Engagement work: Secondary sector update – Spring Term 2021

March 2021

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Introduction

This report summarises the findings from engagement phone calls made to over 150 secondary schools between the end of October 2020 and the end of February 2021. The report is based on the information discussed during remote meetings with headteachers, senior leaders and teachers. The main focus for each discussion was wellbeing, teaching and learning, the curriculum, professional learning and several sector specific matters such as qualifications and examinations. Proportions relate to the sample of schools that we contacted during this reporting period**.**

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

- Remote meetings with headteachers and/or senior leaders responsible for specific areas
- Remote meetings with teachers who attended our teachers' fora
- Informal visits by HMI to 10 secondary schools

This report is also available in Welsh.

Contents

Main findings

Wellbeing

1   Pupils are happy to back at school but many schools report that a few pupils require extra support to readjust to school life.

2   Schools have continued to prioritise the wellbeing and health of pupils. In many cases, they have adapted their curriculum and approaches to allow pupils more time for activities away from digital devices.

3   Many schools report an increase in referrals regarding mental health. Pupils are generally anxious about their health, future career opportunities, examinations and assessments and selecting subjects for study at key stage 4 and post 16.

4   Teachers continue to show high levels of commitment and teamwork but are anxious about assessment procedures and workload regarding planning for distance learning while also teaching face-to-face.

Teaching and learning

5   During the autumn term, pupils' and teachers' experiences varied considerably due to class and year bubbles having to self-isolate.

6   During the second lockdown, pupils and teachers felt better prepared for distance learning. Most schools revised their approaches to include a higher proportion of 'live lessons'. Schools report that teachers' increasing confidence when using digital platforms and applications has allowed them to develop their practice.

7   As schools have gained experience with planning online learning, leaders and staff have increasingly considered core principles of teaching such as explanation, modelling, questioning and feedback.

8   Leaders are concerned that pupils' engagement with learning is variable, particularly pupils who are eligible for free school meals and those with additional learning needs.

9   Many schools continue to be concerned about pupils' basic literacy and numeracy skills, and Welsh-medium schools are particularly concerned about pupils' oracy skills.

Qualifications and examinations

10 Schools generally welcome the system for awarding centre determined grades. They are working with pupils and parents to inform them of the process and to alleviate any anxiety.

11 Teachers are anxious about the workload involved in the process for centre determined grades, especially the appeals process. They also feel pressured to gather as much evidence as possible to inform the centre determined grades.

12 Schools are eager to avoid pupils being overwhelmed by assessments in the period they have remaining in school.

13   Schools are concerned that the lack of examination practice for Year 10 and Year 12 pupils will not prepare them well enough for such assessments when they recommence.

Curriculum

14   Most schools have set up their curriculum to teach pupils in organised bubbles that adhere to health and safety guidance.

15   A few schools have reorganised their key stage 4 provision from a three year period to two years. This avoids the need for younger pupils to choose what subjects to study at key stage 4 without enough experience of all subjects.

16   Practical subjects have experienced particular difficulty in fulfilling practical elements of courses. Most schools have prioritised examination classes for practical work.

17   Extra-curricular activities have been very limited and this has had a detrimental effect on developing pupils' personal and social skills.

18   Schools offer additional support for pupils with additional learning needs through interventions either online or by invitation in to school.

19   As far as possible, schools have continued to collaborate with schools and colleges to offer courses at key stage 4 and the sixth form.

Curriculum for Wales

20   Plans for implementing Curriculum for Wales vary widely in the secondary sector. Many schools have put plans on hold since the pandemic began, only briefly able to develop aspects when pupils returned during the autumn term.

21   Schools who had well developed plans for Curriculum for Wales continue to adapt and refine their curriculum.

22   Schools have identified developments brought about by the pandemic that are useful in developing Curriculum for Wales plans, for example, digital learning and cross curricular work.

23   When pupils return, schools plan to work further on their vision for Curriculum for Wales and implement plans to coordinate the work across the school.

24   Professional learning for Curriculum for Wales has been postponed in many schools to focus on other aspects brought about by the pandemic.

Professional learning

25   Most schools have continued to focus their professional learning on developing digital skills and improving distance learning, as well as keeping staff up to date with operational procedures related to COVID-19.

26   Many leaders and staff feel that the pandemic has brought about positive developments in terms of professional learning. These include improvements in pupils and staff's digital skills and improved and more flexible access to a wider range of professional learning opportunities.

27   Even though many newly qualified teachers (NQTs) and initial teacher education (ITE) students have continued to receive online support, the provision varies widely across Wales and many secondary schools are concerned about their lack of classroom experience.

Leadership

28   School leaders have become increasingly agile and flexible when managing the operational arrangements and health and safety requirements brought about by the pandemic.

29   Leaders have had to adapt their improvement plans and introduce new priorities according to the changing circumstances. Many leaders report that the changes brought about by the pandemic has made them reflect on their practices and ways of working, and that they will retain some changes.

30   During the autumn term, a minority of schools adapted the timing of the school day to allow for staggered starts and break times. During the second lockdown, schools have varied the timing and organisation of the school day to support pupils' engagement with online learning.

31   Throughout the pandemic, schools have adapted their methods of communication and reacted well to the need for messages to be conveyed clearly and swiftly to parents, staff and pupils.

