessing the progress made by learners.

- In three providers, policies did not consistently refer to current Welsh legislation and guidance.

- In three settings, there were concerns about the suitability of planned use of the learning environment.

- Two settings had no clear additional learning provision offer or clear identification of the category of need the provider aimed to support.

Summary

During 2023-2024, independent specialist colleges (otherwise known as independent specialist post-16 institutions) continued to provide education and well-being support for learners with a wide range of additional learning needs.

Independent specialist colleges educated around 170 Welsh-funded learners across Wales aged 16 years and over. The colleges provided for a diverse range of learners' needs, including autistic spectrum condition; social, emotional and behavioural difficulties; and profound and multiple learning difficulties. In five of the colleges, learners lived in residential homes attached to the college.

Nearly all placements at independent specialist colleges are currently funded by the Welsh Government or local authorities for learners from England. Due to additional learning needs reforms, funding for these placements is moving from the Welsh Government to local authorities, with new learners now being funded through local authorities.

In addition to full inspections, we carry out regular monitoring visits of independent specialist colleges. These visits consider the progress made by the colleges against specific recommendations from core inspections and previous monitoring visits.

This year, we carried out one core inspection, five monitoring visits, four initial registration visits and two changes to arrangements visits. The findings from all these visits have informed this report.

Overall, colleges provide a flexible curriculum to meet the needs of learners, but in a minority of

colleges learning activities are not consistently well matched to learner needs. Overall, staff in these colleges develop positive relationships with learners based on a strong understanding of their needs and interests. The stability of leadership is improving but self-evaluation remains an area for improvement in around half of colleges.

Teaching and learning

Most learners in independent specialist colleges made secure progress towards their individual targets.

Overall, support staff developed highly positive relationships with learners and acted as positive role models. In around half of colleges visited, the sensitive and skilled support from learning support workers was a notable strength and they allowed learners to work independently where possible. In a minority of colleges, the quality of learning support was too variable. Around half of colleges we visited had recently improved processes for tracking learners' progress and were beginning to use this information to inform planning.

Coleg Elidyr – Celebrating Welsh language and culture

Learners participating in 'Clwb Clonc' show positive attitudes towards the Welsh language and culture. They engage well with activities the college has developed to improve their Welsh language skills. Where possible, most fluent Welsh speakers naturally converse with their tutors and peers in one-to-one conversations using Welsh.

Independent specialist colleges provided a flexible curriculum, informed by learner interests and future needs. In around half of colleges visited, this offer was strengthened through links with mainstream colleges.

Overall, learners benefited from opportunities to develop practical skills in real world settings. For example, learners worked in the college coffee shop serving paying customers from the local community, cared for animals on the college farm, grew vegetables in the polytunnel and cooked meals in the college kitchen. However, in a minority of colleges, learners completed poorly designed worksheets, which did not further their skills development or learning. Around half of the colleges visited this year had made recent improvements to their learning environments.

The Aspris Hwb – coffee shop

Learners develop a range of important skills for their future lives within the college coffee shop. This is open every lunchtime to members of the public, selling meals, snacks and hot drinks. Leaders have planned this provision as a vehicle to develop a range of skills, for example social skills, basic food hygiene, cooking and money skills.

Learners complete an application to be considered for the role and then sign a contract with the college on appointment. In preparation for placements, they complete accredited qualifications in food hygiene and barista training, which could be transferred to future employment.

Care, support and guidance, and their impact on learners' well-being

All colleges visited this year had established bright and welcoming learning environments where learners felt happy and safe. There were no significant concerns about safeguarding practices in any of the colleges visited this year. Where required, all colleges responded suitably to issues raised in their well-being letters from the previous academic year.

In all of the colleges visited, staff developed a strong understanding of learners' needs and interests. They built positive and nurturing relationships with them. In a few colleges, learner attendance remained an area for improvement. Further, in a few colleges, processes to record and follow up on learner absence lacked clarity and rigour.

In all of the colleges visited, learners benefited from the support of a therapy team. Where this was most effective, learners used this support to develop important skills, such as self-regulation, social and communication skills.

Aspris College – Partnership working for positive transitions

All learners have individual transition pathways upon entry into the college, which are reviewed regularly and ensure that they are being supported to achieve their long-term goals. There is valuable information captured about learners during their assessment, which includes their personal interests, education objectives and support needed. This enables the college to develop appropriate pathway trackers for every learner.

There is a strong partnership between Aspris College and Coleg Gwent. Regular meetings take place between college leaders where important information is shared regarding all current and potential learners. Staff at the college benefit from observing sessions at Coleg Gwent to enhance and develop their own teaching practice as well as enabling them to provide accurate information about courses to their learners. As a result, many learners successfully transition from Aspris College to Coleg Gwent to continue their education.

Leadership and improvement

Leadership across the sector was more consistent this academic year than last. We noted that the majority of colleges had a stable leadership team with a clear, learner-centred vision. In a few colleges, oversight and monitoring processes lacked clarity.

In the majority of colleges visited this year, leaders had established a committed staff team. In the most effective cases, staff benefit from professional learning, which has improved important aspects of their practice, for example delivering personal and social education.

Many of the colleges visited this year benefited from the support of staff in their parent organisation. In around half of these colleges, links with the senior leadership team of the parent organisation had been strengthened. As a result, leaders benefited from appropriate support and challenge.

Around half of colleges had strengthened improvement planning processes. In around half of colleges, self-evaluation processes did not consistently focus on the impact of teaching on learning.

During the inspection cycle 2016-2024, there was no follow-up category used in this sector as we visited all colleges regularly for monitoring visits. However, from September 2024, follow-up will be introduced in this sector for those providers causing concern.

Coleg Elidyr – Enriching the curriculum

The college uses a range of high-quality additional activities to enrich the curriculum. For example, the college encourages learners to participate in local and national vocational skill-building competitions. Learners are successful in demonstrating their skills with a few learners winning gold and silver medals at national level.

Additionally, a few learners achieve gold for the Duke of Edinburgh Award and the Young Leader Award, having demonstrated leadership abilities and successfully completing a four-day expedition.

Nearly all learners participate in relevant work experience placements, and around half support learners to integrate in the local community. For example, learners have placements in National Trust estates, museums, horse stables and local businesses.

Overview of recommendations from inspections and monitoring visits

Over the six visits we completed this year that have published reports, we left a total of 11 recommendations. Nearly all colleges received recommendations following a visit or inspection.

Recommendations left in relation to teaching and learning focused on the quality of learning support and ensuring that the quality of teaching experiences was well matched to the needs of learners.

The majority of recommendations were in relation to leading and improving, in particular, focusing on improving quality assurance processes.

Local Government Education Services

Providers

22

Number of providers 2024

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: 4

Welsh-medium: 1

English-medium: 3

Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 4

Published to website: 2

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2023
Authorities causing significant
concern: 1
No. removed 2023-2024: 0
No. went into follow-up
2023-2024: 0
Total in follow-up in August 2024:
1

Local government education services include those provided or commissioned by a single local authority in addition to those provided in partnership with other local authorities. For example, during this year, some local authorities commissioned school improvement services through regional consortia. The model for providing school improvement varies across Wales and is in a period of transition due to an ongoing review of roles and responsibilities of education partners and delivery of school improvement arrangements.

In addition to our core inspections and follow-up work, local authority link inspectors carried out visits to each local authority over the course of the year to discuss their services. These discussions on specific topics contributed to our thematic reports on additional learning needs (ALN) and early years (EY) provision. During 2023-2024, we piloted enhanced local authority link inspector visits where a small team of inspectors visited a local authority to look at specific aspects of their work in more depth.

Summary

Where local authorities support schools effectively, they use a wide range of information to identify schools that require support and effectively quality assure the work of school improvement officers and partners. Leaders share a strong sense of moral purpose and ensure staff work collaboratively to achieve their priorities.

Annual Risk and Assurance Workshops

As a part of our ongoing link inspector work with local government education services, we contributed to annual risk and assurance workshops alongside Audit Wales and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). Based on this work, we wrote to each local authority, outlining the risks and assurances that we identified.

Key assurances

In many local authorities we identified that inspection outcomes were generally positive, especially in primary schools and non-maintained nursery settings. In a majority of local authorities, we highlighted assurances relating to strong leadership from senior officers and elected members. In these cases, leaders had a clear vision and well-defined roles and responsibilities, which promoted accountability across services. In a minority of local authorities, we noted strengths in how local government education services were working with other directorates within their local authority and the positive impact this was having on the quality of the provision for children and young people.

Key risks

Many local authorities expressed concern about decreasing budgets at a time where there were increasing demands on services, particularly in relation to support for children's and young people's well-being. Attendance was a key risk for local authority education services as this remained significantly below pre-pandemic levels in nearly all local authorities across Wales. We highlighted concerns around learner behaviour and the increase in fixed-term and permanent exclusions in around half of local authorities. We also identified risks related to inspection outcomes, particularly where schools had been in a statutory category for a prolonged period. The recruitment and retention of staff and leaders was also a key risk, and we highlighted this in a few authorities, particularly in Welsh-medium settings.

Joint inspections of child protection arrangements (JICPA)

During 2023-2024, we continued to work alongside Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) to undertake joint inspections of child protection arrangements (JICPA) in Powys and Cardiff local authorities. Our role is to evaluate a local authority's safeguarding and child protection arrangements from an education perspective.

In both authorities inspected, safeguarding was central to the work of leaders and officers within the education directorate. Officers provided strong and effective leadership to ensure that safeguarding was regarded as everyone's responsibility. In both authorities, school and PRU leaders were confident in the safeguarding support and guidance that they received. Staff knew pupils and their families well. There were strong working practices where providers and other agencies such as health and children's services worked effectively in partnership to plan, implement, and review provision for vulnerable children. Pupils received appropriate support within each provider with a comprehensive range of programmes used to promote health and well-being. In both authorities, officers' role in evaluating providers' safeguarding practices through the use of audits was at an early stage of development and needed strengthening.

Inspections

Between September 2023 and July 2024, we completed four inspections of local government education services. The inspection of the Vale of Glamorgan Council was conducted as a pilot for our Inspection 2024 arrangements. All four authorities were asked to produce case studies. Conwy highlighted their support for vulnerable young people through integrated service working. The Vale of Glamorgan prepared a case study on the impact of cross-directorate working on education services. We requested a case study on Ceredigion's work to develop Welsh language provision. Caerphilly's inspection report includes a case study on supporting learners with ALN in mainstream providers.

Outcomes and education services

Inspections of local authority education services include local inspection questions (LIQs), which focus on specific aspects of the provision. Local inspection questions in 2023-2024 focused on areas such as school improvement, promoting good attendance and behaviour, family engagement, the provision for additional learning needs, alleviating the impact of poverty on educational attainment, school reorganisation and provision for developing Welsh.

All our inspections considered how well local authorities support schools to improve, focusing on how they support teaching and learning and leadership. In all four inspections, we found that local authority officers had a generally strong understanding of many aspects of their schools' work. Across the four authorities inspected, officers and school improvement partners had developed strong professional relationships with leaders in schools. Officers or partners visited providers regularly to gather information and to support and challenge school leaders. In many instances, officers used local authority data systems to gather a wide range of helpful information, including information about finance, human resources, attendance and school improvement. Local authorities held regular meetings to discuss potential issues and the support individual schools needed to address these aspects of their work. In a few instances, these information gathering systems were in the early stages of development.

