



Summary of engagement calls and visits to schools and PRUs

Autumn 2021

What was the purpose of the report?

During the pandemic, Estyn introduced a programme of remote and face-to-face engagement with all schools. This enabled inspectors to gather evidence of the impact of the pandemic on pupils and staff. This report summarises the findings from our engagement with schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) during the autumn term 2021. It identifies key messages that schools and PRUs need to consider as they continue with their work to support recovery and reform.

During this period, we made engagement visits and phone calls to 79 primary schools, 20 secondary schools, 2 all-age schools, 2 maintained special schools and 2 PRUs. We made visits to a further 38 primary schools, 57 secondary schools, 6 special schools and 1 PRU through our thematic work and visited 28 schools and PRUs in follow-up.

The report is based on visits to classrooms and discussions with school leaders, teachers, and pupils, either remotely or in person. Proportions relate to the sample of schools that we contacted during this period.

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Main findings

Learner and staff well-being

Nearly all leaders across all sectors reported that the wellbeing of pupils and staff continued to be their main focus during the autumn term. This has been important in helping to support the physical and emotional well-being of all and in providing a safe and supportive learning environment. Leaders noted that most pupils have enjoyed being in school, socialising with their peers and engaging in face-to-face learning.

A few pupils have struggled to reintegrate and conform successfully to new expectations and routines, such as staggered start and end times of the day. This is particularly true of pupils in special schools and PRUs and appears to reflect the increasing social, emotional and behavioural needs that staff are currently addressing.

Schools reported good engagement from many pupils since the start of the new academic year. The most common concern in secondary schools was around pupils' weakened oracy skills and the decrease in their confidence to contribute to class activities.

Most schools reported providing more support and interventions than before the pandemic. Most leaders state that providing wellbeing interventions and programmes within schools has had a positive impact on reducing pupil anxiety and stress, although older pupils in exam years remain concerned about the arrangements for awarding qualifications this summer.

Most schools and PRUs identified that they have a broad range of strategies that promote pupils' well-being. These supportive approaches include positive professional working relationships with teaching staff as well as consistency in approach. Many are making greater use of therapeutic play activities to reinforce pupils' social and emotional development.

Nearly all school leaders considered that they now have a better understanding of the needs and circumstances of the families within their school communities. Leaders identified that this has improved the collaboration and working relationships between school and home.

Nearly all leaders told us that staff anxiety and stress has continued to be a cause for concern. Many said that increased staff absences due to pandemic related illness or stress has been one of the biggest issues when trying to keep schools open.

Leaders in special schools and PRUs report that staff absence is also having a negative impact on pupils' progress. For example, pupils with complex difficulties often find it challenging to develop relationships and have difficulty learning effectively with unfamiliar staff.

Nearly all leaders stated that the term had continued to be very challenging due to the rapid changes in guidance and having to make the necessary adjustments to

learning environments to keep people safe. Nearly all stated that they and their staff felt very tired and, at times, overwhelmed during the term.

Curriculum

Most primary schools spoke optimistically about the potential benefits of the Curriculum for Wales. They welcome the opportunity to work more flexibly and can see the benefits of an approach and content that is tailored to the needs and interests of their pupils.

Many secondary schools have continued to develop their vision and to design and trial aspects of the Curriculum for Wales. However, there is considerable variation in terms of how prepared they are for implementing the curriculum.

Special schools and PRUs confirm that the four purposes of the curriculum are at the heart of their development of educational experiences. While they often talked confidently about how they are developing their curricular, for some the operational challenges of the pandemic have led to a pause in their development of this work.

In many primary schools, leaders have worked thoughtfully with stakeholders to establish a vision for the curriculum. In the strongest schools this vision reflects the local context of the school and the needs of pupils well.

A minority of secondary schools have a clear strategic plan where they have considered short, mid and long-term priorities for the development of the Curriculum for Wales. A few regularly evaluate their approaches to curriculum design and development to identify strengths and area for improvement before making timely adaptations. However, not all are thinking strategically enough about how their curriculum will deliver the aims and ambitions of the Curriculum for Wales.

Schools originally identified as pioneer schools and non-pioneer schools have often reported notably different experiences in planning for the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales. Often, non-pioneer schools feel that they have not had the time to develop the curriculum that pioneer schools had, nor has the learning and experiences that pioneer schools gained been shared with them well enough.

Despite generally positive attitudes towards the opportunities for development afforded by the Curriculum for Wales, perceived barriers, such as a lack of certainty around qualifications, continue to impede progress in a majority of secondary schools.

Many primary and secondary schools continue to request additional guidance on areas, such as planning for progression.

Teaching

A majority of primary schools have thought carefully about how they can improve teaching to support the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales. The most effective schools have developed a whole school, strategic approach to sharing good practice and improving teaching.

A majority of secondary schools are increasingly focusing on developing teachers' understanding of what constitutes effective teaching as part of curriculum developments.

Both primary and secondary schools often use the 12 pedagogical principles outlined in the Successful Futures¹ report to help inform initiatives to improve teaching.

In a minority of secondary schools, leaders shared their understanding of how improving the quality of teaching and developing an understanding of the interdependence between the curriculum and effective pedagogy will provide a sound foundation for their new curriculum.

Many leaders across all schools and PRUs identify concerns about assessment and progression in the Curriculum for Wales, especially over identifying and describing what progress through the curriculum should look like.

A very few primary schools are using curriculum guidance confidently to develop a picture of what progress will look like through their own individual curricula.

Many special schools and PRUs are focusing teaching on mitigating the impact of the pandemic by teaching pupils in small groups or on an individual basis. They identify that having to consider different pupils' experiences during the pandemic has improved the level of planning and support for individual pupils.

Additional learning needs (ALN)

Nearly all leaders in schools and PRUs reported that despite the disruption caused by the pandemic they have continued to reform their provision to meet the requirements in the Additional Learning Needs Code..