32   Leaders provide continuous support for staff wellbeing and work life balance. They find that staff are more anxious than for the previous reopening.

33   Most headteachers report that fellow headteachers have been an important source of support. This has been particularly valued by headteachers who took up their posts during or immediately prior to the pandemic.

34   As the 2020-21 academic year has progressed, many leaders have re-established their monitoring and evaluation processes. Schools have had more structures in place to monitor the quality of online provision than during the previous lockdown. However, the nature, frequency and rigour of monitoring activities vary widely, and in some cases systems are ad hoc, rather than formalised. Due to current circumstances, schools have found it challenging to fully evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in particular.

35   Schools have adopted a wide variety of approaches when planning how to use the accelerating learning grant. The manner in which schools have used and monitored the grant varies across Wales.

36   Headteachers and leaders have found it challenging to manage messages and plan appropriately when they have no or very little prior notice of public announcements on issues such as returning to school or arrangements for examinations. Senior leaders, and headteachers in particular, have had little respite since the beginning of the pandemic.

37   During the autumn term and the second lockdown, schools continued to loan out digital equipment to pupils who did not have ICT equipment at home or to pupils where one device was shared by several siblings. A few schools are exploring how they can sustain and expand schemes to loan out ICT equipment.

Wellbeing

Pupils' wellbeing

Pupils' wellbeing has continued to be secondary schools' primary focus during both the autumn term and the second period of lockdown since December 2020. During the autumn term, schools reported that in general pupils were happy to be back in school. Some found that adaptations they had made to keep pupils and staff safe, such as 'year bubbles' and 'staggered' breaks and lunchtimes had a positive impact on pupils' behaviour and attitudes to learning. In many schools, however, a few found it difficult to readjust to being in back in school and required extra support. Attendance, and the number of pupils having to self-isolate inevitably varied significantly between schools, depending on the number of COVID-19 cases in the local community.

In the second lockdown, schools continued to contact pupils regularly, often through sessions with form tutors, and extra support was put in place for those not engaging in their learning. In many cases, schools have adapted their online curriculum in order to focus more on health and wellbeing issues and literacy and numeracy skills. Learning support assistants and pastoral staff are often deployed to provide extra support for the most vulnerable pupils.

Schools have found that a range of factors have increased the impact of this lockdown on pupils' wellbeing, for instance adverse weather and darker evenings. As a result, many have introduced some different approaches, for example 'wellbeing afternoons' where pupils are encouraged to undertake activities that take them away from the computer screen.

> ### Cameo – Ysgol Uwchradd Aberteifi
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> In response to feedback from parents, pupils and staff, leaders at Ysgol Uwchradd Aberteifi have reduced lesson time by five minutes in order to allocate 30 minutes at the end of each day where pupils are directed to complete tasks that take them away from the screen. These include reading a book, listening to a podcast, playing a musical instrument, going for a walk, artwork, baking and yoga.

Schools have continued to seek pupil feedback about their experiences, and some have developed new approaches to monitor pupil welfare. Many schools report an increase in referrals to external agencies such as child protection services and CAMHS.

> **Cameo – Risca Community Comprehensive School**
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> In order to enhance staff's understanding of the issues faced by pupils during the lockdown, leaders at Risca Community Comprehensive School have created a presentation based on pupils' experiences entitled 'what it's like to be the other side of the screen'. The presentation includes 'talking heads' videos, as well as audio clips and written pieces where pupils from across the age and ability range talk about their experiences, both positive and negative.

Older pupils continue to be particularly anxious about the arrangements for examinations this summer. Many are experiencing high levels of stress caused by their uncertainty about how they are being assessed. In some instances, even those pupils who are usually engaged fully in their learning are finding it a challenge to maintain motivation. In addition, pupils who will be moving to key stage 4 next year are in many cases anxious about making their choices regarding examination courses. This is a particular challenge for schools who operate a three-year key stage four, as the current Year 8 have had so little time in school that it is difficult for them to make informed decisions, especially where their experience of the practical aspects of some subjects has been limited. Consequently, a few of these schools have elected to return to a traditional three-year key stage 3.

Schools continue to provide childcare provision for the children of key workers and vulnerable pupils. Numbers are generally higher than during the first lockdown as schools are inviting more pupils to attend this provision. In many cases, teaching assistants and leadership teams support this provision.

Staff wellbeing

Schools report that teachers and other practitioners have shown high levels of commitment to supporting pupils' learning and wellbeing during this lockdown period. Many teachers report on a strengthened sense of community and teamwork within their schools, though they miss the opportunity to have direct contact with their colleagues. However, they find the planning involved in distance learning time-consuming, and many are particularly anxious about the examination arrangements. In a few schools in the second half of the autumn term, high staff absence resulted in increased pressure on others. At the end of the spring term, a few headteachers report that staff are concerned about returning before they have been vaccinated. Schools have used a variety of approaches to monitor and support staff wellbeing, for example regular online staff forums.

Teaching and learning

During the autumn term, teaching and learning experiences for both pupils and staff varied considerably between schools, depending on the rate of COVID-19 cases in the local community. Some pupils spent most of the term in school, whilst others had to spend considerable periods of time self-isolating at home. Planning a mixture of face-to-face lessons and distance learning activities placed a considerable burden on staff in some schools.