In all four inspections, we found that officers worked productively with colleagues in their school improvement services or partnership arrangements. In the best examples, local authorities had clear systems to quality assure the work of school improvement officers or partners to ensure consistency and quality. Overall, we found that officers and partners were working beneficially with schools to support schools' own quality assurance processes, gathering first-hand evidence through work scrutiny, listening to learners, lesson observations and learning walks. Although this work looked helpfully at the quality of teaching and provision, it did not always focus well enough on the progress made by pupils in lessons and over time.

We found that local authorities offer valuable support for leaders including professional learning opportunities such as shadowing experienced leaders, coaching and mentoring. In addition, school governors received a valuable range of guidance and professional learning to help them undertake their responsibilities.

In general, the local authorities inspected made appropriate use of their statutory powers such as issuing warning notices or providing additional governance when schools did not address urgent performance issues quickly enough. Often support around schools in any category of Estyn follow-up was sound, and in most instances led to timely improvements.

In our inspections this year, we found that school improvement services were having a positive impact overall. Inspection outcomes for schools and providers in three of the four authorities inspected were broadly in line with the national average. Notably, over time, inspection outcomes for schools in Ceredigion have been strong, with no providers requiring follow-up activity since we resumed inspection following the COVID-19 pandemic.

All four inspections considered how well the local authority supported attendance, engagement in education or behaviour. Many authorities were regularly collecting attendance and exclusion data for pupils and providing beneficial educational social work support for schools. In Conwy, we found a well-established and effective culture of cross-service working to provide support for families to help children and young people engage with education. This included valuable work with the health service and the youth and employability services within the council. In Ceredigion, the authority used technology innovatively to raise awareness of traumatic childhood experiences that can lead to challenging behaviours. They used data well to identify pupils who needed support and worked well with schools to provide a range of interventions and provision to help pupils. The Vale of Glamorgan had developed a high-quality toolkit in collaboration with schools to support them to increase their rates of attendance. In Caerphilly, we found that the authority had a clear strategy for improving attendance, which was communicated effectively with schools and other stakeholders, such as parents and carers.

Overall, in all authorities inspected, attendance rates had improved during the academic year 2023-2024, although they remained lower that they were before the pandemic, as was the case across Wales. The rates of absence, particularly persistent absence in secondary schools, remained too high. Our inspections found that often interventions to address these shortcomings had not yet had enough impact on improving attendance levels. Two local authorities were given a recommendation to improve attendance. In January 2024, we published a thematic report on improving attendance in secondary schools, which includes recommendations for local authorities.

Overall, we found that the four local authorities inspected were making good progress towards the implementation of the ALN and Education Tribunal Act (Wales) 2018, through professional learning, support and resources for schools. A common feature was the way officers had established productive and supportive relationships with parents and carers. Local authorities provided a wide range of services to support children and young people with ALN, their families, schools and settings. They used a range of models to deliver this support including through special schools and provision located within mainstream settings. Bilingual provision was a strength in both Ceredigion and Conwy. In Caerphilly, the statutory inclusion team and specialist advisory teachers provided invaluable, systematic support to schools and early years settings. Caerphilly, Conwy and the Vale of Glamorgan had helpfully summarised the authority's expectations in developing inclusive school practices for providers.

The effectiveness of quality assurance processes to evaluate strengths and areas of improvement in ALN services and provisions varied across local authorities. In the best examples, officers analysed appropriately the outcomes for pupils with ALN and other data to consider the quality of provision and identify areas for improvement.

Generally, the local authorities inspected were developing their provision well to mitigate the impact of poverty on the well-being of children and young people. However, they did not always consider well enough how they could improve the learning, progress and attainment of pupils living in low-income households.

In two local authorities, we focused on their arrangements to develop the Welsh language. In both authorities, leaders had a clear vision and strong commitment towards improving provision for the Welsh language. Officers collaborated effectively across service areas and with external partners to deliver improvements. Staff accessed valuable professional learning opportunities to improve their own Welsh language skills and there was a range of resources to help teachers and pupils develop their skills.

All authorities inspected were developing well the work of language immersion centres to support latecomers[1]Latecomers: learners (who are seven years of age or above) who do not speak Welsh but wish to attend Welsh-medium provision to Welsh-medium education. For example, Caerphilly and the Vale of Glamorgan had both recently piloted or established new immersion centres in Welsh-medium schools. In Ceredigion, leaders had acted promptly to plan strategically how they could support providers to move successfully along the language continuum. At the time of the inspection, five schools were changing language category in response to the authority's ambition to ensure that all pupils are able to receive Welsh-medium education in the early years. Read how the local authority was making particularly strong progress towards its Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) here.

Leading and improving

Across all four authorities inspected, leaders had a clear vision for education and a strong sense of moral purpose. They emphasised high aspirations for children and young people within their communities and reflected this clearly in their corporate and financial plans. Local authorities understood well the pressures facing education in terms of finance and were working closely with schools to manage these challenges. Overall, elected members scrutinised the work of education directorates suitably, posing appropriate questions to officers within meetings. In the best examples, they identified pertinent issues to discuss, provided good challenge to the executive and ensured appropriate accountability over time. In one local authority, members of the Youth Council contributed positively to scrutiny meetings and leaders took good account of their views when discussing key issues. In another local authority, senior leaders and elected members had actively encouraged stakeholders to express views on the quality of their work, including children and young people. As a result, their views had influenced the strategic direction of the authority in specific aspects of its work.

At the time of our inspections, we found that all four authorities prioritised safeguarding appropriately, including arranging and facilitating valuable training and guidance for providers.

All four authorities had demonstrated impactful leadership over time, resulting in a track record of improvement. Senior leaders in each authority set high expectations and modelled exemplary professional behaviours. Officers worked strategically to promote collaboration between schools and have developed leadership capacity well across each authority. As a result, across the authorities we inspected, leaders have developed strong professional relationships with staff in schools.

All four local authorities had suitable processes to self-evaluate, monitor and quality assure their provision. However, as in 2022-2023, improvement plans did not consistently set out clear success criteria and officers did not always consider well enough the impact actions had on improving provision and outcomes for children and young people. As a result, officers were not identifying precisely enough areas for further improvement. For example, authorities did not always evaluate the impact of professional learning for staff and schools well enough.

School re-organisation proposals

During 2023-2024, 15 local authorities consulted on a total of 27 proposals for school re-organisation. In a very few cases, local authorities put forward single consultations that proposed changes in multiple providers. Often, these proposals did not provide consultees with enough information about the planned changes. Overall, we concluded that many proposals were likely to enable local authorities to maintain or improve education provision in a particular area. However, in a few instances, proposals did not consider in sufficient detail the impact of changes on pupils' learning or the quality of teaching.

Almost a quarter of proposals consulted on changing the language medium of a provider from English to Welsh to improve provision for the Welsh language. In nearly all cases, these consultations proposed changing the language medium of foundation learning in primary schools. While all proposals considered how these changes could support local authority Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs), they did not always consider the wider impact of the proposed changes on the school.

Around a quarter of proposals consulted on the closure of a school. In a minority of these cases, the local authority included detail around how it would accommodate pupils from these schools, for example by increasing the capacity of a neighbouring school.

Overview of recommendations

In the 2023 – 2024 academic year, Estyn inspected four Local Authorities.

All four were given a recommendation to improve or refine their self-evaluation and improvement planning, with a focus for three on them on learner outcomes.

Two were given a recommendation to improve attendance in the authorities' schools, and one to support schools to reduce rates of exclusions.

Further education

Providers

There are 12 colleges providing further education courses in Wales. Many have multiple sites across a wide geographical area, spanning several local authority areas.

A majority operate under a group structure, maintaining separate college identities for individual sites or regional site clusters. A few colleges operate as wholly owned subsidiaries of higher education institutions.

Many colleges also provide work-based learning and adult learning in the community programmes. Some also deliver Welsh for adults programmes and/or provision in the justice sector. This provision is inspected under the relevant inspection arrangements for each of these sectors. Please see the relevant sector reports for further details of these other areas of provision.

Colleges also provide higher education courses, which are quality assured by the Quality Assurance Agency, QAA.

Learners at further education institutions (FEIs) in 2022-2023

105,785

All FE learners at FEIs (99,930 in 2021-2022) +5.9% change

45,275

Full-time FE learners (45,250 in 2021-2022) +0.1% change

60,510

Part-time FE learners (54,680 in 2021-2022) +10.7% change

Learners at FEIs with Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic Backgrounds: 10% (9.4%)

Learners at FEIs identified as having a 'disability and/or learning difficulty': 13% (12.3%)

Follow-up:

There are currently no further education colleges in follow-up.

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 1

The inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai in April 2024 was

Case studies

No. of case studies: 0

Colleges with case studies: 0

Engagement visits

No. of visits: 12

Link inspector engagement visits were made to all colleges

undertaken as a pilot inspection for the new Inspecting for the future (2024-2030) inspection arrangements.

The remaining colleges will be inspected under these new arrangements in the new cycle of inspections from September 2024 onwards.

Names of colleges with case studies: Not applicable

between January and June 2024.

Five colleges were also visited as part of the Junior Apprenticeship thematic review.

Summary

Where teaching and learning is effective, learners make good progress and display strong subject or vocational skills. Care, support, guidance and well-being is supported well through welcoming and inclusive environments. Leaders ensure that improvements and professional learning respond well to national, regional and local skills needs.

Learning, teaching and learning experiences

During our link engagement visits to further education (FE) colleges, we focused on their range of provision and outcomes for learners on different programmes. Most colleges deliver a mix of academic and vocational provision, with most learners studying vocational programmes. The numbers and proportion of learners studying AS and A level programmes have risen in recent years, reflecting the higher GCSE grade profiles achieved in school during the pandemic period, when these were affected by teacher assessed or teacher determined grades. Most colleges told us that this uptick in recruitment tended to be at least partly offset by lower retention rates as a greater proportion of learners than usual struggled to adapt to the demands of AS/A level programmes.

Recruitment patterns onto vocational programmes varied substantially between occupational areas and between colleges. Teachers and learners in practical subjects often benefited from professional and realistic learning environments that helped learners develop relevant skills that prepare them for employment. College leaders and staff were notably more positive about the made for Wales qualifications in health and social care and childcare and construction and building services engineering than on previous visits, with colleges welcoming recent adjustments to some qualifications in these sectors.

Across the sector, the proportion of learners achieving higher grades in graded provision, both on vocational and A level programmes, was too low. Colleges recognised the need to improve successful completion rates on underperforming programmes. In addition, the development of Welsh language skills was limited and very few learners carried out written work in Welsh.

During the core inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, we found that many learners displayed strong subject or vocational skills. In addition, learners identified with additional learning needs, including learners on independent living skills (ILS) programmes, made at least sound progress in their learning. In a few ILS sessions, some paper-based activities, such as cutting and sticking, did not meaningfully reinforce learning.

The inspection report of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai includes two 'Spotlights on' teaching and learning experiences at the college, including bilingual delivery and hybrid teaching. The 'Spotlight on bilingual delivery' highlights how in these sessions the language of learning switches seamlessly between English and Welsh. The 'Spotlight on hybrid teaching' outlines how teachers plan and deliver these sessions skilfully to make sure that all learners contribute and share their ideas through collaborative activities.

During our thematic review visits to the five colleges currently delivering junior apprenticeship programmes, we found that junior apprenticeship programmes had a positive impact on engagement, attendance and progression of 14 to 16-year-old learners.

Care, support and guidance, well-being and attitudes to learning

During our link visits to FE colleges, we focused on their work in relation to addressing poverty and disadvantage and implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET) and ALN code (2021).