Nearly all additional learning needs coordinators (ALNCos) have a positive view of person-centred practice (PCP) and most view the ALN reforms as a positive development. Many noted that pupils and parents appreciate the changes in how the school seeks their views, how meetings are held and how information is shared.

In nearly all schools and PRUs, ALNCos have a secure understanding of the new code and the concept of PCP. In primary schools, many ALNCos have transferred their knowledge and understanding to other staff successfully.

Secondary schools noted that while some staff have received training on ALN reform, which has resulted in a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities in providing universal support for pupils with ALN, this is still not always embedded across all areas of their school. Ensuring that all teaching staff realise that provision for ALN is everyone's responsibility remains a challenge where teachers still see themselves as subject specialists and do not routinely consider the needs of pupils with ALN when they plan and deliver lessons.

¹ Donaldson, G. (2015) Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales. Cardiff: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2018-03/successful-futures.pdf>

Most leaders stated that the training provided by the local authority and regional consortia on ALN reform had been helpful. For example, local authorities have provided effective professional learning opportunities including workshops, on-line modules, professional discussion opportunities and good quality resources for staff to use.

Most schools and PRUs have identified those pupils who need specialised ALN intervention and have mapped out the universal provision needs of other pupils. In most schools, there is a range of suitable interventions, support packages and curriculum provision at all of these levels.

ALNCos and leaders in Welsh-medium and bilingual schools are concerned that there remains a lack of screening assessments, support resources and intervention programmes available in the Welsh language.

Many ALNCos in the primary sector have worked in partnership within their cluster of schools to create pamphlets and letters which inform parents of the ALN reforms and how they will affect their children. In nearly all cases, ALNCos in secondary schools stated that there was effective planning and support at cluster level.

Across all sectors, ALNCos noted significant challenges regarding time constraints and administration requirements and report that the writing of IDPs is time consuming.

Professional learning

Despite the pandemic, many schools have focused on providing professional learning opportunities for staff to improve the quality of teaching and to prepare for the Curriculum for Wales.

Professional learning has continued on-line in many special schools and PRUs, and leaders described the benefits of accessing professional learning in this way.

A majority of secondary schools have supported staff to use research and enquiry to contribute to improving aspects of teaching and learning. Leaders in these schools feel that this is helping staff to prepare for the delivery of the Curriculum for Wales.

Many primary schools and a minority of secondary schools have introduced coaching as an approach to professional learning. This approach also supports collaboration between schools and clusters, and between staff within and across areas of learning and experience.

A majority of leaders identified that they had received support from regional consortia and local authorities on developing a vision for, and considering the principles of, the Curriculum for Wales. In general, many schools would like more professional learning on areas such as curriculum progression, monitoring and recording pupil progress and more practical and bespoke support for designing and developing their curriculum.

In a minority of schools, there has been minimal professional learning for staff around curriculum design, the four purposes and areas of learning and experience.

Staff in these schools often do not have a strong understanding of, or the expertise to develop, a curriculum that is cohesive and shows progression.

Special schools and PRUs continue to be restricted in their ability to visit other providers and to work collaboratively with colleagues in other schools. As a result, opportunities to share effective practice in person remain restricted.

Leadership

Nearly all leaders continued to identify that leading a school in a pandemic has been challenging and their priority has been to keep everyone safe and to maintain the wellbeing of staff and pupils.

Leaders have been mindful of not overloading staff when they have been under pressure for a considerable time. Despite this, there has been notable staff absence due to pandemic-related issues or stress. This has often had an adverse impact on preparations for the Curriculum for Wales and ALN reform.

Many leaders in the secondary sector felt that the autumn term was the most challenging period of the whole pandemic. Curriculum change and ALN reform contributed to the significant pressure felt by leaders. Despite this, they displayed a broadly positive attitude to the opportunities provided by the Curriculum for Wales.

In a majority of secondary schools, senior leadership teams have developed a vision for implementing change successfully. However, leaders reported that COVID-19 has slowed progress towards the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales and the development of a local curriculum.

Many leaders in primary schools feel that they have created a positive environment, where creativity and experimentation are encouraged. Nonetheless, many say that challenges associated with the pandemic continued to hamper the pace and effectiveness of many of their plans.

The schools that appear to be most prepared for the implementation of Curriculum for Wales are those where leaders have allocated time and space for staff to develop their thinking and expertise.

Where leaders raised particular concerns, it was frequently around identifying what progression through the Curriculum for Wales should look like in their schools and what form assessment should take. Most leaders told us that they were unsure about these areas and would appreciate further guidance.

Many leaders noted that it was not always possible to carry out their usual self-evaluation activities due to the restrictions associated with the pandemic. They wanted to evaluate provision and standards thoroughly but were keen not to add any further pressure to an already tired workforce.

Detailed findings

Wellbeing

Nearly all leaders across all sectors reported that the wellbeing of pupils and staff continued to be their focus during the autumn term. Leaders noted that most pupils have enjoyed being back in school, socialising with their peers and engaging in face-to-face learning. The behaviour and attitudes to learning of many pupils is good.

Many leaders shared that pupils have shown a great deal of resilience and have adapted well to changes to school timetables and routines. In a minority of primary schools, staff have taken the opportunity to incorporate their work on wellbeing into their schemes of work and classroom practice.

Generally, secondary schools identified that attendance is good considering the challenging situation regarding the pandemic. They reported an increase in attendance in the second part of the autumn term due to fewer COVID-19 cases amongst pupils. However, in the majority of schools, a very few pupils still have not returned to face-to-face learning since the start of the first lockdown. This is mainly due to emotional or mental health issues.