Teaching under social distancing guidelines provided staff with a range of challenges. In particular, they were forced to teach 'from the front', impacting on their ability to interact with pupils and provide individual feedback. Managing the changeovers between lessons caused significant difficulties for staff in some instances. As the term progressed, schools increasingly reported that staff, whilst remaining positive about pupils being back in school, were suffering from fatigue under the pandemic arrangements.

During the second lockdown, pupils and teachers in general felt much better prepared for distance learning. This was particularly the case in schools where groups of pupils had to self-isolate during the autumn term. In these schools, teachers had continued to explore and develop a range of approaches to planning online learning experiences.

In most schools, the proportion of 'live lessons' provided during the second lockdown has increased substantially. As staff have increased in confidence in delivering these lessons, they have experimented further with digital platforms. Some, for example, have used the 'chat' facility to conduct a dialogue with pupils as they complete their work online; others have used 'break out rooms' to conduct small group discussions.

Many schools report that their revised approaches to distance learning have had a positive impact on some pupils' independence and perseverance in learning. For example, teachers have provided revision tasks accompanied by spoken narratives that provide opportunities for pupils to develop independent revision skills and examination techniques. However, a few pupils find it difficult to participate in online activities and report feeling overwhelmed by the work that they have to complete independently. In some cases teachers have not adapted the content of their lessons to ensure that tasks and resources are suitable for distance learning.

In general, leaders are concerned that engagement with learning has been variable during the lockdown period. Teachers are particularly concerned about the engagement of pupils with additional learning needs and those eligible for free school meals. In addition, despite more nuanced systems to monitor pupil engagement, precise evaluation of their engagement remains a challenge. For example, pupils may log on to a live lesson but not participate or concentrate during the lesson, or may not complete the associated work.

Teachers report that, due to the variability in engagement, it is difficult to plan appropriately for the progress of all pupils, and they are concerned about their re-engagement when they return to school. For example, some pupils in a class will have completed all the set work, and more, while others will have completed very little, if any work.

Many schools continue to be concerned about pupils' basic literacy and numeracy skills. Where schools were able to undertake baseline assessments of pupils' skills during the autumn term, many reported that some pupils had regressed significantly in these areas. In particular, schools express concerns about the ability of pupils to produce extended writing of high quality. Some are also concerned that a dependency on 'spell check' has reduced pupils' confidence and independence with

correcting their own spelling and grammar. In general, Welsh-medium schools have seen a decline in pupils' range of Welsh vocabulary and their use of spoken Welsh.

Cameo – Ysgol Uwchradd Aberteifi

Teachers in Ysgol Uwchradd Aberteifi were concerned about pupils' subject knowledge and their recall of prior learning. They introduced a concept called 'five a day'. This involves posing five types of questions to pupils on the learning objective for each lesson. These questions are based on topics or skills relevant to the objective that they learned last lesson, last week, last term and last year, and the link to that day's lesson.

As schools have gained increasing experience with planning online learning, leaders in some schools have worked with staff to consider how core principles such as explanation, modelling and questioning can be applied to both face-to-face and distance learning. This has helped teachers to reflect on how they can build on previous knowledge and skills, provide clear instructions, model and scaffold work clearly, design a range of activities and identify and address misconceptions in both live and online settings.

During the second lockdown, schools have continued to develop a range of approaches to assessing pupils' work and providing them with feedback. Some, for example, have used software that enables them to record spoken feedback to pupils about their work; others provide 'live' written feedback as pupils complete work within a digital classroom to address misconceptions and prompt improvements. However, schools in general have continued to find assessing progress and providing meaningful feedback to pupils to be a considerable challenge under lockdown.

Cameo – Ysgol y Creuddyn

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

In general, the response of the schools to the challenges of the pandemic has strengthened collaboration both within and across subject areas or areas of learning and experience. Many schools report that increased collaboration and the sharing of good practice has both reduced workload and had a positive impact on staff's professional learning and the quality of learning resources. In many schools, teachers and leaders feel that this has strengthened their understanding of how colleagues plan and deliver learning and has had a positive impact on their own practice.

Qualifications and examinations

Over the pandemic period, many schools have focused heavily on providing support for examination year groups. Schools are pleased that these year groups have now returned to school and most schools are prioritising teaching and learning to support pupils in their preparation for assessment.

In general, due to COVID-19, schools feel that the awarding of centre determined grades is the fairest option for pupils and welcomed this announcement from the Welsh Government. However, many schools felt that the lack of detail provided in the announcement has added to the anxiety of staff, pupils, and parents at an already difficult time. Now that the details have been published, schools are working with parents and pupils to develop their understanding of the process and to alleviate any anxiety. For example, to settle pupil concerns, some schools have held specific assemblies to explain the decision and its implications, and some have developed a video for parents and pupils to explain the process and timescales for assessment. Another school provides half termly interim reports to pupils. They have amended these to ensure that pupils and parents are fully informed of pupils' targets, projected grades, and effort levels.