Colleges offered a wide range of support to those learners affected by poverty, ALN or other identified barriers to progress. They made effective use of financial contingency funds made available to colleges by the Welsh Government to help learners who might be facing financial hardship or difficulties. Learners are also able to benefit from an Education Maintenance Allowance or a Welsh Government Learning Grant. The availability of free or subsidised transport arrangements was cited as a key issue in most colleges, and concerns were expressed about the potential impact on participation in those areas where local authorities are intending to change their policy towards free travel or where bus routes or timetables are likely to be rationalised.

Colleges worked hard to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for learners. In response to ALNET Act requirements, colleges were enhancing their provision for learners with additional learning needs, continuing to train and develop their staff and strengthening partnerships with schools, local authorities and health boards. As a result of this work, transition arrangements have improved for many learners moving from school to college. All colleges have established a local universal and additional learning provision offer and many used this well to clarify the extent and limits of their offer to local authorities, schools and parents/carers.

These arrangements were most effective when college staff were invited to attend transition panels and reviews and when key information on learners was shared with colleges in an accurate and timely manner. Where information was not shared or was delayed, this hindered transition arrangements and made it more difficult for appropriate support arrangements to be identified and put into place. Although the overall impact of the changes was positive, college leaders and staff expressed concern over the high administrative workload associated with the new ALN arrangements, especially where there are substantial differences in required documentation across several local authorities. Colleges have also begun to implement reasonable adjustments into college systems and procedures, but it is too early to evaluate the overall effectiveness of such changes. Our recently published youth engagement and progression lead worker thematic review highlighted the need to strengthen collaboration between lead workers and FE colleges to support young people either not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET.

Many colleges recognised the need to improve the overall effectiveness and impact of tutorial programmes and several colleges were piloting the use of specialist roles, such as pastoral coaches,

to help achieve greater consistency in delivery and impact. Positive behaviour management approaches were becoming more prevalent in colleges with clear focus on restorative approaches rather than relying on previous student disciplinary policies and policies.

College leaders and staff highlighted the widespread mental health challenges facing many learners, including exam anxiety. They also identified exam access arrangements as especially challenging, both logistically and in terms of resourcing, including the need for many additional rooms and extra invigilators, particularly for GCSE resit examinations.

Colleges have established strong well-being teams over recent years. However, leaders expressed concern over potential sustainability of the current staffing arrangements in light of changes to funding, including scaling back or ending of some specific project funded initiatives.

During the core inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, we found that most learners enjoyed coming to college and felt safe and secure. Most learners were happy, well-motivated and proud of their progress. Well-established learner voice arrangements, including learner surveys and learner representative mechanisms, provided useful opportunities for learners to express their views and opinions on their learning experiences. Leaders had established a strong safeguarding culture with good working relationships between teaching, well-being and safeguarding teams and outside agencies. However, we identified a need for greater consistency and effectiveness within and across colleges in ensuring attendance and punctuality of learners across campuses. There was also a need to improve the consistency of advice and guidance for learners nearing completion of their programme on their next steps.

The inspection report of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai includes two 'Spotlights on' well-being, care, support and guidance at the college. One highlights the value of the specialist roles of a college nurse and mental health practitioner. The other outlines how the college has significantly strengthened its relationship with its partner local authorities and schools to support the successful transition of learners into college.

During our thematic review visits to the five colleges currently delivering junior apprenticeship programmes, we found that learners on these programmes particularly valued the support provided to them by learning coaches as well as dedicated teaching staff. However, there was a need to ensure that responsibilities for safeguarding arrangements are always clear and that individual risk assessments are undertaken for all school pupils attending partnership provision in college, including junior apprentices.

Leadership

During our link engagement visits to FE colleges, we focused on college strategy, self-evaluation and improvement planning. We found that strategic priorities were identified clearly and used appropriately to inform strategic and operational planning. Governing boards provided appropriate challenge and support to senior leaders, including helping to shape and determine the strategic direction of the college and oversight of performance.

College leaders reported that they participated actively in regional skills partnerships and this helped to ensure overall responsiveness to national, regional and local skills needs. In many cases, college developments aligned well with national, regional and local priorities. Learner recruitment patterns varied across the sector as did the performance of individual colleges against learner number delivery

targets as set in their FE funding allocation agreements. Many colleges identified particular challenges in recruiting learners in the health and social care and hospitality and catering sectors.

Collaborative 14-16 provision arrangements were especially variable and several college leaders expressed concern over the potential impact of introduction of VCSEs on this area of their work. Overall, collaborative working between colleges, schools and local authorities is still too underdeveloped and, with insufficient national direction or local action, does not maximise opportunities to enhance local 16-19 provision or partnership provision for 14 to 16-year-old pupils, including junior apprenticeships. Any criticism in this area cannot be targeted at FE providers alone.

In most colleges, as part of self-evaluation activities, there has been a gradual return to the use of internal and external benchmarking in response to national developments in the publication of consistent measures data relating to learner outcomes and the return to usual assessment arrangements following the pandemic. College leaders identified that the lack of FE college sector specific comparator data as a subset within consistent performance measures for post-16 learning limited the scope for effective benchmarking.

Problems with the accuracy and reliability of college approaches to inputting and evaluating value added data was also limiting the ability of colleges to evaluate robustly the distance travelled by individual learners.

Most college staff benefited from a wide range of professional development activities, with designated time for this within college calendars. College leaders identified staff recruitment difficulties and sickness absence as a source of concern, for example in lower paid roles such as learning support assistants and invigilators. It continued to be challenging for colleges to recruit Welsh-speaking staff.

The inspection report of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai includes three 'Spotlights on' leadership and improving. These focus on staff and learner consultation, specialised professional development and the college's contribution to sustainable farming and local food production developments.

This year, there was an unusually high turnover in the number of senior postholders, including four of the twelve chief executive officer roles in the sector retiring. A tightening of the overall financial position across the sector was also cited by many colleges as a key factor influencing recent voluntary severance exercises within further education.

During the core inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai, we found that senior and middle leaders used information well as part of self-evaluation and monitoring arrangements. However, evaluation of teaching, assessment and standard of learners' work was not considered well enough to inform improvement planning and support sharing of good practice.

Overview of recommendations

Recommendations from the inspection of Grŵp Llandrillo Menai included strengthening the impact of teaching on the quality of learning, improving high grade attainment and addressing punctuality and attendance issues consistently.

Recommendations from thematic review of the junior apprenticeship programme included making sure that safeguarding arrangements for individual junior apprenticeship learners are clear and robust, and providing regular updates of any timetabling arrangements affecting individual learners.

The report also made a series of recommendations for schools, local authorities and the Welsh Government.

We also made a recommendation in our Youth Engagement and Progression Lead Worker Review report, focused on improving the transition support into post-16 destinations for young people at risk of being not in education, employment or training.

Work-based learning: apprenticeships

Introduction

The current Welsh Government contract for the delivery of apprenticeship programmes commenced in August 2021.

Ten training providers are commissioned contractors to deliver apprenticeships.

Six of the contracts are delivered by further education colleges and four by independent training providers. These 10 providers work with a range of other training providers using partnership and sub-contracting arrangements to deliver training for programmes at foundation apprenticeship, apprenticeship and higher apprenticeship levels.

Across most learning areas outcomes have improved, although they remain low in health, public services and care and hospitality and catering.

Of the four inspections undertaken, one provider needed follow-up with areas for improvement causing concern.

Learners

46,610

No. of apprenticeship learners 2022-2023

17,480

No. of foundation apprenticeship learners 2022-2023

20,070

No. of apprenticeship level 3 learners 2022-2023

9,060

No. of higher apprenticeship learners 2022-2023

Provision

Apprentices are employed and work in a wide range of occupations.

Apprenticeships are available at level 2 (foundation apprenticeship), level 3 (apprenticeship) and level 4 and 5 (higher apprenticeship).

Learners undertaking apprenticeships are full-time members of their employer's staff. Apprenticeship programmes generally take two to three years to complete.

Apprentices enter their training at different levels depending on the job role, their previous experience and the needs of employers. As well as developing their job-related skills in the workplace, apprentices work towards achieving a series of recognised qualifications as part of their apprenticeship frameworks.

Inspections	Case studies	Follow-up
Core inspections undertaken during 2023-2024: **4**	Number of case studies: **5**	Providers in follow-up: **1**

CAVC Apprenticeships
Gower College Swansea
ITEC Training
Cambrian Training

Summary

Most learners develop a wide range of practical and theory skills rapidly as a result of their workplace experiences and supportive teaching, training and assessment. Providers are continually improving their procedures to ensure that learners' well-being needs are identified and quickly met. In general, leaders prioritise well and work effectively with a range of partners.

Learning, teaching and learning experiences

Many learners made at least sound progress in developing a wide range of theory knowledge that helped support their job roles. In most cases, learners developed a comprehensive range of practical skills that they applied to their work roles well. Learners on higher level apprenticeships often linked projects and assignments to their workplaces, which developed their higher-level knowledge and thinking skills and resulted in new practices and procedures for their employer. Learners at all levels quickly became valued members of their employers' staff, contributing well to a wide range of activities and tasks. As a result of their apprenticeships, learners at all levels developed their verbal and written communication skills well. In the best cases, learners used these skills when interacting with their managers and peers and when speaking to customers and clients. However, in our thematic review of delivery of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeship programmes we found that the learning and teaching of literacy, numeracy and digital skills in apprenticeships was unhelpfully skewed towards preparation for external assessment.

In the majority of cases, teachers, trainers and assessors had high expectations of their learners. These staff gave high levels of personal support, encouraging and motivating learners to achieve higher standards of practical and theory work. Assessors visited and monitored learners' progress regularly, updating progress tracking records and giving beneficial feedback on written work. In the best cases, assessors negotiated appropriately challenging targets with learners for the completion of written work. Most learners knew the progress they were making and what they needed to do to complete their apprenticeships. All four of the providers inspected developed a comprehensive range

of teaching and learning resources to support learners.

In each of the four providers, teachers, trainers and assessors used questioning techniques particularly well. They used questions effectively to check learners' knowledge and understanding and to probe and extend higher level understanding and thinking.

All providers had made progress in developing a beneficial range of bilingual teaching and learning resources. Each provider had increased the capacity of their staff to deliver and assess programmes bilingually. Learners with Welsh language ability conversed confidently in Welsh with Welsh speaking staff assessors. However, the number of learners who chose to do written work or assessments in Welsh remained low.

Across the network, a few learners remained on-programme beyond their expected apprenticeship end dates, with a number of learners well beyond their expected dates. These learners are generally in the health, public services and care and hospitality and catering sectors. Although improving, these sectors generally remain the slowest to fully recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. New qualifications in the health, public services and care sectors have now bedded in, but workforce pressures in the sector remain a concern. A key issue identified in our inspections was the lack of time that employers, especially in the health and social care sector, are giving learners to undertake written work or off-the-job learning.

Care, support and guidance and well-being and attitudes to learning

Across the sector, providers and their sub-contractors had a comprehensive range of care, support and guidance procedures and protocols. The support available to learners was wide ranging with learners' well-being being a constant focus. As their first point of contact, learners built strong levels of trust with their assessors. Across the four providers, assessors made regular visits to learners who were at risk of leaving their apprenticeship or behind where they should be for the stage of the programme. As a result, many of these learners remained in training and eventually completed their programmes.

Each of the four providers had a range of support services available to learners. These were generally appropriate to the size and nature of the provider, with further education lead providers having a wide range of in-house support services available. All providers used their available expertise appropriately to support learners when a need was identified. This support was often for personal, emotional or well-being matters. When a need for specialist support was identified, providers would often secure the support of external agencies to give learners the support they need.