For a few pupils who were a cause for concern prior to the onset of COVID-19, the pandemic has exacerbated issues. In most cases, school leaders recognised that pupils who did not engage well with learning prior to the start of the pandemic continued to be a cause for concern. A few pupils in special schools and PRUs have struggled to reintegrate and conform successfully to expectations and routines. This appears to reflect the increasing social, emotional and behavioural needs that staff are currently addressing.

Schools reported good engagement from many pupils since the start of the new academic year. The most common concern in secondary schools was around pupils' weakened oracy skills and the decrease in their confidence to contribute to class activities. Staggered lunches and a reduction in the length of time for the lunch period meant that some schools did not provide lunchtime clubs and other social activities. This can have a negative effect on pupils' social skills. Leaders in special schools and PRUs shared concerns about not being able to develop learning experiences fully, such as exposing pupils to new and unfamiliar experiences outside of the familiar classroom.

There is an increase in the number of pupils eligible for free school meals across many schools, with a few schools noting a substantial increase from the start of the pandemic. This greater level of deprivation has led to an increased need for schools to amend their provision to support pupils' wellbeing and learning.

Nearly all leaders in special schools and PRUs shared clear approaches to assessing, monitoring, and evaluating pupil well-being. This allows staff to identify barriers to learning and helps them know when and how to intervene or provide support. For example, at one special school, the school's educational psychologist works closely with pupils and their families to monitor and to support their well-being. They provide a point of contact for other agencies working with the child. In this way, pupils access appropriate help on a regular basis when needed.

Most leaders state that providing wellbeing interventions and programmes within schools has had a positive impact on reducing pupil anxiety and stress. Many primary schools have invested in staff professional development so that they are able to provide direct support for nearly all their pupils.

Cameo – staff and pupil wellbeing questionnaires

At Ysgol Y Llys, Denbighshire, leaders have given pupils and staff the opportunity to share their feelings and concerns through wellbeing questionnaires. Leaders analysed the results and looked for trends and common themes. As a consequence, the school was able to target the specific wellbeing needs of the staff and pupils and put in place the necessary interventions. Now the school has a permanent wellbeing officer who leads on intervention strategies and provides the required support for staff and pupils across the school.

Most schools reported providing more support and interventions than before the pandemic. In secondary schools these often include:

- revised PSE programme to respond to the challenges of the pandemic, such as building resilience, prioritising emotional and mental health, dealing with exam anxiety
- more school-based interventions, such as extended form time for social skills programmes and promoting resilience
- investment in more wellbeing staff and officers
- professional learning for all school staff on well-being matters, such as the trauma-informed schools training
- increase in pupil voice activities such as regular questionnaires

A few secondary schools shared concerns regarding their oldest pupils, particularly those in Year 13. These pupils are facing external exams for the first time and are less independent and resilient than pupils from previous years. Generally, they have weaker revision skills and techniques and are showing signs of anxiety.

Most schools and PRUs identified that they have a broad range of strategies that promote pupils' well-being. These supportive approaches include positive professional working relationships with teaching staff as well as consistency in approach. For example, at one PRU, at the beginning of the day all pupils receive a one-to-one check-in with a familiar mentor, as well as daily interventions such as mindfulness and high energy activities to promote well-being. Many schools and PRUs are making greater use of therapeutic play activities to reinforce pupils' social and emotional development.

Nearly all school leaders considered that they now have a better understanding of the needs and circumstances of the families within their school communities. In many primary schools, staff have engaged with parents through wellbeing workshops or have held virtual meetings with parents to discuss their child's needs. Leaders identified that this has improved the collaboration and working relationships between the school and home setting.

A few leaders stated that they had seen an increase in referrals to outside agencies due to concerns around pupil behaviour and attendance. Schools serving communities with high levels of disadvantage continue to face complex challenges. Leaders in primary schools noted that in these circumstances, the support of educational welfare officers and social services has been key to improving the conditions for certain pupils.

Nearly all schools reported an increase in child protection referrals over time and that they are still making as many referrals as they did on return to school following the first national lockdown. Secondary school staff also reported an increase in reports of domestic abuse. Across nearly all schools, a few families have significant challenges and are receiving regular support from wellbeing staff as well as from external agencies.

Cameo – individualised support to improve well-being

Cefn Saeson Comprehensive School, Neath Port Talbot, have created a register of vulnerable pupils and have allocated a 'key worker' for each of these pupils. The key workers were chosen carefully to ensure that they knew the pupil well, had a good relationship with them and understood their specific situations. Senior leaders feel that this ensures that all pupils have a strong, supportive relationship with a member of staff who is also able to link with the pupils' families. Pupils responded positively to this approach and feel that they have a member of staff that they can trust and to whom they can go when they need help and support.

Nearly all leaders told us that staff anxiety and stress has continued to be a cause for concern. Many said that increased staff absences due to pandemic related illness or stress has been one of the biggest issues when trying to keep schools open. Leaders have found it increasingly difficult to find cover for members of staff who are absent.

Many in special schools and PRUs described a strong relationship within staff teams and note a range of examples where staff have gone above and beyond what would usually be expected of them during the pandemic. At one special school teaching staff have access to the school's psychotherapist to discuss their own, as well as pupils' well-being.

Cameo – beneficial support for well-being

At The Court special school, Cardiff, the school's psychotherapist provides support to all members of the school community. Their role is to support the school, as well as supporting individual staff to maintain positive relationships with pupils, parents and carers. They are a point of contact for all agencies involved with pupils and help support cohesive working. In some cases, social services refer parents to them for further support to help ensure that pupils can be a member of a secure family unit.

To support staff, the psychotherapist has delivered training on topics such as relationships, psychology and attachment. This helps with building trusting working relationships with pupils and their parents/carers. This is key to helping pupils to rediscover their trust in the process of learning and support their personal, social, emotional development. Where required, the psychotherapist provides extra support for individual staff or staff teams who are struggling with the challenges of their role. For example, they provide targeted support and training on how to meet the individual needs of pupils.