> **Cameo – Ysgol Maes y Gwendraeth**
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> In order to inform parents about the changes to assessment procedures and 2021 qualifications, Ysgol Maes Y Gwendraeth has distributed a bilingual pamphlet to all parents/ carers of Year 11, 12 and 13 pupils. These pamphlets highlight the main key messages and update parents on their decisions about centre determined grades, the quality assurance processes, the review of grades and the appeals processes. It has also arranged a webinar in Welsh and English for parents providing an update and guidance for them on the alternative assessment arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels in summer 2021 and the school timeline. Parents can ask any questions through the chat facility.

There is anxiety in schools regarding the workload involved with the centre determined grades process and the appeals process in particular. Many schools are working with other schools to jointly develop processes, policies and protocols, as well as template forms and letters. They are mindful of the fact that their decisions could be open to challenge. In addition, some schools are using peer moderation processes to further support confidence in the assessment and appeals processes. In some cases, moderation is being used internally as an interdepartmental process and in other cases, schools are working with other schools within their local authority to moderate grades. While schools are appreciative of the materials that are being shared to support the centre-determined grades process, they are also concerned about the amount of information and professional learning that needs to be assimilated and are frustrated that materials are often shared at a late stage.

There is a general concern for the wellbeing of staff due to the workload involved with centre determined grades and collation of evidence. Teachers feel pressure to complete as much of the examination courses as possible and to gather evidence about pupil progress in order to inform centre determined grades. In addition, there

are concerns regarding departments involving only one member of staff and the workload and pressure to 'get this right'. To support teachers, in one school, subject area teams have put together a plan based on the evidence they already have, what is missing and how they might tackle any areas that are light. In another school they have prioritised non examined assessments (NEAs) and identified what pupils can do from home. They have introduced an extensive revision programme and nominated two days a week specifically as NEA days.

Schools are eager to avoid pupils being overwhelmed by assessments. Some schools report that pupils feel that everything they do is being assessed and this is adding to the pressure they are already experiencing. In addition, schools are aware of the anxiety some pupils are experiencing regarding previous work not intended for assessment now being part of assessment evidence. To help to alleviate this, one school has introduced a pupil assessment pathway to clarify the key tasks and dates.

> **Cameo – Brynteg Comprehensive School**
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> To support pupils and maintain their engagement, Brynteg Comprehensive School is bringing forward the guidance and advice programme for pupils in Year 11 to look at what they will do in Year 12. The school has widened the offer and designed a new prospectus to encourage pupils to continue to engage with the school after the submission of grades and help them feel more confident and enthusiastic about the future.

Many schools are concerned about the wellbeing and progress of pupils in Year 11 as some have lost over 50% of their face-to-face time in school since September. Schools feel that some of these pupils have found it difficult to engage with their work at home and as such are unprepared for the return to school. Year 12 pupils are a particular concern for schools. These pupils will not have taken external examinations in Years 11 or 12 and schools feel that when they get to the end of Year 13, they will not have had enough examination practice. Schools report that some pupils in Year 13 are more reticent to apply for university places due to a lack of confidence.

Curriculum

In most schools, leaders endeavoured to provide as normal an experience as possible for pupils during the period between September and December under the circumstances. At the start of the autumn term, in many schools, key stage 3 pupils were taught in class bubbles in one classroom with teachers moving between classrooms, while key stage 4 pupils moved between classrooms. In order to create bubbles that are as small as possible, many schools have changed their setting or banding arrangements in key stage 3. In many cases, pupils are taught in mixed ability classes, often in their form classes, for all their lessons. Where work is not suitably differentiated, this can prove frustrating for higher ability learners and challenging for those who need additional support. In a few cases, schools have used quarter or half year groups in order to keep bubbles small but to also allow for

an element of setting. In other cases, pupils are taught in ability groups for all their lessons. In a few schools that had previously had a three-year key stage 4, leaders have decided to revert back to a two-year GCSE model. They stated that it would not be fair for Year 8 pupils to make choices so early following disruption to their time at secondary school, and having had very little experience of the practical elements of some subjects.

Subjects that have a substantial practical aspect have faced considerable challenges during the pandemic. When pupils were in school during the autumn term, schools took a variety of approaches to try and ensure that pupils, especially those following examination courses, had sufficient safe access to specialist facilities for these lessons. However, in some schools, key stage 3 pupils had only limited access to these facilities in this period and lessons were heavily focused on theory. During the second lockdown, many schools have developed approaches to enable pupils to carry out practical work, for example by setting tasks that utilise resources available in the home. However, this aspect has continued to be a considerable challenge for these subject areas.   A minority of schools stated that a lack of practical activities is having a negative effect on pupils' attitudes to learning, particularly for pupils in key stage 4 who are studying vocational courses.

School leaders are concerned that restrictions on extra-curricular activities and limited wider learning experiences are having a detrimental effect on the development of pupils' personal and social skills. As a result, many schools have introduced wellbeing lessons into the curriculum.

Prior to the second lockdown, schools offered a range of interventions for pupils in need of additional support. Although they have endeavoured to maintain this provision during periods when pupils are learning at home, for example by assigning learning support assistants to work remotely with individual or small groups of pupils, this has been a considerable challenge for most schools. A few schools have added an additional intervention lesson to the end of the school day. Increasingly, during the second lockdown, schools have invited pupils who have additional learning needs or who are struggling to engage with school work in to school to receive support.