The four providers had further strengthened their procedures to identify and support learners' individual needs. These providers had put a clear focus on improving the support available to learners with an additional learning need. They had raised staff awareness, made links to specialist support agencies and accessed specialist teaching and learning resources and materials. In three of the providers, they employed a specialist additional learning needs co-ordinator to help make sure that learner needs are met. In three providers, support for learners with an additional learning need had been significantly strengthened with the result that individual needs were met more quickly and effectively. Overall, across the network this strengthened awareness has resulted in an increase in the number of learners identified and supported with an additional learning need. Although the topics of radicalisation and extremism were delivered during inductions and periodically through the apprenticeship programmes, teachers, trainers and assessors did not routinely engage learners in

activities to develop their understanding well enough.

All four providers had appropriate arrangements and staff training to safeguard learners. Overall, learners had an appropriate understanding of safeguarding and knew reporting procedures if a need arose. The development of learners' knowledge of radicalisation and extremism was not always undertaken thoroughly well enough. As a result, teachers, trainers and assessors did not always engage learners in activities that developed their understanding well enough.

Leadership

As well as the challenge of improving learner outcomes in health and social care and hospitality and catering, providers faced the additional challenge of a funding cut. The sector wide cut means a reduction in the number of apprentices entering employment and training.

In the four providers inspected, leaders delivered apprenticeship programmes in partnership with sub-contractors and longstanding local employers. Strategic planning carefully considered local, regional and national priorities. In each of the providers, there was regular communication between managers and staff at all levels. In the four providers, leaders shared a comprehensive range of information with their sub-contractors about the delivery of their apprenticeship contracts, for example on Welsh Government communications, learner progress and outcomes data and safeguarding.

All providers had sound arrangements to self-evaluate the quality of their provision. Quality improvement documents often identified helpful targets for improvement in key areas but plans for improvement were not always clear and precise enough to support effective monitoring or measure their impact well enough. Across the providers inspected, self-evaluation was not always linked well enough to quality improvement processes with clear actions for improvement. This was especially the case in relation to improving learner outcomes. An emerging challenge for providers is to make sure that employers fully supported their learners in all aspects of their apprenticeships. In these cases, employers did not give learners the necessary time away from the workplace to attend training sessions or complete written assessments. Each of the four providers had beneficial professional learning activities available to staff and, in the best cases, these were shared with sub-contractors.

Overview of recommendations from inspections

In In the four inspections undertaken, each provider was left with a recommendation to improve the rates at which learners achieve their apprenticeships. Each provider also had a recommendation to improve the quality of teaching and learning. This included improving, target setting and planning, learners' literacy and numeracy skills and teachers' and assessors' practice. Each provider had recommendations to improve self-evaluation and improvement planning. Two providers had a recommendation to make sure all employers meet their obligations to fully support the training of their apprentices.

Case studies

Cardiff and Vale College Apprenticeships

Care, guidance and support

Cardiff and Vale College Apprenticeships support teams offer a wide range of services for learners. There are strong arrangements in place to identify learners' support needs and to monitor support

appropriately in order to develop learners and support their progress. Clear processes were devised for apprentices who presented with an individual development plan, those who declared an additional learning need at the start of their programme and those who staff suspected had an ALN.

Teaching and learning experiences

Cardiff and Vale College Apprenticeships works in a region with the most diverse landscape in Wales in terms of economic prosperity and the diversity of the communities within it. The college recognises the key challenge to tackle poverty across the region and support prosperous communities. It positions its approach around strategic core themes, which include providing a responsive and impactful apprenticeship delivery, maximising opportunities for young people to engage with apprenticeships, increasing engagement beyond level 2 and a commitment to priority sector areas. In order to meet these aims, it ensured that provision was planned at a strategic level, in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders.

Gower College Swansea

Employer boards

In 2017, Gower College Swansea created a strategy to enhance collaboration with employers. To stay ahead of constantly evolving skills needs and to ensure that employer demands were understood, the college created eight employer boards resulting in the co-creation of provision.

Support for learners with an additional learning need

Gower College Swansea reviewed and improved their approach to identifying and supporting apprentices with disabilities and those presenting with additional learning needs, promoting the extensive support available to learners with disabilities, sensory impairment, additional learning needs (ALN) and work/life limiting health conditions. Many individuals have faced learning and work challenges without formal diagnosis or support until embarking on their apprenticeships.

Cambrian Training

Industry engagement and influence

Senior leaders are particularly active in the food, drink and hospitality sectors. They attend employer representative group meetings and have long-standing relationships with a wide range of employers across Wales. They work with employers and representative bodies to address current and future skills gaps and training needs. As a result, the provider develops its provision to meet these skills needs for the food, drink and hospitality sector across Wales.

Youth Work

Youth work providers

We piloted our new arrangements in two providers, one national voluntary sector provider and a local authority provider.

Numbers of young people

There were 81,293 registered members of statutory youth work sector provision in 2023-2024. However, there are many thousands more young people who take part in activities run by the voluntary sector.

Provision

Youth work is delivered in a wide range of settings and places across Wales, driven by the needs and interests of young people and the skills of youth workers. Estyn inspects youth work happening in publicly funded settings run by the voluntary sector and local authorities.

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 2 pilot core inspections were held during 2023-2024.

One local authority: Inspection report The Vale of Glamorgan Youth Service 2024 (gov.wales)

One national voluntary body: Inspection report The Boys and Girls Clubs of Wales 2024 (gov.wales)

Case studies

No. of case studies: 0

Follow-up

None in follow-up

Summary

Youth work providers offer educational and pastoral support to a broad range of young people. Provision varies greatly, from targeted sessions in formal education settings to community youth clubs and from street-based work where young people gather to take part in sports to activity-based clubs. The common thread is that all these activities are young person centred, with the needs and views of young people central to the provision offer and planning.

Provision and learning

In the sessions visited, youth workers assisted and guided young people in targeted and open sessions to become more resilient and gain the skills, knowledge and attitudes to support their own personal and educational development. Young people contributed positively to activities and benefited from diverse opportunities, such as crafts and sporting activities, to develop their personal and creative potential while learning to express themselves.

Gloves in the gym project

'It's not just for the boys which is good'

Gloves in the gym is a physical activity-based project with the aims of increasing health and well-being through engaging in positive sporting activities, challenging negative behaviours and building confidence and self-esteem, along with raising awareness of being an active member of their community. The project runs seven bespoke sessions a week across various schools and community settings in the Vale of Glamorgan. The team of staff deliver referral-based sessions in mainstream schools, through the medium of Welsh and English, to the Resource Base at Whitmore for young people with additional learning needs, and a Wellbeing After-School Club and community-based open access sessions for positive leisure time in the evenings. In addition to this, the Gloves in the Gym project delivers activities at all community events run by the Vale Youth Service, along with offering targeted support within the education directorate whether these are one-to-one or group-based sessions.

Many young people learnt the importance of positive participation within society. Through valuable political activities, such as youth fora, they developed as active and conscientious citizens. For example, the 'Raise your Voice' project supported marginalised young people well to build their confidence and co-develop a website with information about how young people can get involved in democratic processes.

Across the providers inspected, young people improved their understanding of the importance of mutual respect and tolerance and developed the social skills to interact successfully with others.

New Dragons

The New Dragons speech and language club provides a safe and appropriate environment for young people with a range of speech, language and communication needs, autistic spectrum disorder or other additional learning needs. Once a week, young people access a range of carefully planned and appropriately stimulating activities, including a range of expressive arts and crafts and games opportunities. Young people access social interaction and learning that they may find challenging elsewhere. As a result, they develop their communication skills and social confidence as well as forming friendships.

In a number of targeted projects visited, many young people became more confident in expressing their views and taking greater responsibility for their own personal choices. In the Her Voice Wales project, young women developed as champions for equality and advocates for girls in their community. The project developed helpful guidance and resources to promote young women's awareness of issues that may impact on their safety and well-being.

Youth workers in both providers were dedicated and enthusiastic and provided valuable support for a wide demographic of young people, including those who were vulnerable and required extra support. Staff engaged young people well in activities that were beneficial to their personal and educational development and well-being. This helped the young people to develop the interpersonal skills that enabled them to enjoy and benefit from their interactions with peers and adults. The quality and range of provision were good in both providers. However, overall, access to Welsh-medium provision was limited and Welsh speaking staff lacked confidence or strategic direction from leaders and managers in how best to use their Welsh language skills with young people.

Everyone Loves the Bus

The V-Pod is the Vale of Glamorgan's mobile provision and is a positive and engaging experience for young people, which allows youth workers to adapt their approach based on immediate needs and interests of the community they are visiting. The bus helps to maintain the youth service's profile across the local authority. Staff are adept at identifying and negotiating the best locations to park and at using the space on board to maximum effect. The bus carries a variety of equipment including gazebos for pop-up events, sports, arts and music equipment. The provision offers flexibility in reaching young people who may not have access to a youth club or service due to geographical, social, or economic barriers. The mobile unit ensures inclusivity and enables isolated young people to access activities. For example, one young person receiving palliative care is enabled to attend sessions with the support of her carer and the youth workers, addressing the barrier presented to participation.

Leadership and improvement

Leaders and managers in both providers ensured that young people were central to their strategic planning. They had a clear vision of how to support young people to become active members of society who could participate constructively in their communities. Overall, leaders provided valuable and relevant continuous professional development to workers, which in turn helped to attract and retain a professionally qualified workforce. However, in one provider, information on the quality of direct provision and staff development needs was not gathered systematically enough to inform priorities, training and support.

Follow up

No providers required follow up.

Overview of recommendations from inspections

- Both providers received recommendations regarding the need to strategically develop Welsh-medium and bilingual youth work provision.

- One provider received a recommendation to ensure more systematic use of information between the central provider and affiliated clubs to better support arising issues and training needs.

Adult Learning in the Community

Partnerships

Adult learning in the community (ALC) is delivered by 13 non-statutory partnerships and by Adult Learning Wales.

Membership of each partnership differs from area to area, but most include provision offered by the local authority, further education colleges, including Adult Learning Wales, and voluntary or community organisations.

Adult learning in the community normally takes place at venues such as libraries, community learning centres or schools. While most courses are delivered in person, nearly all partnerships deliver some of their provision in an online or blended way.

The Welsh Government funds partnerships through the annual Adult Community Learning Grant to deliver courses in literacy, numeracy, digital skills, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and other courses that help learners to apply and develop these skills.

Partnerships have been strongly involved with their local authorities' and further education colleges' bids for the UK government-funded adult numeracy initiative, Multiply. This funding is intended to develop a range of new provision to engage learners and develop numeracy skills.

Learners at adult learning in the community partnerships

The most recent Welsh Government data shows that, in 2022-2023, the number of unique adult learners engaged with this provision increased by 53% compared with the previous year, to 16,005. The increases seen since the low point in 2020-2021 have partially reversed a longer-term decreasing trend. Lower numbers in recent years may be due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Follow up

During 2023-2024, one adult learning in the community partnership had made sufficient progress to no longer need follow-up activity from Estyn. Two partnerships inspected during 2023-2024 required follow-up.

Core inspections

No. of inspections: 6

Case studies

No. of case studies requested: 4

Published to website: 2

Engagement visits

Link inspectors conducted seven in-person or online visits with

Carmarthenshire
Greater Gwent
Ceredigion
Rhondda Cynon Taf
Powys-Neath Port Talbot
Conwy & Denbighshire

Providers with case studies:
Carmarthenshire
Greater Gwent
Rhondda Cynon Taf
Conwy & Denbighshire

those partnerships that were not inspected over the course of the year.