Nearly all leaders stated that the term had continued to be very challenging due to the rapid changes in guidance and having to make the necessary adjustments to learning environments to keep people safe. Nearly all stated that they and their staff felt very tired and, at times, overwhelmed during the term.

Curriculum

Most schools have begun to prepare for the Curriculum for Wales and spoke optimistically about its potential benefits. They talked positively about the work they have done so far and the difference it is making, particularly in terms of engaging and enthusing pupils. All schools welcome the opportunity to work more flexibly with the curriculum and can see the benefits of an approach and content that is tailored to the needs and interests of their pupils. Many schools have placed a greater emphasis on Cynefin and promoting Welsh history and culture within their vision and in their curriculum offer.

While nearly all secondary schools we spoke with are broadly positive about opportunities provided by the Curriculum for Wales, there is considerable variation in terms of how prepared they are for implementing the curriculum. This is due in part to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant operational challenges schools have faced.



Since September, many secondary schools have continued to develop their vision and to design and trial aspects of the Curriculum for Wales. In a few cases, schools have moved too swiftly into developing content for the areas of learning and experience before truly exploring their vision for their curriculum and evaluating the quality of teaching at a whole school level.

Around half of special schools and PRUs talked confidently about the strategies they are using to develop their curricular, such as evaluating and adapting themes for learning, realigning staffing responsibilities and developing curriculum planning to deliver the areas of learning and experiences (AoLE). However, others explain that the operational challenges of the pandemic have led to a pause in their development of this work. Most leaders identified that the principles of the Curriculum for Wales match well with the approaches to learning followed by most in their sectors and gives them the freedom to develop learning experiences which suit the needs of their pupils.

In many primary schools, leaders have worked with stakeholders to establish a vision for the curriculum. In the strongest schools this vision reflects the local context of the school and the needs of its pupils well. In these providers, leaders have worked thoughtfully with staff and pupils to consider how the four purposes can best be interpreted and applied to reflect the context of their school. A minority of schools have aligned their vision to the four purposes of the curriculum but have not yet considered well enough how to make this vision a reality for pupils. In a few schools there is little alignment between the vision for the school's curriculum and its practical application. Many of these schools have struggled to develop their approach to the curriculum since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020.

Cameo – using census information to aid curriculum design

In Alexandra Primary School, Wrexham, the school used census information to help understand the needs of their pupils and the potential impact this may have on their aims and curriculum development. For example, they noted that 46% of families didn't have cars, 86% lived in rented accommodation, there were minimal community safe spaces available for pupils and that the most prevalent types of crime in the area included domestic violence and anti-social behaviour. As a result, they ensured that aspects, such as a greater focus on diversity, trips to outside of the local environment, hands-on outdoor learning and pedagogy related to resilience and respect were integrated into their curriculum offer.

Most primary schools have designed their curriculum around termly or half-termly themes. Planning for these themes generally take into account the statements of 'what matters', the four purposes of the curriculum and cross cutting themes appropriately. Often teachers plan interesting tasks at the beginning and end of units of work to engage pupils and to consolidate their learning. For example, schools sometimes begin themes with an off-site visit or with a day of whole-school activities. In many schools, themes are shared across classes or across the whole school, with staff planning teaching together to ensure there is continuity and progression across phases. However, in a few cases, these themes focus too heavily on one area of learning or do not provide sufficient opportunities for learning across a wide enough

range of knowledge, skills and experiences. In a very few cases schools are relying on 'bought in' schemes of work and are not adapting these well enough to their own context and the needs of their pupils.

Many primary schools have started to reflect on their initial early work on the curriculum and have adapted or completely changed their approaches. For example, a few schools recognised that having a one-off week focused on a particular AoLE or theme did not provide enough time to develop the breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding of pupils. Instead, they have reconsidered their approach and integrated aspects of the AoLE and cross curricular skills over longer periods of time. All schools continue to focus on developing literacy, numeracy and digital skills, and are positive about the structure that the related frameworks provide.

Special schools and PRUs confirm that the four purposes of the curriculum are at the heart of their development of educational experiences. For example, at one PRU pupils have the opportunity to develop as enterprising and creative contributors by preparing items as part of their construction lessons to sell at the Christmas fete. They then consider and select charities that would benefit from the money raised by their endeavours. Pupils are given the opportunity to develop as enterprising and creative contributors in this way.

Cameo – responding to the needs of pupils

The PRU at Carmarthenshire Secondary Teaching and Learning Centre offers a range of holistic and bespoke learning experiences based on the needs of pupils. A few pupils have limited motivation, or fear trying new experiences. To help them overcome these challenges, the PRU organised a professional chef to visit and provide pupils with outdoor cooking activities. This experience was planned carefully to ensure it was interesting and safe. As a result, the pupils engaged well and were motivated to succeed and complete the task successfully

A majority of secondary schools have trialled the development of the Curriculum for Wales within one AoLE initially, often humanities. They have gradually increased the involvement of additional departments over time, though this varies from school to school. Schools have adopted different ways to develop their curricula, such as:

- providing opportunities for departments to collaborate on specific aspects, including opportunities to work with literacy, numeracy and information technology co-ordinators to plan provision for skills within the curriculum
- using approaches, such as posing 'big questions' to focus learning on key concepts and skills
- working closely with their cluster primary schools to consider progression in the Curriculum for Wales

A minority of secondary schools have a clear strategic plan where they have considered short, mid and long-term priorities for the development of the Curriculum for Wales. These priorities include aspects such as the development of teaching, ensuring sufficient time for leaders to plan and collaborate and ensuring opportunities for parents, pupils and staff to contribute to the development of the

curriculum. However, not all are thinking strategically enough about how their curriculum will deliver the aims and ambitions of the Curriculum for Wales.