Schools that work in partnership with other schools and colleges to provide courses have, in the main, continued to collaborate. In a minority of instances, practical courses that are provided off-site have not been able to run, or the provision includes reduced opportunities to partake in practical activities.

Curriculum for Wales

Plans for implementing Curriculum for Wales vary greatly within the secondary sector. Many schools indicate that plans have been put on hold as they have been dealing with operational matters linked to COVID-19 and have had less time to plan strategically. In schools where plans for the curriculum are less developed, leaders believe it is difficult to create a vision and plan the provision without being physically able to meet to discuss. A few schools have continued with their plans to develop

Curriculum for Wales, albeit virtually. Schools who had well developed plans for the new curriculum prior to the pandemic have continued to refine their provision.

Many schools have identified advantages brought about by the pandemic that could support the development of Curriculum for Wales. Most leaders cite the improvement in staff and pupils' digital skills as being a major benefit that will support the roll out of the new curriculum. They also welcome the renewed focus on supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing. A few headteachers have noted that during the pandemic, leaders have developed a better understanding of cross curricular work whether it be through projects or thematic work that pupils could complete at home. Others feel that there has been more time for professional learning around teaching and a spirit of innovation, experimentation and creativity. Leaders feel that these developments are preparing staff well for aspects of Curriculum for Wales. A few headteachers believe that post pandemic, curriculum reform might be timely since it will require rebuilding and reflecting on teaching methods.

Those schools that were pioneer and innovation schools feel well prepared for 2022. However, in general, schools do not feel these schools have engaged well enough with other schools to support curriculum development.

Most schools have developed plans for professional learning to support the development of Curriculum for Wales. However, a majority of schools had to postpone much of the professional learning that was planned for the autumn term in order to focus on priorities brought about by the pandemic. Generally, they have planned to restart this in the spring term. However, a minority of schools have delayed this further as a result of the additional lockdown. These leaders feel it is important they have all staff in school to engage in the initial stages of developing the vision for curriculum and teaching. However, a few school leaders feel that they have not been able to plan or deliver any professional learning for Curriculum for Wales during this time.

Cameo – St Cenydd Community School

When the first lockdown took hold, St Cenydd School was beginning its professional learning activities based on considering their vision and values in light of Curriculum for Wales. As a result of the circumstances, leaders have had to adapt their plans for professional learning on Curriculum for Wales. Leaders have prepared a series of think pieces, or 'thunks', to encourage staff in each AoLE to work together on their area. They have also designed a professional learning programme on various aspects of curriculum design. This includes provision of articles and reading materials as well as talking heads videos and online professional learning sessions on these topics. In addition, leaders have developed a web based action research portal for staff to support professional learning and development for Curriculum for Wales and to facilitate 'virtual' discussions and sharing of ideas.

> **Cameo – Stanwell School**
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> As part of their professional learning programme to support the development of Curriculum for Wales, school leaders plan weekly professional learning sessions and have built in collaborative planning days for leaders. These involve pupils as 'curriculum consultants' to support staff to develop a curriculum that is underpinned by their pupils' interests and needs.

Most schools are aware of 'The Journey to 2022' document and a majority are beginning to use this to support and inform their planning. Generally, schools welcome this guidance and feel that it will support them well as they begin to develop their approaches to curriculum design and delivery.

Professional learning

Most schools have continued to focus their professional learning on developing digital skills and improving distance learning, using what they learnt from the first lockdown. They have also kept staff up to date with operational procedures related to COVID-19. As staff have become more confident and skilled in their use of digital platforms and applications, schools have been able to focus less on upskilling staff on how to use platforms to considering the most effective strategies for distance learning and how they can best use digital tools. A majority of schools have focused their professional learning on their teaching and learning strategy, and how digital platforms can support their existing approach. In addition, many schools have continued to provide support for teachers to develop their understanding of Additional Learning Needs and to support staff to respond to the changing needs of all pupils. More recently, schools are focusing on supporting staff through the centre determined grades process.

Many leaders and staff feel that the pandemic has brought about positive developments in terms of professional learning. The online professional learning offer, at a local, national and international level is now extensive, open to all and accessible due to the removal of the need to travel and often free of charge. Staff can now access a huge range of professional learning opportunities at a time that suits them. As a result, many schools report that staff are more engaged in their own professional learning and are taking more ownership over their own professional development. Some schools have asked all staff to identify particular aspects of their own professional learning that they would like to develop and the online activities they were going to pursue in order to do so. This resulted in staff undertaking a wide range of activities ranging from accredited health and safety courses or ELSA courses for support staff and teaching assistants to teachers working virtually with teachers from other schools on research projects. Many leaders are planning to develop a blended and more flexible approach to professional learning in the future. A few leaders feel that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their professional learning plans.

Many leaders state that online professional learning also offers opportunities to network and share practice with staff from within the school and other schools. Even

though schools recognise that there are disadvantages in terms of opportunities for effective group discussions and the loss of informal interaction in school, many leaders feel that the situation has resulted in greater sharing of practice than was the case prior to the pandemic. Many leaders feel that the pandemic has encouraged staff to be more confident in sharing and developing their practice and has afforded more opportunities for teachers to observe each other teach. They welcome the more open and reflective culture they have developed. They also feel that it has made staff focus more closely on teaching and learning in meetings.