For the purposes of our inspection activity, we recognise the following 13 partnerships, and the designated further education institution for adult learning in the community, Adult Learning Wales:

Partnership	Local authority
Adult Learning Wales	n/a
Bridgend	Bridgend
Cardiff & Vale	Cardiff
Cardiff & Vale	Vale of Glamorgan
Carmarthenshire	Carmarthenshire
Ceredigion	Ceredigion
Conwy & Denbighshire	Conwy
Conwy & Denbighshire	Denbighshire
Greater Gwent	Blaenau Gwent
Greater Gwent	Caerphilly
Greater Gwent	Monmouthshire
Greater Gwent	Newport
Greater Gwent	Torfaen
Gwynedd and Môn	Gwynedd
Gwynedd and Môn	Anglesey
Merthyr Tydfil	Merthyr Tydfil
NE Wales ALC Partnership	Flintshire
NE Wales ALC Partnership	Wrexham
Powys-NPT ALC Partnership	Neath Port Talbot

Partnership	Local authority
Powys-NPT ALC Partnership	Powys
Pembrokeshire	Pembrokeshire
Rhondda Cynon Taff	Rhondda Cynon Taff
Swansea	Swansea

Summary

Most learners make sound progress in their lessons and have positive relationships with their tutors, but partnerships do not evaluate how well learners progress in the longer term well enough or offer enough provision through the medium of Welsh. Learners enjoy their learning and value the opportunity for a second chance at learning and the benefits to their wellbeing and mental health that it brings. There are significant concerns about the sector, in relation to partnership working, leadership capacity and continuity. A few providers have reduced or ceased provision, citing budget constraints. While providers have worked well to use Multiply funding to offer new numeracy provision, partnerships have faced challenges in recruiting learners and tutors, and in planning for a return to business as normal when the Multiply funding window closes.

Teaching and learning

Adult learning in the community sessions are normally taught in small classes, typically fewer than ten learners. The professional relationships between tutors and their learners were strong, and tutors knew their learners well. In most cases, tutors adapted their teaching to meet the needs of individual learners effectively and provide one-to one support for learners as they worked. Frequently, tutors tailored the level and content of their delivery well to suit the needs, interests and preferences of learners.

Adults returning to learning in community classes usually have complex profiles of strengths and weaknesses in their literacy, numeracy and digital skills. On the whole, tutors were effective at identifying learners' individual strengths and weaknesses in these skills, using digital tools such as the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) or through their professional experience. Most learners understood what they needed to do to improve, through the use of an individual learning plan, or through feedback from their tutors.

Most learners made sound progress in their sessions. Over a longer period, such as a term, most learners made suitable progress in developing their skills against their starting points and in achieving their qualification aims. However, partnerships did not evaluate how learners progress through their provision well enough. They did not use information from management information systems (MIS) well enough to track and monitor learners' longer-term progress, for example to evaluate how learners progress onto different courses or levels of study within the partnership, or to track their destinations into further learning, jobs or both.

In most partnerships inspected during 2023-2024, inspectors found a suitable balance between non-accredited and accredited programmes, giving learners opportunities to attain relevant qualifications.

However, in a few partnerships, and in a few programme areas, such as English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), learners did not have suitable accredited options.

Overall, even in areas where Welsh is widely spoken in the local population, partnerships offered little or no provision through the medium of Welsh, meaning that Welsh speaking learners or communities did not have the opportunity to benefit from adult community learning programmes in Welsh. Across our inspections during 2023-2024, inspectors found that a few teachers used Welsh as a language of learning, for example through using bilingual terminology or through using simple Welsh greetings and phrases. A few partnerships were developing innovative approaches, for example at Rhondda Cynon Taf, where the partnership worked collaboratively with organisations like Menter Iaith to offer adult learning in the community provision bilingually or through the medium of Welsh.

Care, support and guidance, well-being and attitudes to learning

The atmosphere in adult learning in the community classrooms was nearly always productive and positive. Learners valued the opportunity to return to learning, enjoyed their experience and appreciated the work of their tutors. Learners were supportive of each other, frequently offering their peers support and encouragement. Many learners also valued the opportunity for friendship and the social interaction that learning offers, and frequently described the positive effect that learning and attending their sessions had on their mental health and well-being. Where partnership working was less strong, opportunities to give cross-provider support to learners with additional learning needs were less well developed and less effective.

Partnership providers created safe and caring environments that supported the educational and personal development of learners. They promoted equality and diversity and successfully highlighted the importance of these in Welsh society.

Leadership

In both our inspections and link inspector visits, we found a few partnerships where reorganisation, changes in roles or failure to replace key personnel were having a negative impact on the partnership's work and provision for learners.

One local authority decided to cease its ALC partnership provision entirely and another provider reduced the extent of its in-person provision across its geographical range. In both cases, providers cited budget constraints as a significant factor in their decisions. These are concerning developments.

The quality of partnership working and leadership continued to be an area of focus and considerable concern. In the six inspections we carried out during 2023-2024, we left recommendations to improve elements of partnership working at three partnerships. Where we identified areas for improvement in partnership working, these typically included the following:

- There was a lack of clarity or formal agreement about each partner's roles and responsibilities
- There was a lack of strategic vision, leadership and direction for the partnership
- Planning to offer learners clear progression routes into, within and beyond the partnership was ineffective
- Provision planning was not coherent, meaning that learners or potential learners in some geographical areas of the partnership did not have convenient access to in-person provision
- Self-evaluation and quality improvement processes did not take a partnership overview, meaning

that partners did not have a clear understanding of the overall partnership's strengths and areas for improvement

- Partners missed opportunities to share resources, such as through collaborative or joint professional learning activities or colocation of provision
- Partnership marketing and promotional materials, or websites, did not allow learners or potential learners to see straightforwardly the full range of the partnership's provision
- Partnerships were not working closely enough with the full range of local providers, community or third sector groups to expand their Welsh-medium or bilingual provision

We also identified strong aspects of partnership working, for example at the Powys-Neath Port Talbot partnership, where we spotlighted effective use of service level agreements that made clear the roles and responsibilities of each partner.

Spotlight on service level agreements from Powys and NPT ALC partnership report

The partnership has service level agreements (SLAs), which define the arrangements between NPTC Group of Colleges and each of its two local authority partners – Neath Port Talbot and Powys. Each SLA sets out the responsibilities of both parties and includes arrangements for provision offer, expected outcomes, quality assurance and renumeration. These formal agreements ensure that there is clarity between partners and continuity between organisations in the event that key personnel change roles or retire.

Across the sector, we saw some improvement in the way partnerships use their websites to inform learners and potential learners about their provision. A few partnerships had redesigned their websites enabling users to search and browse courses offered by all providers in the partnership. Others had improved the visibility of links to their partners' websites so that users can navigate more straightforwardly between them to search for courses.

The funding available through the UK Government's Multiply initiative was very large in comparison to the annual Adult Community Learning Grant. The funding also had a short time frame and strict eligibility criteria for the type of provision that could be funded. Partnerships worked well to co-ordinate the provision they offer through Multiply, but frequently faced challenges in recruiting learners and tutors within the short timescales available, and in planning how best to secure an effective transition back to 'business as normal' when the funding window closes.

Overview of recommendations

The recommendations from the six inspections fall into these broad categories:
- Strategic leadership and planning – there were three recommendations related to improving partnership working and strategic leadership
- Self-evaluation and quality improvement – three recommendations related to partnership-wide approaches to self-evaluation, including evaluating learners' progression
- Welsh-medium provision – three recommendations related to improving or increasing Welsh-

medium of bilingual provision

- Quality and retention – two recommendations identified the need to improve course quality or retention rate
- Provision – there was one recommendation to improve the access to provision across the full geographical range of the partnership
- Additional learning needs – one recommendation was to improve support and monitoring for learners with additional learning needs
- Promotion and marketing – one recommendation was to ensure that potential and existing learners can easily access an overview of the full partnership's course offer and progression pathways

References

Welsh Government (2023) *Post-16 local authority: adult learning funding allocations*.

Welsh for Adults

Providers

11

Dysgu Cymraeg/Learn Welsh providers under the National Centre for Learning Welsh, which funds and quality assures their work

Learners

16,905

Individual learners during 2022-2023

15,260

Individual learners during 2021-2022

14,965

During 2020-2021

The number of learners has risen by 33% since the beginning of the inspection cycle (12,680 individual learners in 2017-2018).

Provision

All providers offer a range of in-person, online and distance learning.

Inspections

Two core inspections of Learner Welsh providers undertaken during 2023-2024:

- Learn Welsh Nant Gwrtheyrn, which specialises in residential courses
- Learn Welsh Pembrokeshire

In the Welsh for Adults sector, we continued to give summative grades for inspections of Learn Welsh providers.

We also inspected the National Centre for Learning Welsh for the second time in this inspection cycle.

Inspection report The National Centre for Learning Welsh 2024 (gov.wales)

Learn Welsh Nant Gwrtheyrn

[Using the Welsh language: purposeful and unique extra-curricular activities that support learners to speak Welsh increasingly spontaneously on the Nant site and in the local community | Estyn (gov.wales)](#)

[Effective immersion: supporting learners to make swift progress when supporting them to learn about and appreciate Welsh history and culture. | Estyn (gov.wales)](#)

The National Centre for Learning Welsh

[Expanding participation and ensuring that everyone in Wales has an opportunity to learn the language, whatever their background – Estyn](#)

[How the Learn Welsh sector influences pedagogy and language acquisition in other sections in Wales and beyond – Estyn](#)

Follow-up

Follow-up in the sector is different from almost all other sectors as there is a national body, which is responsible for quality assurance in the sector. Progress against all recommendations to individual Learn Welsh providers during core inspections is discussed with the National Centre for Learning Welsh and evaluated as part of their inspection.

Introduction

The number of learners in the Welsh for Adults has increased by 33% since the first nationally [published figures](#) for the sector in 2017-2018. In addition, the sector now offers free courses to young people between the ages of 16-25, increasing the number of learners in this category by a further 9% during 2022-2023. The National Centre for Learning Welsh has worked purposefully to increase the sector's offer to learners who wish to learn for work-related purposes as well as specific groups such as refugees and asylum seekers, with materials now available to speakers of Cantonese, Syrian Arabic, Pashto, Farsi and Ukrainian.

Summary

Teaching in the sector focusses on ensuring that learning experiences are inclusive, positive and effective in producing active Welsh speakers. Care, support and guidance was excellent in both Learn Welsh providers inspected this year. The support and guidance provided contribute positively to learners' well-being and enjoyment of their courses. The National Centre for Learning Welsh, which funds and quality ensures the work of Learn Welsh providers, supports this work usefully through appropriate scrutiny and professional development opportunities for staff. The National Centre for Learning Welsh provides highly effective leadership to the sector, which is reflected in the shared vision and clear focus of Learn Welsh providers. Together, they offer a high quality service that focuses on producing active Welsh speakers, in accordance with Welsh Government policies.

Learning, teaching and learning experiences

Learners in all types of provision continued to display high levels of motivation and enthusiasm during their lessons. Many learners made strong progress in developing their language skills, speaking with increasing spontaneity and confidence with each other and their tutors. Tutors knew their learners well and encouraged them to use their language skills in their communities and workplaces. As a result, many learners spoke Welsh outside formal sessions, which increased their confidence and improved their ability to feel part of Welsh-speaking networks and communities. Learners made the strongest progress when immersed fully in the language on intensive courses. Nearly all learners who attended residential courses made rapid progress. This was due to a combination of tutors' skilful planning and teaching, and the unique immersive environment.