Schools originally identified as pioneer schools and non-pioneer schools have often reported notably different experiences in planning for the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales. Many non-pioneer schools consider that pioneer schools have had a significant advantage over them as they had the benefit of more time to develop and refine their approach to the curriculum without the time pressure that other schools now feel. In addition, pioneer schools had the advantage of speaking regularly and in depth to many other pioneer schools. This enabled them to work collaboratively to compare approaches, share ideas and come to conclusions about what works well and what does not. In general, they were also able to give their staff more time to undertake background reading and classroom-based research. Many non-pioneer schools feel that the learning and experience of pioneer schools has not always been shared well enough with them, both during the pioneering process or subsequently.

A few secondary schools regularly evaluate their approaches to curriculum design and development to identify strengths and area for improvement before making timely adaptations. These adaptations have included:

- a stronger focus on teaching and pedagogy
- provision that offers sufficient challenge for all pupils
- offering a more balanced curriculum that enables pupils to develop knowledge, understanding and skills effectively
- greater breadth and depth of subject specific knowledge, understanding and skills
- providing authentic learning and cross curricular links
- sequencing key concepts effectively to ensure progression
- more opportunities for pupils to make connections between local, Welsh and international contexts
- more opportunities for pupils to consider diversity
- increased and better opportunities for pupils to develop their Welsh language skills

Leaders across all special schools and PRUs identified the continued need for a flexible curriculum to respond to the needs of pupils due to their differing experiences during the pandemic. They continue to highlight the challenges in delivering broad learning experiences for all pupils under current restrictions. They are beginning to resume some off-site activities to ensure rich learning experiences for pupils, including work experience, sports activities and visits to places of interest.

A few leaders in special schools and PRUs have reviewed the learning experiences they were able to offer during the last academic year, particularly throughout the periods of lockdown and distance learning. As a result, they have made changes to the curriculum for the autumn term to ensure pupils' experience a broad balance of all areas of learning.

A majority of leaders identified that they had received support from regional consortia to help them consider a range of areas, such as approaches to developing a vision

for curriculum and teaching and the important principles of the Curriculum for Wales. A majority of schools report that they would have valued more support from regional consortia on the practicalities of curriculum design.

Despite generally positive attitudes towards the opportunities for development afforded by the Curriculum for Wales, perceived barriers continue to impede progress in a majority of secondary schools. These include a lack of certainty around future qualifications and accountability arrangements. Many primary and secondary schools also continue to request additional guidance on assessment and planning for progression.

Teaching

A majority of primary schools have thought carefully about how they can improve teaching to support the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales. The most effective schools have developed a whole school, strategic approach to sharing good practice and improving teaching.

In the most effective schools, leaders have developed a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes effective teaching and shared this with staff. This builds confidence and encourages teachers to trail new approaches and to review their impact on pupils' learning. In these schools, there is a culture of self-reflection and coaching that enables the open sharing of good practice and the willingness of staff to have valuable professional conversations about what works and what doesn't.



A majority of secondary schools are increasingly focusing on developing teachers' understanding of what constitutes effective teaching. A few schools have used teaching bulletins or regular staff briefing sessions to highlight effective pedagogy and shared classroom practice. In some instances, schools have provided coaching to support the development of teaching. Teachers reported that they are focusing on whole school priorities in teaching and developing an understanding of pedagogy in their specific subject areas.

Many secondary schools identified that teachers' confidence in using digital technology to support learning and teaching has developed considerably during the pandemic. In a few schools, teachers have continued to incorporate elements of practice developed during blended learning into their classroom teaching, for example providing recorded verbal feedback on pupils' work using digital apps.

Both primary and secondary schools often use the 12 pedagogical principles outlined in the Successful Futures report to help inform initiatives to improve teaching. Many schools have placed a valuable, renewed focus on formative assessment strategies to ensure effective feedback to pupils as they carry out tasks and undertake their learning.

Cameo – using Estyn's thematic review on Improving Teaching² to improve practice

Leaders at Ysgol Sant Curig, Vale of Glamorgan, used Estyn's thematic review on improving teaching to help improve practice. They used whole-school professional learning time to scrutinise the report carefully with staff and to consider how the teaching strategies outlined fitted with their practice. Teachers considered which elements to best adopt in their classrooms and worked together to implement and embed these identified strategies. One of the positive outcomes of this work is that pupils are increasingly taking more responsibility for their own learning.

The school is now ready to refine this work, and have identified their next steps, including working in groups within the school and across the cluster to develop the six areas of learning and experience and a whole-school approach to assessment and progression. They are using an approach where they set up a triad of teachers to work collaboratively and use the pedagogical principles in Successful Futures to support teaching and to share good practice.

In primary schools where improving teaching is an integral part of preparation for the Curriculum for Wales, leaders and teachers have focused particularly strongly on the elements of teaching that they believe will have the greatest impact on pupils' progress. These include:

- taking greater account of pupils' opinions and interests when planning the curriculum and learning opportunities.
- planning authentic learning contexts to engage pupils more practically in their learning and to help them understand its purpose.

² Estyn (2018) *Improving Teaching*. Cardiff: Estyn. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2020-07/Improving%2520teaching.pdf>

- considering ways to adapt and improve the learning environment for pupils of all ages, including using the outdoors more purposefully and regularly to encourage curiosity and a love of learning in practical and experiential ways.
- improving the questioning skills of teachers and support staff to challenge pupils of all abilities more effectively and to deepen pupils' thinking skills.
- building ways to develop pupils' independent learning skills.

In a minority of secondary schools, leaders shared their understanding of how improving the quality of teaching and developing an understanding of the interdependence between the curriculum and effective pedagogy will provide a sound foundation for their new curriculum. These schools are focusing strongly on developing a curriculum where effective pedagogy is considered at all stages of planning, implementation and evaluation.

In a few primary and secondary schools, leaders have not considered teaching carefully enough. They do not always make strong enough links between improving teaching and developing the curriculum and do not appreciate the considerable impact that high quality teaching will have on the success or otherwise of Curriculum for Wales.