Cameo – **Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Is Coed**

In Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Is Coed, senior leaders create a fortnightly pedagogy newsletter for staff. This summarises and collates ideas from social media platforms, blogs and articles and poses specific questions to be discussed in departmental meetings.

Sharing good practice amongst staff is central to the school's development of pedagogy during the pandemic. Each department or area collects examples of good practice, for example through screen shots of effective practice that heads of department note in lessons. The school has developed a website and playlist for staff that provide a central point for them to access resources to support remote teaching. For example, there are quick links to examples of good practice, 'how to' videos, slides containing clips from a range of lessons, links to useful apps and websites, along with agreed slides that all staff use to introduce and end remote lessons.

Senior leaders hold staff meetings on Google Meet, so that staff understand pupils' experiences better as they attend the meetings as the pupils would. Senior leaders model pedagogical best practice during the meetings. For example, they use Google Slides to model how pupils can work collaboratively and how staff can monitor each pupil during live lessons, much as they would in a classroom.

A minority of schools have encouraged their teachers to develop approaches to professional enquiry. In the main this is focused on aspects that will improve the quality of teaching and learning both at a distance and face-to-face. In many cases, leaders feel that the pandemic has encouraged more staff to engage in research.

Cameo – Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bryn Tawe

Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Bryn Tawe has a research team to investigate effective methods for teaching and assessment. The team is made up of senior leaders and teachers and is responsible for researching different teaching and assessment methods and on ensuring that all teaching and learning decisions are based on the latest research. Currently, the school has four main focus areas for this research: improving pupils' literacy skills, explanations and modelling, checking understanding and developing independent learning skills.

The research team identify relevant research and engage with all staff to identify training needs. These findings are used to support the school to plan their professional learning approach. Leaders feel that this is supporting staff well. For

example, the professional learning to develop teachers' questioning and the targeting of misconceptions has supported teachers to improve their questioning during distance learning activities.

The research team produce and share resources with all staff based on their findings. Teachers use these resources and then provide feedback to the research team on their effectiveness. This enables the research team to use feedback to improve resources and develop teaching and learning approaches.

Cameo – Ysgol Gyfun Gwyr

In its role as one of the Welsh Government's professional learning schools and as a lead school for professional learning in the ERW region, Ysgol Gyfun Gwyr uses professional enquiry to develop its planning for the delivery of the Curriculum for Wales. This approach aims to develop staff's understanding of the principles of the Curriculum for Wales and strategies for embedding it successfully. In light of this, leaders decided to earmark a fortnightly lesson for all staff as a lesson of enquiry. This is an opportunity to browse articles, collect data, interview learners and formulate strategies to enrich teaching, learning and assessment for learning activities.

Many schools have continued to engage in the support that the regional consortia and local authorities have provided. In general, schools have found this support to be helpful. Leaders have been particularly positive about the offer of online professional learning and the availability of recorded sessions. They feel that it has reduced travel time and that more staff have been able to engage with the training.

Schools have worked with regional consortia to provide professional learning for newly qualified teachers (NQTs). Although, overall, provision for NQTs varies across schools. In most cases NQTs are engaging in the whole school programme for professional learning. However, in some cases, newly qualified teachers are not receiving additional support to develop their teaching. Many schools are worried about their NQTs as they had so little face-to-face teaching experience last year.

There is similar variation in the provision for initial teacher education (ITE) students. For example, students from one university started teaching earlier than those from another, meaning that they gained more experience and practice. Similarly, in some schools they help to deliver live lessons alongside teachers whereas in others they have no experience of live teaching.

Leadership

Flexibility and agile working

Secondary school leaders have demonstrated significant flexibility and agility in their response to the pandemic. They have become increasingly adept at managing the operational arrangements and health and safety requirements brought about by the

pandemic while also responding to the needs of the school community and continuing with 'usual' school business. They have often been required to act swiftly and at short notice in response to changing guidelines and decisions made at a national level.

Leaders have had to adapt their improvement plans and introduce new priorities according to the changing circumstances. In some cases, schools have accelerated progress against existing priorities, such as those around digital skills or parental engagement. In other cases, they have adapted existing priorities, such as those around teaching and learning or curriculum development to reflect the context at the time. In other examples, schools have paused work on pre-pandemic priorities in order to focus on COVID-19 related work. Where this has happened, these priorities are often linked to Curriculum for Wales.

Many leaders report that the changes brought about by the pandemic has made them reflect on their practices and ways of working. For example, some report that they intend to change their policies and practices around homework, and that remote learning offers new ways to support pupils who have difficulties attending school. The pandemic has necessitated many changes to the ways in which schools operate, and many leaders report that they have found several of these to be beneficial, and plan to retain these changes. For example, some leaders report that changes to movement around the school and entering and exiting classrooms have resulted in better behaviour. School staff and leaders have also found that online meetings are often more efficient.

Managing operational arrangements

Due to the need for leaders to respond regularly to the events of the pandemic, leaders report that they have less time to think and plan strategically. A large proportion of time is taken up with meetings around COVID-19 operational guidance, the administration of COVID-19 test and trace protocols, the provision of distance learning, guidance to support teachers to produce accurate Centre-Determined Grades and the revision of school policies in line with these developments. A very few schools have increased the capacity of the senior leadership team through the introduction of temporary associate assistant headteacher positions.