The two Learn Welsh providers inspected offered a wide range of courses, from entry to proficiency level, in-person, and online. One provider operated effectively to increase the numbers of Welsh speakers within its host local authority by employing an officer to work proactively with the local authority's staff.

The National Centre for Learning Welsh played a valuable role in developing the generally high quality of teaching and learning throughout Learn Welsh providers. A few tutors in one provider inspected did not question learners effectively enough nor allow them enough time to digest information and begin to create language independently. However, overall, most tutors across both providers had high expectations of their learners and made very effective use of the target language to improve learners' speaking and listening skills. They probed and intervened purposefully to extend learners' ability to use Welsh naturally and improve their understanding of different grammatical features of the language.

Care, support and guidance and well-being and attitudes to learning

The standard of care, support and guidance was excellent in both providers inspected. Providers' positive approach to creating a caring and inclusive environment for all learners helps learners to feel safe, and eager to engage with their learning effectively.

Providers and tutors responded well to individuals' educational and pastoral needs to assist them in achieving their personal goals. Many learners played an active part in their learning communities and most felt that providers responded appropriately to their views and concerns.

Tutors and leaders responsible for courses in the residential provider ensured that learners received exemplary levels of pastoral and educational care both prior to and during their courses. This was beneficial to both their well-being and levels of attainment.

Learners in both providers generally received very high levels of care and support. Consequently, many learners returned to subsequent courses and improved their levels of fluency.

Leadership

Both Learn Welsh providers inspected focused clearly on their mission to increase the numbers of active Welsh speakers.

Leaders in one provider were highly effective in developing their provision innovatively to offer the

best possible environment in which learners could make effective progress and appreciate Welsh as a living language.

Leaders in the other Learn Welsh provider were effective in developing the provision offer within the constraints of a small provider. The provider evaluated data appropriately and this contributed to the provider's strong and consistent performance against its recruitment targets and the levels of learners' completion and progression. However, managers did not systematically track the progress of groups of learners in sufficient detail to purposefully refine and adapt provision. In addition, they did not always identify areas for improvement in aspects of their work, such as teaching and learning, well enough.

The National Centre for Learning Welsh provided very effective leadership to the sector and was proactive in promoting increased levels of participation from all groups in society. The national fee structure was keeping course costs for learners as low as possible, and most learners either received reductions in the course fees or received courses for free.

The National Centre had developed the sector from being a provider of courses for Welsh learners only to becoming an influential voice and facilitator to increase the use of the Welsh language and the number of active fluent Welsh speakers.

Overview of recommendations from inspections

Two Learn Welsh providers were inspected in 2023-2024, as well as the National Centre for Learning Welsh

In the provider that specialises in residential provision and language immersion, the recommendations focused on extending the professional learning offer to include regular opportunities for tutors to observe effective practice. In addition, there was a recommendation to establish procedures with the National Centre for Learning Welsh to share information nationally about the progress and achievement of learners who have followed the provider's intensive courses, to support them to learn Welsh seamlessly irrespective of provider.

In the other Learn Welsh provider inspected, three recommendations reflected the key areas for improvement.

- Strengthen strategic planning processes to forward plan provision purposefully
- Refine processes for evaluating teaching and learning to prioritise strengths and areas for improvement
- Strengthen processes for monitoring and tracking the process of groups of learners over time in order to meet the needs of learners increasingly effectively

The National Centre for Learning Welsh received two recommendations to:

- Continue to expand and share the expertise of the Learn Welsh sector regarding second language pedagogy and acquisition to other relevant sectors to support the Welsh Government's aim of reaching a million Welsh speakers by 2050
- Continue to innovate through facilitating linguistic planning activities that integrate new and unwilling speakers in initiatives that normalise the use of Welsh in the community and in the workplace

Justice

Adult Prisons and Young Offender Institutions (YOI)

Number: 5 adult prisons and 1 YOI

Provision

All prisons and YOIs in Wales are for adult or juvenile male offenders. At many prisons in Wales, education is delivered by staff directly employed by the prison itself. Novus Cambria delivers education and training provision at HMP Berwyn, while Novus Gower provides these services at HMP Parc.

Inspections

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons leads inspections of prisons and young offender institutes across England and Wales. Estyn worked with partners this year to inspect HMYOI Parc and HMP Cardiff. HMI Prisons' published inspection reports can be found here: His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons

Youth Justice Services (YJS)

Number: 17

Provision

Youth justice services work with young people who get into trouble with the law and try to support them in staying away from crime. Education, training and employment support is one aspect of the work of YJS provided in partnership with other services.

Inspections

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation oversees inspections of youth justice services (YJS) in England and Wales. Most inspections are single inspections conducted by HMI Probation. HMI Probation carried out six single inspections of the YJS of Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Flintshire and Newport. Where the size of the service and other factors warrant, Estyn participates in joint inspections of YJS in Wales. This year, there was one joint inspection in Wales of the combined YJS of Conwy and Denbighshire. HMI Probation's published inspection reports can be found here: His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation

Secure Children's Homes

Number: 1

Provision

Secure children's homes provide secure placements for young people aged between 10 and 17 and include full residential care, educational facilities and healthcare provision.

Inspections

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) leads inspections of the secure children's home in Wales. Estyn teams carried out one joint inspection of a secure children's home this year with CIW.

Summary

These summary findings are taken from the findings of Estyn inspectors during the inspections of HMYOI Parc, HMP Cardiff and the joint inspection of Conwy and Denbighshire YJS. The summary also reflects national issues from the annual report for 2023-2024 of His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons.

Where teaching is strong, many learners develop valuable skills and make secure progress. However, the quality of teaching is inconsistent across the sector. Where it is weak, it does not meet learners' needs or contribute well enough to their prospects of success on release. Rates of attendance have improved since the pandemic. However, the support for learners with additional learning needs to overcome barriers to learning is inconsistent. Leaders work well together to ensure that most learners have sufficient time out of cell to pursue a range of activities. However, where the curriculum offer is weak, there are insufficient opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful and appropriate learning or training.

Teaching and learning

Where teaching was well planned, and teachers used effective teaching approaches, many learners were engaged in their learning, made strong progress towards qualification aims and developed worthwhile skills and knowledge. At HMP Cardiff, a few learners demonstrated advanced skills in art and construction. Literacy and numeracy skills were often integrated meaningfully and effectively in cross-curricular areas. This supported prisoners to develop their writing and basic numeracy skills well in context. Overall, the majority of prisoners and children did not develop their digital skills well enough.

Staff shortages and weaknesses in teaching practice negatively impacted learners' progress in both establishments, although these issues were significantly more pronounced at Parc YOI. Here, shortcomings in the provision for and teaching of literacy and numeracy led to a minority of learners not making sufficient or timely progress in developing these critical skills. This echoed the picture in YOIs nationally as reported by HMCI of Prisons, who found that overall, "the standard of teaching was not good enough in all YOIs, particularly in English and maths" (HMIP, 2024, p. 46). In Parc YOI, there was too much variability in learners' progress across the curriculum and the curriculum offer did not provide learners with enough access to meaningful education pathways that secured progression and supported their aspirations.

The education, training and employment (ETE) manager and case workers at the Conwy &

Denbighshire YJS worked well with partners to share information and provide support to secure children's engagement in education. However, part-time timetables were over-used, and children did not receive an appropriate range of good quality, personalised services. There were no systematic, planned education pathways or strategy for addressing children's literacy and numeracy weaknesses to support successful progress in education, training and employment.

Care, support and guidance and their impact on learners' well-being

Overall, learners had good attendance at education and skills sessions at the YOI and the adult prison. At HMP Cardiff, most learners worked productively independently and with their peers and showed positive behaviour and engagement during sessions.

Both establishments supported prisoners to recognise and reduce reoffending behaviours. At Cardiff, the men discussed the challenges of addiction and building positive relationship habits in dedicated sessions. Some prisoners at Cardiff developed resilience well when persevering with complex tasks, and their confidence and pro-social behaviours improved when they took on positions of responsibility as peer mentors. At Parc, the wide range of enrichment activities had a significantly beneficial impact on most learners' well-being and engagement.

There was too much variation in how well learners' individual needs were identified, communicated to staff and acted on to address barriers to learning. At Cardiff, learners' needs were generally identified appropriately, and some staff used this information well to support these learners in making good progress. At Parc, information on learners' additional learning needs was not shared well enough with staff, and the monitoring of the progress of these learners was underdeveloped.

At Cardiff, learners received helpful advice and guidance on courses, training and qualification options, and they were supported in a wide range of ways to be successful on release.

Conwy and Denbighshire's YJS provided good opportunities for children to establish their Welsh identity and culture in service delivery. However, there were long waiting lists for support with neurodiversity. YJS children's additional learning needs were not sufficiently assessed or known. There was a lack of capacity and access to specialist support.

Leadership and improvement

Leaders and staff at the YOI and the adult male prison visited in the academic year 2023-2024 worked hard to provide sufficient activity spaces despite staffing or resourcing issues. This ensured that most prisoners and children had an appropriate amount of time out of their cells. This was better than the picture across the UK overall.

Although there were some gaps in provision, leaders at HMP Cardiff had successfully developed a curriculum that met many prisoners' educational, employability and personal development needs. At Parc, education leaders had little influence on learning pathways, which were primarily constructed to manage behaviour. This was similar to the picture in YOIs nationally, where an overreliance on keeping children apart impacted the meaningfulness of curriculum arrangements. Weaknesses in the new partnership between the prison and the new education provider further compounded the issue, and any potential benefits of working in partnership with a local college had not translated into the curriculum offer, staffing arrangements or the quality of teaching at the time of the visit.

Both prisons had developed reading strategies, but these had not been implemented at the time of the visits, so inspectors could not comment on their impact. There were weaknesses in the provision for the Welsh language for Welsh speakers and learners.

Leaders and staff benefited from a range of professional development networks regionally and nationally to share practice and enhance provision. Leaders used the findings from self-evaluation activities to identify broad strengths and areas for development. This information informed the curriculum offer and staff professional learning needs well at Cardiff and helped leaders at Parc to identify key priorities for improvement suitably.

While data was used well to monitor performance against key performance indicators or track attendance, it was not used as well to identify precise areas for development to inform improvement planning.

A new leadership team within Conwy & Denbighshire's YJS had improved communication within the service and strengthened the management board's understanding of its cohort and responsibilities. However, the board was not providing enough strategic direction or challenge to the work of the service, nor were members of the board using their position well enough to secure timely and well-coordinated support from all partners for children overseen by the YJS. Similar to the findings in prisons, the management board did not have a clear enough understanding of its cohort and was not analysing the information and data available to it well enough to establish its needs.

Overall, developing the precision of self-evaluation approaches remains a priority for the sector's work.

Overview of recommendations

There were common themes in the recommendations identified during the inspections of education, skills and work activities at HMYOI Parc and HMP Cardiff, although the weight of the areas for improvement differed across the two establishments:

- Improve the precision of self-evaluation processes to inform improvement actions better
- Improve the quality of teaching
- Improve the curriculum offer to meet learners' needs

At Parc, the recommendation on leadership focused on strengthening partnership arrangements. At Cardiff, the priority was to improve reporting and accountability arrangements between middle and senior leaders.