Many leaders across all schools and PRUs identify concerns about assessment and progression in the Curriculum for Wales, and especially over identifying and describing what progress through the curriculum should look like.

A very few primary schools are using curriculum guidance confidently to develop a picture of what progress will look like through their own individual curricula. In these schools, where a vision for progress is more clearly developed, schools are using the frameworks and statements of 'what matters' to plan carefully for progress across the school. They incorporate opportunities for classroom assessment that allow teachers to adapt their practice lesson by lesson, and over time, to move pupils towards overarching aims and objectives. These schools understand that the primary purpose of assessment is as a tool to be used by teachers for evolving effective practice and supporting learning.

Teachers reported that teaching has been particularly challenging during the autumn term. Prior to this term, in secondary schools, whole classes or year groups would isolate if there was a case of COVID-19. This meant that they would be teaching whole classes online or face-to-face. However, in the autumn term, only individuals with COVID-19 and their close contacts had to isolate. This meant that the make-up of classes could be different in every lesson and pupils were at different points in their learning due to differing periods of self-isolation.

Many special schools and PRUs are focusing teaching on mitigating the impact of the pandemic by teaching pupils in small groups or on an individual basis. In general, distance learning is not appropriate or effective for many of their pupils.

A few special schools and PRUs noted that having to consider different pupils experiences during the pandemic has improved the level of planning and support for individual pupils. Many use a 'trauma-informed' approach, where they consider what and how they will teach in response to pupils' personal trauma as well as the effects

of the pandemic. This includes building positive relationships with pupils and responding practically to their identified problems so that they can make progress.

Nearly all special schools and PRUs report that, due to the pandemic, they are currently unable links with other providers to observe and share effective practice. Around half reported that they miss these opportunities for staff as they are a valuable resource for staff development. To try and address this gap, some schools are continuing to share best from their own staff during staff meetings.

Cameo – planning and teaching to address the impact of the pandemic

Leaders at the Llechan Lan Centres PRU, Gwynedd, are concerned about the long-term impact of the pandemic on pupils, particularly on their well-being and oracy skills. Developing oracy skills in Welsh for those pupils who come from homes where English is the main language has been a challenge during periods of lockdown.

The PRU ensures its approach to planning learning focuses on the needs of all pupils. They are helped to develop their Welsh oracy skills through cross-curricular, practical activities, which also support their well-being, such as cooking, physical education or shopping in the local community. As a result, pupils have been supported successfully to develop skills such as self-control, co-operation, self-confidence and turn-taking, alongside the development of their Welsh skills.

Additional learning needs

Nearly all leaders in schools and PRUs reported that despite the disruption caused by the pandemic they have continued to reform their provision to meet the requirements in the new Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (ALNET act). Leaders in special schools and PRUs note that the reforms support the pre-existing ethos of their schools. In nearly all schools and PRUs, ALNCos have a secure understanding of the new code and the concept of person-centred practice.

In primary schools, many ALNCos have transferred their knowledge and understanding to other staff successfully. For example, staff now have a clear understanding of person-centred practice and how this approach improves annual review meetings for pupils with ALN. Despite the confidence in relation to ALN reform in PRUs, leaders feel that there are still some areas which require further clarification, for example on who is responsible for developing individual development plans (IDPs) for pupils with dual registration. Secondary schools noted that there is variability here in terms of responsibilities. While some staff have received training on the ALN reform and on PCP, they note that this is still not embedded enough across all areas of their school.



In the majority of secondary schools, there are plans for further staff training. In a few, ensuring staff's understanding of their responsibility in applying PCP in their planning, teaching and assessment is part of the whole-school development plan. In these schools, staff confidence is developing suitably. However, many ALNCos in the secondary sector felt that ensuring all teaching staff realise that provision for ALN is everyone's responsibility remains a challenge.

Nearly all ALNCos have a positive view of PCP and most view the ALN reform as a positive development. Many noted that pupils and parents appreciate the changes in how the school seeks their views, how meetings are held and how information is shared via IDPs and one-page profiles. One leader of a special school described how they are developing their own IDP format. Overall, ALNCos note that parental engagement has improved due to these changes.

Cameo – effective individual development plans

Pen y Cwm special school, Blaenau Gwent, has been developing its own IDP format over a period of several years. The document is child-friendly and amended at least annually. At annual reviews the IDP is shared on a big screen. This allows all contributors, including staff, parents, other professionals and pupils, where appropriate, to work together to amend key information, such as pupil progress and targets. This approach has been welcomed by parents and professionals alike and means that pupils are involved meaningfully in their reviews.

This school continues to reflect on and develop the effectiveness of practices and have recently updated their systems to ensure compliance with the ALN reform. Leaders have shared this work with other schools within the region.

There was variation in how schools and PRUs conducted their PCP reviews, with some still conducting meetings online and others inviting parents and agencies into school. In many cases, ALNCos considered parental and pupil preferences when deciding how to conduct reviews. This resulted in families feeling more comfortable and thus able to make a better contribution in meetings.

Most leaders stated that the training provided by the local authority and regional consortia on ALN reform had been helpful. Local authorities have provided effective professional learning opportunities including workshops, on-line modules, professional discussion opportunities and good quality resources for staff to use. This has supported schools in gaining a deeper understanding of the changes the act brings. Many additional learning needs coordinators in primary schools have also worked closely with colleagues within their school clusters to share information and best practice.

Most schools and PRUs have identified pupils needing specialised ALN intervention and have mapped out the universal provision needs of other pupils. In most schools, there is a range of suitable interventions, support packages and curriculum provision at all these levels.