During the autumn term, a minority of schools adapted the timing of the school day. In some cases, that meant that the school day ended between 1.40 and 2.15 p.m. Timings have been adjusted to allow shorter, split lunchtimes or in order for bus companies to transport primary and secondary pupils separately to reduce virus transmission. During the second lockdown, schools have varied the timing and organisation of the school day to support pupils' engagement with online learning. Some schools have followed the usual school timetable, while others have shortened or lengthened lesson, introduced breaks between lessons or created a wellbeing session to reduce the amount of time pupils spend on screen.

Generally, schools have provided opportunities for Year 11 and Year 13 to attend school regularly from the 15th of March onwards. During this period teachers are providing both face-to-face and distance learning for pupils. Many schools are gradually increasing the number of pupils attending the school site to include pupils from key stage 3 and Year 10 and Year 12, though this varies significantly from

school to school. For example, face-to-face provision varies from between a few hours on one day to five full days for key stage 3 pupils.

Communication

Throughout the pandemic, schools have adapted their methods of communication and reacted well to the need for messages to be conveyed clearly and swiftly to parents, staff and pupils. Leaders make good use of technology to communicate through social media posts and materials on their websites. Schools prepare video messages when appropriate and many headteachers share messages through video blogs. Most schools have reviewed their reports to parents and many include information regarding engagement in distance learning.

> **Cameo – Risca Community Comprehensive School**
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> In order to support staff wellbeing, the headteacher at Risca Community Comprehensive School held training for middle leaders on communication during the crisis. The training focused on how to use email and communicate messages carefully, how to phrase things, how to focus on solutions and how to explain the rationale behind decisions. For example, one activity involved considering a poorly worded email and creating an alternative email that conveyed the same message in a gentler way.

Communication with pupils has been paramount in ensuring their safety and wellbeing as well as ensuring continuity in their learning. Schools have continued with their systems of regular check-ins on wellbeing and kept pace with information on lessons and expectations for learning.

Senior leaders utilise technology to communicate with staff safely and within current guidance. Staff briefings, departmental meetings and teach meets are held online and leaders report that they are much more focused on teaching and learning. Many find this an effective use of time and plan to continue with some online meetings post pandemic. A few schools feel that online meetings are a barrier to networking effectively and sharing good practice through workshops.

Supporting the school community (parents and staff and governors)

Headteachers and leaders are mindful that parents require help to support their children when learning at home. One school provides online tutorials and videos for parents that give tips on how to use technology for online learning. Another school organised three sessions with parents to advise and guide them on their arrangements to teach and assess pupils who are in examination years. Many schools hold online parents' evenings with allocated appointments for each subject. Feedback from parents suggest that this is a preferred method of meeting with teachers as it is more private and focused. Attendance at these meetings seem to be better than usual meetings at the school.

Cameo – Lewis Girls' School

For several years, Lewis Girls' School has had online portfolios for every pupil. In order to focus parents' evenings on pupil progress rather than other issues, parents look at these portfolios with teachers during parents' evenings. The digital nature of this practice means that this has worked particularly well during the pandemic, when the school had to move their parents' evenings online.

Governors' meetings have continued online, with documents being shared electronically. Although some schools were initially slow to commence full governing body meetings online, mainly due to technical difficulties, most now regularly meet through 'Teams' or 'Zoom'.

Leaders provide continuous support for staff wellbeing and work life balance. They find that staff are more anxious than for the previous reopening. Staff are also concerned about the workload involved with providing distance learning and face to face teaching when some pupils attend and others are required to stay at home.

Collaboration and school to school working

Most headteachers report that fellow headteachers have been an important source of support. This has been particularly valued by headteachers who took up their posts during or immediately prior to the pandemic. In most cases, headteachers have met frequently throughout the pandemic to share experiences and ideas and to work collaboratively, both within and across sectors.

Where schools have had an opportunity to collaborate with other schools they have found this beneficial. Local authorities and regional consortia have supported this collaboration through their professional learning offer and the facilitation of meetings. A few schools have collaborated to develop resources in response to specific needs within their own context, for example to develop resources to develop Welsh oracy skills.

Monitoring and evaluation

As the 2020-2021 academic year has progressed, many leaders have re-established their monitoring and evaluation processes. They have adapted their processes to conform to health and safety requirements and leant more heavily on activities that are easier to manage under COVID-19 conditions. For example, prior to the Christmas lockdown period leaders in a few schools conducted learning walks where they observed lessons from classroom doorways in order to maintain social distancing. In other schools, leaders conducted work scrutiny as they usually would, but allowing for time to quarantine books. Schools have made increasing use of pupil, staff and parent questionnaires, and to a lesser extent focus groups, in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in provision.

During the post-Christmas lockdown, schools have had more structures in place to monitor the quality of online provision than during the previous lockdown. In many cases, this involves senior leaders and heads of departments or faculties becoming members of online classes and sampling the provision. In a minority of cases,

leaders are observing live lessons. However, the nature, frequency and rigour of monitoring activities vary widely, and in some cases systems are ad hoc, rather than formalised.