References

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (2024) *Annual Report 2023-24*. UK: HMIP. [Online]. Available from: HM Chief Inspector of Prisons annual report: 2023 to 2024 – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) (Accessed 4th October 2024)

A review of the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales

In May 2024, we published our thematic report on the junior apprenticeship programme in Wales. The report was written in response to a request from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in Estyn's annual remit letter 2023 to 2024 as updated in October 2023.

Our report draws on findings from in person visits to all five further education colleges delivering junior apprenticeship programmes at that time. We held focus group learner workshops with groups of Year 10, Year 11 and former junior apprenticeship learners and spoke with senior leaders and staff of the colleges, schools and local authorities involved. We conducted learning walks at the colleges to visit junior apprenticeship classes and the facilities they use. We also looked at a range of information provided by the colleges in relation to their junior apprenticeship programmes.

Our recommendations

Schools should:

1. Provide comprehensive and timely impartial advice and guidance to all pupils and their parents or carers about all 14-16 curriculum options, including junior apprenticeships where these are available
2. Work collaboratively with colleges and local authorities to evaluate opportunities for developing or extending junior apprenticeship programmes in order to broaden their curriculum offer in the best interests of learners

Further education colleges should:

1. Work closely with schools to make sure that responsibilities for safeguarding arrangements are clear and that individual risk assessments are undertaken for all junior apprenticeship learners
2. Share and agree timetable arrangements with partner schools and local authorities for all junior apprenticeship learners and keep them updated of any changes affecting individual learners, such as pastoral plan arrangements

Local authorities should:

1. Clarify and communicate future funding arrangements for junior apprenticeships with schools and colleges
2. Work collaboratively with all their local schools and colleges to evaluate the potential for introducing or extending junior apprenticeship provision to enhance suitable learning opportunities for Year 10 and 11 pupils struggling to engage with existing mainstream provision in schools

The Welsh Government should:

1. In light of the establishment of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER),

clarify and publish details of ongoing responsibility and continuing arrangements for junior apprenticeships and their funding

2. Review specific curriculum requirements for junior apprenticeship programmes as set out in the Welsh Government programmes directory, particularly in relation to English, mathematics and numeracy qualifications to ensure qualification aims match needs and abilities of individual learners and reflect the new national 14-16 qualifications in place from September 2027

What did our thematic say?

The colleges, schools and local authorities involved have developed a range of effective programmes aligned to junior apprenticeship guidelines established by the Welsh Government to allow participating Year 10 and 11 learners to attend college on a full-time basis. Arrangements are well established in five of the twelve colleges in Wales following an initial roll out of the programme in 2017. However, learners in many areas of Wales do not have similar opportunities because there are no collaborative local arrangements in place within their areas to support the delivery of junior apprenticeship programmes.

We have identified a number of key factors that underpin the establishment of effective junior apprenticeship programmes. These include:

- close collaboration along with open and effective communications between colleges, schools and local authorities
- a range of alternative vocational pathways for learners
- flexibility to accommodate local contexts
- appropriate resourcing of the programmes using a combination of funds accessed through local authority, school and further education funding mechanisms

Schools and local authorities usually work closely with colleges to target available junior apprenticeship places mainly at Year 10 and 11 learners who are struggling to engage with a mainstream school-based curriculum and are particularly interested in work-related vocational options. However, we found the availability of information within schools about junior apprenticeship opportunities is not consistent enough with a few learners and parents/carers only becoming aware of the programme via friends or family rather than directly from their schools.

Delivery and timetable arrangements differ between colleges and for different vocational pathways. Although guidelines state that programmes should be similar to full-time school teaching hours, in practice a minority of programmes and learners were timetabled for fewer hours than in school. Individual pastoral support plans that may allow this were not always reviewed effectively enough to support a return to full-time education and attendance.

Most learners we observed were taught in dedicated junior apprenticeship classes in the colleges' vocational facilities such as workshops or salons, where classes for older learners also take place. In the very few cases where learners take part in post-16 programmes, we found that arrangements for individual safeguarding risk assessments were not always clear or robust enough.

Most learners enjoyed the strong focus on vocational subjects and practical activities. Their improved engagement in learning was reflected in very high success rates for vocational qualifications. However, most learners still struggled to achieve GCSE English, mathematics or numeracy at grade D

or above.

We identified a range of positive impacts of the junior apprenticeship programme including:
- improved levels of engagement and attendance
- very high success rates in vocational qualifications offered
- strong positive learner feedback
- strong progression rates into further education and training

The transformation in many learners' attitudes to learning from relative disengagement to making enthusiastic and ambitious choices to commit and continue to post-compulsory learning was the most striking overall impact of the junior apprenticeship programme.

Impact of poverty on educational attainment, support, provision and transition for early education

In November 2021, we published our thematic on the impact of poverty on educational attainment, support, provision and transition for early education. Our report draws on findings from visits to funded non-maintained nursery settings that provide nursery education, primary and all-age schools and one children's centre. We also consulted with parents, local authorities and school improvement services.

Our recommendations

The Welsh Government should:

1. Ensure that EYPDG funding is allocated equitably to local authorities that fund non-maintained settings
2. Provide improved guidance on how the funding is distributed and used within settings and schools

Local authorities should:

1. Provide specific professional learning and information to schools and settings on how to best meet the social, emotional and personal developmental needs of early years children adversely affected by poverty and deprivation
2. Ensure that leaders in schools and settings have a secure understanding of EYPDG funding so that they may target it effectively on addressing the impact of poverty and disadvantage for their early years pupils
3. Ensure parity in the early years provision between schools and settings based on a robust understanding of the role of effective environments, enabling adults and engaging experiences

Schools and setting leaders should:

1. Evaluate the impact that the EYPDG funding has on the progress of children's skills and development
2. Ensure that the provision provided for early years children is developmentally appropriate

What did our thematic say?

Leaders report significant worsening of poverty levels since the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis.

Leaders invest a significant time in building strong and supportive relationships with families in need. Many offer parents practical support such as access to external services such as food banks, housing support and links to other third sector agencies.

Practitioners in both sectors work closely with parents, and multi-agency when appropriate to prepare children for transitions from home to setting or setting to school.

There is a disparity across Wales to how the Early Years Pupil Development Grant (EYPDG) is allocated to and delegated within local authorities. This has a detrimental impact on a few of the most deprived areas of Wales.

In the best cases, leaders use EYPDG funds effectively, prioritising areas for improvement through self-evaluation.

Most school leaders experience lower levels of support and funding available for ALN children compared to what is provided in the non-maintained sector.

Generally, both settings and schools invest in substantial professional learning on understanding childhood trauma, speech and language development, and supporting children with ALN. Overall, this learning enables staff to adapt their provision to meet individual needs effectively. However, there is often a lack of consistency in training and support provided by local authorities to focus on how all schools can best meet the social, emotional and personal developmental needs of early years children adversely affected by poverty and deprivation.

Many practitioners have a robust understanding of child development. They use this knowledge to plan appropriate environments and experiences that match children's developmental stages and interests well. They make thoughtful adaptations to their provision to ensure that children have ample time to play and explore in both the indoor and outdoor environments to develop their communication, social and cognitive skills.

In a few schools, leaders introduce formal learning (for example, early reading and number work) too soon. This approach did not always meet the developmental needs of early years children.

Most non-maintained setting leaders are well supported by their early years advisory teachers, who provide tailored guidance, professional development and support in self-evaluation and improvement planning processes.

Most non-maintained settings receive valuable support from umbrella organisations.

Both non-maintained settings and schools benefit from collaboration with multi-agency teams, including health visitors and educational psychologists, to support children's emotional health, well-being, and development. These partnerships help address issues such as trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Youth engagement and progression lead worker review

In July 2024, we published our thematic report on the youth engagement and progression lead worker role in Wales. The report was written in response to a request from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in Estyn's annual remit letter 2023 to 2024 as updated in October 2023.

The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) is designed to facilitate young individuals in accessing education, training, or employment opportunities. Central to this framework is the assignment of a lead worker who provides support to young people either not engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET) or at risk of becoming NEET. Our report draws on findings from a series of visits and virtual meetings with key stakeholders, including 11 local authorities, nine secondary schools, five colleges, five training providers, and Careers Wales teams. Our focus was on evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the lead worker role in assisting at-risk young people through their transition into post-16 education, training, or employment.

Our recommendations

The Welsh Government, Careers Wales, local authorities and all other partners involved in supporting young people through lead workers should:

- Improve post-16 transition support by ensuring continuity of a young person's lead worker until 31st January following a young person's move into their post-16 destination, whether this is in school, at college, with a training provider, or employment
- Develop ways to measure the success of work to prevent young people becoming NEET that are based on longer-term evaluations and do not over-emphasise the value of initial destination survey data
- Support better data sharing about the circumstances of individual young people to facilitate stronger collaboration between all partners, including education and training providers, and enable young people to receive relevant and timely support
- Support the professional learning needs of lead workers in all agencies and share effective practice in the provision of lead worker support
- Improve practice in line with the effective practice featured in this report and address the shortcomings highlighted in this report

What did our thematic say?

In a young person's life, the lead worker often served as the only consistent and reliable presence. They played a pivotal role in providing young people with personalised support in relation to their current situation and accessing progression opportunities. Adapting to post-pandemic challenges, lead workers commonly addressed issues like social anxiety, mental health, and financial struggles.

Lead workers' influence often extended beyond the young person as the support they provided also positively impacted on families and the wider community. This is what some of the young people shared with us.

"I feel she's proper like helped us, and we are in school every day, and if we didn't have a lead worker, we wouldn't be doing as good as we are now."

"I could turn to Megan, she always texted and called even when I didn't answer. I don't see Megan as often now. I'm giving 'Inspire' a go and hopefully I will go on a placement and get a job."

"I would have struggled if my lead worker support was taken away when I was in year 10."

"We can talk about anything, and she wouldn't judge. If I see her in the corridor, we have a chat."

Our evidence indicated significant, yet often appropriate, variation in relation to the lead worker role across Wales. Approaches were influenced by local contexts such as geography and demographics, as well as available support agencies. Leaders and managers in local authorities faced challenges in relation to assessing the scale of need and the type of support required, as well as meeting need. Complexity of need and the rates of referrals were increasing.

Transition activities into post-16 colleges were typically well-structured, but collaboration between post-16 providers and lead workers was often lacking once a young person enrolled with many training providers being unaware of the lead worker role and its benefits. Handover at this stage posed a risk as young people often lost continuity of support. There were no systematic procedures to ensure that students retained their places and when young people were identified as at-risk, they were usually assigned a new lead worker instead of reconnecting with their previous one.

Local collaboration to support the lead worker role varied, with the best cases involving strong representation from relevant agencies at strategic and operational levels with leaders committing to transparent data sharing. However, in many cases there were challenges due to anxieties around GDPR and a lack of understanding about what information could and could not be shared. Collaboration at a regional and national level was limited with very few examples of pan-Wales sharing of knowledge, experiences, and professional learning.

Leaders monitored and evaluated the impact of lead worker services using various approaches, including data tracking, learner well-being surveys, case studies, and feedback from young people and lead workers. However, attributing successful outcomes, such as a sustained place in education, training, or employment beyond age 16, solely to lead worker interventions was challenging due to the number of other services that a young person often received support from.

Lead worker recruitment and retention challenges stemmed from short-term contracts and difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified youth workers. Recruiting Welsh speakers was particularly challenging, limiting support services in Welsh. However, demand for Welsh-medium support was low and therefore meeting need did not pose challenges at the time of our visit.