Many secondary schools continued to screen pupils in Year 7 in order to gain baseline information. They use this information productively to identify if pupils need literacy and numeracy support. Many schools provided beneficial group and individual learning experiences, such as specific play therapies and emotional literacy sessions which stimulate pupils' social interaction and support pupils achieve their targets. The role of the teaching assistants is paramount to the success of these interventions and ALNCoS value their skills and commitment.

ALNCoS and leaders in Welsh-medium and bilingual schools are concerned that there remains a lack of screening assessments, support resources and intervention programmes available in the Welsh language.

Many additional learning needs coordinators in the primary sector have worked in partnership within their cluster of schools to create pamphlets and letters which inform parents of the new act and how it will affect their children. In some cases, information is shared through virtual meetings where parents can ask questions and discuss any concerns they may have. However, they identified that staff shortages in local authorities were also having an impact on pupils with ALN, with many pupils having to wait longer to see specialists.

In nearly all cases, ALNCoS in secondary schools stated that there was effective planning and support at cluster level. There were good examples of primary and secondary ALNCoS sharing workload such as writing generic documents and policies, moderating IDPs and generally providing each other with support. This ensured quality and consistency of approach, such as adopting a common provision map, and supports transition of pupils from primary to secondary schools. A few secondary schools benefitted from good practice seen in their cluster primaries. For example, in one cluster, all schools created a common digital presentation to use in progress reviews.

Across all sectors, ALNCoS noted significant challenges regarding time constraints and administration requirements and report that the writing of IDPs is time consuming. In the majority of cases, ALNCoS said that their local authority had provided them with beneficial training and continued to support them in writing IDPs. However, in some cases, ALNCoS in secondary schools noted that the initial momentum from their local authority had not continued and that there was not enough support for the work needed. In a very few cases, the local authority had supported primary schools but had not yet provided any training for their secondary schools.

Whilst in the majority of cases ALNCoS have enough time to carry out their statutory and strategic role, there is still variation in their teaching commitments. For example, in secondary schools a significant few still teach for 20% of the week and, in a very few cases, the ALNCo has a 50% teaching commitment.

Professional learning

Despite the pandemic, many schools have focused on providing professional learning opportunities for staff to improve the quality of teaching and to prepare for the Curriculum for Wales.

For example, a few primary schools have looked at how they can deliver more effective outdoor learning and how they can incorporate this more regularly in their curriculum planning. Leaders in primary schools often explained the importance of including all staff in professional learning to ensure that there is a whole school approach to curriculum development.

In a few primary schools, where there has been a need to react rapidly to circumstances caused by the pandemic, leaders have found it more challenging to maintain a structured approach to professional learning and this has often slowed planned learning linked with the Curriculum for Wales.

Professional learning has continued on-line in many special schools and PRUs, and leaders described the benefits of accessing professional learning in this way. For example, leaders reported that more members of teaching staff have accessed virtual professional learning and can make better use of their time at their school or PRUs rather than travelling distances to attend professional learning events.

Over recent years, primary and secondary schools have broadened their professional learning offer to include more online learning opportunities. These ensure that all staff can engage with the training and revisit recorded training as appropriate. In addition, many secondary schools have continued to provide staff with opportunities to participate in leadership development programmes.

Cameo – support for online professional learning

Bishop Gore School, Swansea, has developed a digital professional learning platform. As a result, instead of working sequentially through a list of professional learning aspects, staff work on the professional learning area most appropriate to them. This system ensures that staff know what their next focus should be and has made workload for staff manageable.

A majority of secondary schools have developed staff's use of research and enquiry to contribute to improving aspects of teaching and learning. Leaders in these schools feel that this is helping staff to prepare for the delivery of the Curriculum for Wales. In a few primary schools, leaders have encouraged teachers to research and develop different pedagogical approaches and to share good practice. This has helped them to refine their provision to best meet pupils' needs.

Cameo – research-based approach to curriculum development

St Joseph's RC High School, Newport, used a research-based approach to develop curriculum and teaching. To ensure that the research is specific and measurable, the school has developed a framework for writing enquiry questions and every department has developed an enquiry question about the new curriculum. Outcomes and understanding from each of the professional enquiries are shared with colleagues. In addition, all enquiries are linked to performance management and feed into department and whole-school evaluation.

A few primary schools have worked with external bodies, such as universities or the National Strategy for Educational Research and Enquiry (NSERE) to focus on approaches based on research. Staff felt that this has allowed them to take more adventurous approaches as their decisions were evidence based.

Most leaders confirmed that recently, they have had more opportunities to focus on professional learning to support the wider strategic priorities identified in their own development plans. A few schools and PRUs continue to be limited in their ability to visit other providers and to work collaboratively with colleagues in other schools due to pandemic constraints. As a result, opportunities to share effective practice in person remain restricted.

Many primary schools and a minority of secondary schools have introduced coaching as an approach to their professional learning. This approach also supports collaboration between schools and clusters, and between staff within and across areas of learning and experience. Leaders in primary schools identify that where this works well, they take ideas from other schools and adapt them carefully to suit their own context. A few schools noted that they would welcome opportunities to work with similar schools outside of their local cluster to see if a commonality of approach would be useful. At the same time, most recognised that their curriculum needs to be relevant to their pupils and bespoke to their school.

A majority of leaders shared that they had received support from regional consortia and local authorities to help them to consider specific issues, such as developing a vision for their curriculum, and considering the important principles of the Curriculum for Wales. Secondary schools noted that they have appreciated the opportunities organised by regional consortia to link with other schools to develop the Curriculum for Wales. While they have valued the opportunities for virtual networking, a few felt that the timing of these meetings was a barrier to all staff benefitting.

Around half of leaders identified that they needed more support with the particular development needs of their schools. Many primary schools have therefore turned to external providers to start them off on their curriculum design journey. Where this has been effective, schools have used this initial input to consider their specific circumstances and to decide what is pertinent to their pupils' needs.