Schools' systems to monitor pupil engagement have also become more sophisticated over time. Most schools now have agreed criteria to define engagement and are able to more effectively track and monitor pupil engagement. These criteria cover a range of factors such as attendance at live lessons or form periods, submission of work, and quality of work. However, difficulties remain with precise tracking and monitoring of pupil engagement when they are learning from home. For example, average engagement percentages may mask significant variation between subjects. Similarly, pupils' presence in online lessons does not necessarily equate to engagement. Other pupils may not attend any live lessons but do access all materials asynchronously. In addition, variation remains in terms of the frequency of monitoring and contacting pupils and parents. Some schools register pupils in every lesson and pupils are contacted immediately if they fail to attend, others monitor and contact on a daily basis and some monitor weekly or fortnightly.

Many schools are using variations on these evaluation processes to identify strengths and opportunities to share good practice. Schools are also identifying areas in need of improvement and making changes as a result. For example, schools have changed the length of lessons, introduced more breaks and adapted the timetable in response to their findings. In other examples, schools have adapted the professional learning provision to support whole-school foci and the needs of individual practitioners. However, due to current circumstances, schools have found it challenging to fully evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in particular.

Accelerating learning (RRRS) grant

Overall, schools have received useful information about the Welsh Government's 'Recruit, Recover, Raise standards: the accelerating learning programme' grant, from local authorities and regional consortia. Schools have adopted a wide variety of approaches when planning how to use the grant. The manner in which schools have used and monitored the grant varies greatly across Wales.

Overall, school leaders are concerned about pupils' literacy skills in particular. Welsh-medium and bilingual schools are very concerned about pupils' Welsh language skills. In general, leaders' main focus for any additional provision is to support pupils in Year 11 and Year 13 and for core subjects.

Positive uses of the grant

- Many schools use this funding to support pupils' literacy and numeracy skills, and offer interventions to pupils who needed additional support. These schools continue to offer this provision remotely, by using teaching assistants or through employing additional staff

- A minority of schools have appointed additional teachers for English, mathematics and Welsh to reduce class sizes and to allow more flexibility when allocating staff to target groups.

- A few schools have used the grant to plan alternative provision for pupils that have found re-engaging with learning difficult following the initial lockdown period. These schools have appointed additional members of staff, including teaching assistants and learning coaches, to offer a range of activities alongside the core curriculum. Examples of this include running additional wellbeing support sessions and providing revision or catch up sessions after school.

- A very few schools are providing targeted support to develop individual pupils' digital competency.

Challenges

- Generally, leaders have found it challenging to recruit new teachers, particularly in Welsh-medium schools and in areas of economic deprivation.

- Many leaders indicate a shortage of mathematics teachers, which has limited their opportunities to plan and spend this grant.

- Many leaders report that they are unable to recruit teachers to meet pupils' needs quickly enough.

- A number of headteachers noted that the staff employed to support pupils could be used in synchronous learning during the lockdown period.

- Headteachers welcome the funding but are mindful of the fact that it is time limited, and therefore challenging in terms of the school's long term planning, and that the funding can only be spent on specific aspects

> **Cameo – Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Is Coed**
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> Ysgol Gwent Is Coed, a Welsh-medium secondary school, has appointed a full-time language support teacher to work with pupils that have joined the school through a language immersion programme. The intention is that this teacher will also support pupils who are struggling with language acquisition across the curriculum following the lockdown period.

Headteacher wellbeing and impact on leaders

Senior leaders, and headteachers in particular, have had little respite since the beginning of the pandemic. In addition to their usual responsibilities, they spend a great deal of time, including out of school hours, dealing with COVID-19 related work, such as managing the lateral flow tests for staff and pupils. There are also concerns regarding the workload for headteachers in managing the appeals process.

Headteachers and leaders have found it challenging to manage messages and plan appropriately when they have no or very little prior notice of public announcements on issues such as returning to school or arrangements for examinations. They start receiving queries from parents, pupils and staff before they have had time to read the required information and consider actions in the context of their own school.

Keeping abreast of frequently changing guidance and messages from a range of different sources also puts additional pressure on headteachers.

Managing resources

Headteachers have deployed teaching assistants and pastoral mentors to support pupils' learning and wellbeing through both face-to-face and digital provision. Many schools have allocated teaching assistants to online classrooms in order to support pupils with their work. Pastoral staff have contacted pupils that have not engaged with learning by telephone to offer assistance. In addition, schools have invited pupils who did not engage well with learning or who have struggled with school work, in to school, where they are supported by staff.

During the autumn term and the second lockdown, schools continued to loan out digital equipment to pupils who did not have ICT equipment at home or to pupils where one device was shared by several siblings. This has allowed pupils to access live lessons, pre-recorded video clips, digital resources, tasks and activities via online platforms. A few headteachers express frustration that the delivery of devices ordered to support staff and pupils with distance learning has taken several months. A few schools are exploring how they can sustain and expand schemes which loan out ICT equipment to support pupils who do not have suitable digital equipment at home. Generally, schools are beginning to plan how they can make more use of digital platforms for future learning, for example to further develop pupils' digital skills and to enhance classroom teaching.