A review on developing pupils' Welsh reading skills from 10-14 years of age

In September 2024, we published our thematic report on developing pupils' Welsh reading skills from 10-14 years of age. The report was written in response to a request from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in Estyn's annual remit letter 2023 to 2024 as updated in October 2023. Following the publication of a report on pupils' English reading skills from 10-14 years of age by Estyn in May 2023, we set out to produce a report on how Welsh and bilingual schools develop pupils' Welsh reading skills across the curriculum.

Our report draws on findings from visits to Welsh-medium and bilingual primary, secondary and all-age schools, in addition to a few immersion units. In each school visited, meetings were held with senior leaders, literacy co-ordinators, teachers and pupils. We conducted learning walks, looked at pupils' work and documents the schools had on developing reading skills and on transition arrangements. A pupil survey was carried out in the Urdd Eisteddfod in June 2023 and a pupil questionnaire was distributed to those schools within the sample. We also drew on evidence from primary, secondary and all-age inspections of schools outside the sample during 2023-2024.

Our recommendations

Leaders in schools should consider how to:

- Strengthen opportunities for pupils to develop a variety of reading skills, including advanced reading skills, in subjects across the curriculum in addition to Welsh
- Use a variety of self-evaluation activities to effectively monitor and evaluate pupils' reading skills to identify clearly which aspects of reading need to be improved or strengthened
- Plan strategically and structure opportunities appropriately to increase pupils' interest, resilience and confidence when reading in Welsh

Local authorities should consider how to:

- Facilitate transition arrangements between primary and secondary schools and remove any barriers to ensure that schools are able to work together beneficially to develop pupils' reading skills

The Welsh Government should consider how to:

- Create opportunities for Welsh authors to engage with schools and talk to pupils about the type of books they would like to read in Welsh
- Work with partners such as 'Adnodd' to improve and increase the availability of Welsh-medium resources, including non-fiction books

What did our thematic say?

Our report on Welsh reading skills highlights a number of strengths and areas that need to be addressed to ensure improvements. In addition to the examples of good practice in schools, we have included suggestions within each chapter to help schools strengthen their practices in developing pupils' reading skills.

The first chapter, 'Pupils' standards and attitudes' focuses on the development of pupils' reading skills across the curriculum and pupils' attitudes to reading. The main findings here were that almost all pupils understood the importance of reading to support their learning and future life chances. However, the negative impact of the pandemic remains clear on Welsh reading standards and pupils' confidence in general.

The second chapter which has two parts, considers the offer provided by schools to strengthen pupils' reading skills and how leaders prioritise reading in their schools. We noted that:
- many young people from 10 to 14 years of age used basic reading skills successfully to find the main messages and key information
- the most beneficial opportunities to develop reading skills could be seen in Welsh lessons or language sessions and within the humanities subjects
- leaders in nearly all schools visited recognised the importance of prioritising the development of pupils' reading skills
- the immersion units and Welsh language centres we visited worked effectively in developing the Welsh skills of pupils who transfer from English medium- education at a late stage

Improvements were needed in the following areas:
- purposeful opportunities for pupils to develop their advanced reading skills across the curriculum
- co-ordinating provision to develop pupils' reading skills in a majority of secondary schools
- leaders use of a wide enough range of evidence to identify the exact aspects of reading that need to be improved and plan relevant actions
- plans to develop pupils' reading skills from Year 6 to Year 7

The third chapter, 'Promoting a reading culture' describes the way in which effective schools create a reading culture successfully and engage pupils' interest in full. Overall, experiences to promote reading outside the classroom were seen to have decreased significantly since the pandemic, particularly in the secondary sector.

Progress of schools, settings and local authorities in supporting pupils with additional learning needs

Background

This report considers how well the funded non-maintained settings, maintained primary, secondary and all-age schools that participated in the review are implementing and embedding aspects of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET) and the accompanying Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Code. It also considers how well local authorities have supported schools. The review identifies effective practice to support inclusive education which includes developing strategies to support pupils with ALN, enhancing Welsh-medium support and strengthening professional learning, quality assurance and the roles of the Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo) and Early Years Additional Learning Needs Officer (EYALNLO).

Our findings are based on engagement with a sample of eight funded non-maintained settings,11 primary schools, seven secondary schools and two all-age schools. Of these, nine were conducted through the medium of Welsh. Eight of the schools, including one Welsh-medium school, host local authority specialist class provision for pupils with ALN. We also drew on evidence from our ongoing inspection activity and from discussions between our local authority link inspectors and local authority officers. Further, the report draws on evidence from discussion with a focus group of Early Years Additional Learning Needs Lead Officers (EY ALNLOs). We also canvassed the views of parents and carers in relation to their experiences

Our recommendations

Schools and settings should:

1. Ensure that high quality teaching and learning meets the needs of all pupils and supports inclusive education

Schools should:

1. Ensure that ALNCos are fully involved in influencing the strategic direction and decision making of the school

Local authorities should:

1. Work with schools and settings to promote inclusive education, targeting support where needed and strengthening the co-ordination of support services to ensure high quality teaching for all pupils
2. Continue to develop the workforce, services, professional learning and provision for pupils through the medium of Welsh

1. Work with all local authorities to ensure that they have a common and secure understanding of the definition of additional learning provision and that local authorities and their schools apply this consistently
2. Continue to develop workforce planning, resources and professional learning to ensure equitable Welsh-medium ALN provision
3. Evaluate the impact of implementation and the demand for additional and specialist provision for pupils with ALN; this evaluation should guide future funding arrangements, ensuring that resources meet identified needs

What did our thematic say?

Implementing and embedding ALN reform has been a significant undertaking for local authorities, schools and settings. During our visits and in our meetings with stakeholders, the inspection team consistently noted the strong commitment and resilience demonstrated by staff in local authorities, schools and settings. Staff were working diligently to support children and young people with ALN within the context of ongoing challenges. These included the lasting impact of the pandemic on well-being, challenges with attendance, the reported but unverified increase in children and young people with complex needs as well as budgetary and workforce pressures. Overall, the requirements of ALN reform were starting to ensure improvements in provision for pupils with ALN across the country. As a result, where ALN reform had been implemented successfully, many pupils made suitable progress from their initial starting points. However, the implementation of ALN reform was not consistent and, as a result, pupils' additional learning needs were not always supported well enough Further, the majority of schools and local authorities in the sample had begun to strengthen the quality assurance of ALN processes and provision. Many leaders expressed concerns about their ability to continue to deliver the necessary ALN services, once additional funding comes to an end.

Many schools and settings were fostering an inclusive culture, focusing on all pupils' learning and well-being, but in a minority of cases, the teaching and support were not effective enough. Local authority guidance on inclusive teaching varied across Wales, and support for inclusive practices was still in early development in many areas.

The number of pupils identified with ALN or special educational needs continued to decrease, but the number of pupils with a statutory plan (IDP or statement of SEN) increased. Inconsistencies in interpreting the ALN Code and in the subsequent approaches to school maintained and local authority maintained IDPs remained across local authorities.

Overall, participating schools and settings had a secure understanding of the provision that they make for pupils with ALN. However, it remained the case that the extent to which the provision is classed as ALP was unclear. Most schools and local authorities agreed that it would be beneficial for ALP to be clarified at a national level.

The role of the Additional Learning Needs Coordinator (ALNCo) was recognised as crucial, with most schools valuing the enhanced responsibility of the role. However, in some schools, ALNCos were not fully involved in strategic decision-making.

This is the first time that we have reviewed the progress of funded non-maintained settings and the role of the Early Years Additional Learning Needs Officer (EYALNLO) in relation to ALN reform. Many of

the funded non-maintained settings that we visited as part of this review provided effective learning experiences for children with ALN. Overall, they planned carefully to tailor learning experiences to meet the individual requirements of each child including those with ALN. Further, the role of the EY ALNLO was well established across Wales. Overall, these officers worked effectively to support parents and early years settings to ensure beneficial and timely support for younger children with emerging or identified ALN.

The extent to which local authorities, schools and settings planned and provided equitable support for Welsh-medium ALN provision remained underdeveloped. This has been recognised by the Welsh Government and local authorities, but significant challenges remained in relation to Welsh-medium recruitment and retention as well as the provision of Welsh-medium standardised assessments and resources.

Transition and pupil progression

In September 2024, we published our thematic report on transition and pupil progression from primary to secondary school. The report was written in response to a request from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in Estyn's annual remit letter 2023 to 2024.

We set out to produce a report on how well schools work together to support pupils' transition from primary into secondary school. We focused on how well schools work together to ensure that their curricula and teaching develop pupils' knowledge, skills, understanding and learning behaviours effectively across transition. We also considered how schools support the well-being of learners at this important transition point. We have identified features of effective provision, highlighted where practice is less successful, and explored the reasons why.

Our report draws on evidence from our inspection and follow-up findings, and visits to 41 schools in 15 local authorities. They consisted of 23 primary schools, 13 secondary schools and 3 all-age schools. Of these, 14 were conducted through the medium of Welsh. During school visits, we met with school leaders, curriculum leaders and pupils from Year 6, Year 7 and Year 8. We looked at a range of documents, including curriculum planning, pupils' learning and transition plans. We took evidence via virtual meetings from three regional support services and three local authorities.

Our recommendations

Schools should:

- Develop a clearer shared understanding of progression within and across their clusters of schools
- Work more closely as clusters to ensure that approaches to information sharing, teaching, and the curriculum support pupils to develop knowledge, skills, experiences and learning behaviours progressively from 3 to 16 years old

The Welsh Government should:

- Provide clear guidance on the practical application of how to develop progression through and across the curriculum
- Ensure that there is sufficient support to enable leaders and teachers to develop a coherent and progressive curriculum that sets high expectations for all pupils

Local authorities and regional support partners should:

- Encourage and support stronger collaboration among clusters to address the recommendations we have identified for schools, focusing on establishing well-defined clusters with specific and clear objectives

What did our thematic say?

Our report highlights a range of different practices across Wales, and notes strengths and areas that need to be addressed to support pupils' transition and their learning.

Our findings showed that headteachers or senior leaders from most clusters of schools meet regularly to discuss Curriculum for Wales and how to support pupils' transition from primary to secondary school. However, in many cases, and for a range of reasons, transition work is not effective enough to ensure that pupils make systematic and continual progress in their knowledge, skills, understanding and learning behaviours from primary into secondary school.

In a minority of cases, clusters have set up groups of teachers to consider examples of pupils' learning, to help them begin to develop a shared understanding of progression across their schools. However, there is still not a strong understanding of what progression looks like in most clusters of schools. As a result, these practices have not improved how well learning progresses from primary into secondary schools strongly enough.

In a few cases, clusters of primary and secondary schools have worked together positively to map out knowledge, skills and experiences across all areas of learning and experience and have used this to begin to develop a shared understanding of progression. However, even where this is in place, secondary schools do not always use it to take account of pupils' prior learning well enough. In all-age schools, despite the potential of the all-age approach to learning, curriculum coherence and planning for progression were not always strong.

Many schools have provided teachers with a range of professional learning to support the introduction of Curriculum for Wales. However, in only a few cases had clusters of schools shared approaches to teaching or considered how they could ensure that teaching strategies supported pupils to make effective and continuous progress from primary into secondary school.

In nearly all cases, primary schools passed on a broad and varied range of information about pupils' learning and progress to secondary schools prior to transition. A minority of clusters were beginning to consider how to share information on pupils' progress, in line with Curriculum for Wales. However, these processes did little to support continuity in pupils' learning.

In nearly all cases, schools supported pupils' induction into secondary school well. In most cases, clusters of schools supported many aspects of pupils' well-being effectively, and primary and secondary schools worked together conscientiously to support the transition of pupils with additional learning needs.