In general, many schools would like more professional learning on areas, such as curriculum progression, monitoring and recording pupil progress and more practical support for designing and developing their curriculum. A few leaders in primary schools expressed concerns about particular challenges, for example accessing professional learning in certain areas of learning and experience, such as science and technology and expressive arts.

In a minority of schools there has been minimal professional learning for staff around curriculum design, the four purposes and areas of learning and experience. Staff in these schools often do not have a strong understanding of, or the expertise to develop, a curriculum that is cohesive and shows progression.

Professional learning in special schools and PRUs has continued to be responsive to the ever-changing situation. For example, it has included training on the development of teaching staff's skills to respond to pupils' well-being and social, emotional, and behavioural needs. One PRU has facilitated training which included a carousel of activities from which staff could choose to attend sessions that were most relevant to their own context. These sessions included aspects such as transgender provision, trauma and attachment. At another special school the school's psychologist has delivered training to staff members on developing therapeutic working relationships with pupils, as well as attachment and developmental trauma. Leaders continue to provide opportunities for procedural training in aspects such as health and safety and safeguarding.

Leadership

Nearly all leaders continued to identify that leading a school in a pandemic has been challenging and their priority has been to keep everyone safe and to maintain the wellbeing of staff and pupils.

Leaders have been mindful of not overloading staff when they have been under pressure for a considerable time and there have been notable staff absences linked to the pandemic. On occasions, this meant limiting professional learning sessions and reducing monitoring in school. In a few cases, this has had an adverse impact on preparations for the Curriculum for Wales and ALN reform.



Many leaders in the secondary sector felt that the autumn term was the most challenging period of the whole pandemic. In addition to the usual work of running a school, leaders continued to manage COVID-19 related issues such as health and safety measures, and increased pupil and staff absence. Curriculum change and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) reform contributed to the significant pressure placed upon leaders and many noted the uncertainty with regards to accountability measures and examinations as an additional concern. They reported that they would appreciate further support to manage these aspects of their work. Despite these challenges, leaders displayed a broadly positive attitude to the opportunities provided by the Curriculum for Wales and the willingness of staff to embrace enhanced cluster working and collaboration between schools.

Many leaders in primary schools feel that they have created a positive environment, where creativity and experimentation are encouraged. Nonetheless, many say that challenges associated with the pandemic continued to hamper the pace and effectiveness of many of their plans. For example, the recurring nature of staff and pupil absences make it hard for teachers and leaders to trial new ideas and initiatives and to evaluate their success.

Our discussions with primary schools confirmed that strong, effective leadership is key to every aspect of curriculum reform. The schools that appear to be most prepared for the implementation of Curriculum for Wales are those where leaders have allocated time and space for staff to develop their thinking and expertise.

Most leaders in all sectors identified difficulties in securing supply cover as an issue. This made it difficult to cover sickness absence or, in a minority of instances, for staff to attend professional learning opportunities linked to changes, such as ALN reform and the Curriculum for Wales. Leaders in smaller primary schools expressed particular concerns, mainly because the headteacher often has substantial teaching responsibilities and staff absences can cause significant disruption. In larger primary schools, headteachers also told us that they had been covering classes regularly due to staff absence.

In many secondary schools, senior leadership teams have developed a vision for implementing change successfully. However, leaders reported that COVID-19 has slowed progress towards the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales and the development of a local curriculum. They attributed this to the lack of face-to-face meetings and opportunities for discussions with and between staff, the need to focus more on improving the skills levels of pupils who have been affected by the pandemic, managing COVID-19 related issues, and staff absence. Another contributory factor included the time-consuming nature of managing Centre Determined grades (CDGs).

A notable outcome of the approach that many leaders have taken throughout the pandemic is the development of a more collaborative culture in schools and the increased willingness of staff to innovate. Schools have had to make changes and adapt their practice with regularity throughout the pandemic. As a result, leaders reported that their staff are more open to change and in secondary schools are beginning to consider different approaches to teaching as a part of the trialling of approaches to the Curriculum for Wales. A majority of primary school leaders noted that they are confident for their staff to try new approaches, evaluate their impact and

refine their processes. Where schools use this cyclical approach, they tend to be further ahead in their preparation for the Curriculum for Wales.

Where leaders raised particular concerns, it was frequently around identifying what progression through the Curriculum for Wales should look like in their schools and what form assessment should take. Most leaders told us that they were unsure about these areas and would appreciate further guidance.

Many leaders noted that it was not always possible to implement their usual self-evaluation activities due to the restrictions associated with the pandemic. For example, most leaders in primary schools noted that they had not conducted lesson observations or specific first-hand observations of teaching and learning in classrooms. As a result, they did not feel as confident as usual in their assessments of pupils' standards or in the quality of classroom provision.

A few school leaders had sought alternative ways to secure an understanding of current quality. In the best examples, leaders gleaned evidence from other sources, such as a greater scrutiny of pupils' work and the online learning materials teachers provided in blended or distance learning sessions.

Cameo – using coaching to improve teaching

Sandycroft Primary School, Flintshire, has evaluated the impact of lesson observations on improving standards of teaching and learning. It was clear that lesson observations were regarded by teachers as high challenge, were having limited impact and did not support a positive learning culture.

At the same time as evaluating lesson observations, the school was developing a mastery approach to teaching maths. Coaching teachers during lessons was a key aspect of this work. Leaders identified that the impact of the coaching in lessons was positive, and the coaching model extended quickly beyond maths lessons to other areas of the curriculum and to all roles within school.

Developing a culture of effective challenge with low threat was a key aspect of this work. All staff were encouraged to highlight areas of weakness with which they need support to improve their teaching or their wider roles within school. Leaders modelled this for staff, and the school was able to use these evaluations to bring about improvements in teaching and learning in a culture that promotes challenge with low threat, and an efficient and effective way to improve teaching.

The school is now using the pedagogical principles of the Curriculum for Wales as the focus for coaching in the school.