



HMCI Annual Report

2022-2023



HMCI's foreword

2022-2023

At Estyn, we are committed to our quality assurance responsibilities and playing a key role in the continual improvement of education and training in Wales. The independent review of our work, *A Learning Inspectorate* (Donaldson, 2018), highlighted the efficient, flexible and innovative nature of the organisation, and the credibility which we enjoy as a result of our independence and professionalism. Since the review we have continued to adapt, aiming to further improve the way in which we work for the benefit of learners in Wales. We have sharpened our focus on identifying how providers, and the wider education and training system, can improve. We have discontinued our use of one-word summative gradings across most sectors. We have enhanced the way in which we work with providers during formal inspections and also as part of our wider evidence gathering and evaluation activities. Drawing on the input of current practitioners remains a key feature of our approach. By acting as peer inspectors and provider nominees, and by taking part in our thematic reviews and feeding into our stakeholder groups, practitioners contribute valuable insights, which we use to inform our work.

We are keen to add value by sharing our findings in a timely and accessible way so that our advice can be readily understood and acted upon. Last October, continuing with the approach we introduced in 2022, we published an early summary of the sector specific findings of the annual report. This approach aims to provide prompt, useful feedback for the education and training workforce and to highlight the examples of effective practice that we have seen during the year. Following on from that early summary, I am now delighted to launch this full Annual Report. It provides considerably more detail and background to our findings, setting out how well each sector in Wales is performing, and also evaluating education and training in the context of a range of cross-cutting key themes. I hope it is of use.

There is much to celebrate about Wales's education and training provision. I visit educational settings of all kinds across Wales almost on a weekly basis. During inspections I hear directly from pupils and older learners, and speak with teachers and support staff members, as well as senior leaders. For me, the strong commitment of educators across Wales is a source of pride. As the inspectorate, our contributions to supporting further improvement are paramount. It is our role to highlight and share the best practice we see across Wales whilst maintaining our impartial approach to evaluation by clearly identifying aspects that need to improve.

Welsh education and training providers face the dual challenges of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic whilst also working to implement improvement focused policy reforms. The shadow of the pandemic remains apparent on learners' wellbeing and the progress that they make. Learner attendance, attitudes to learning and aspects of learners' knowledge and skills remain weaker than pre-pandemic norms. There are also lingering effects on the education and training workforce, with workplace absences compounding the ongoing challenge providers face in recruiting teachers and support staff members across a number of specialisms.



The introduction of Curriculum for Wales ([Welsh Government, 2017a](#)), the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Transformation Programme ([Welsh Government, 2020](#)), the review of school improvement support services ([Welsh Government, 2023a](#)) and the formation of the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) ([Welsh Government, 2017b](#)) are all derived from improvement focused policy reforms and will affect many providers. Whilst the potential long-term benefits of these changes are clear, effecting the changes presents a significant challenge. In times of such change and challenge, we have been careful to acknowledge the pressures facing each sector. As emphasised by the Minister for Education and Welsh Language in his November speech, providers should not face these problems alone ([Welsh Government, 2023b](#)). We have sought to be sympathetic in our approach, recognising the specific challenges practitioners and leaders face, whilst maintaining a focus on the wellbeing and progress of learners. As education and training providers work to recover from the effects of the pandemic, we have seen examples of excellent practice across Wales. In 2022-2023, the implementation of Curriculum for Wales was very much in its infancy, but we have seen examples of emerging practice that justify a degree of optimism for the future. On the whole, the enthusiasm of educators across the sectors to make progress and overcome the challenges they face is encouraging.



Educators across Wales have also worked diligently to support vulnerable children, young people and adults who have arrived here as asylum seekers or refugees. Wales as a nation has opened its arms to offer sanctuary to those fleeing from persecution in other countries. During the summer term, I asked our inspectors to review the way in which our education and training services were caring and catering for these vulnerable children and adults. Although our findings identify a few areas for improvement, our conversations with refugees and asylum seekers themselves left us in little doubt that educators here in Wales have shown real compassion. They have successfully nurtured refugees and asylum seekers and helped them feel able to focus on learning as they settle into a peaceful life here in Wales. We were delighted to learn from educators about the valuable contributions that those who arrived as refugees and asylum seekers had made to their new communities.

However, progress for all learners across the education and training sectors in Wales is being impeded by weaker aspects of practice. We continue to see too many examples of ineffective self-evaluation and improvement planning. It is vital that providers make sure that their work always adds value. They should have a clear understanding of what is working well and should prioritise improving teaching, training and learning to secure the best possible outcomes for learners. In the context of the new curriculum, the problem has been compounded by some schools overly focusing on ‘what’ to teach, i.e. the content of their curriculum, without giving sufficient attention to ‘how’ it is taught and how assessment and progression are monitored. The effectiveness of the external support available to schools, particularly with their evaluation and improvement processes, is inconsistent. We have seen effective examples in well-developed partnerships, but elsewhere, and particularly for secondary schools, the variable quality of support is a cause for concern.

Effective well-being support for learners, including for those with identified additional learning needs, continues to be a high priority for providers. This annual report shows that the legacy of the pandemic persists, with clear effects on learner attendance and the progress that they make in their learning. Learners’ literacy and numeracy skills remain affected, with inconsistent progress being made to close the gaps that developed during the pandemic. Our ITE settings face ongoing challenges, compromising our ability as a nation to ensure a reliable pipeline of talented and suitably qualified entrants into the teaching profession in the numbers that we need.

The recently published results of the 2022 round of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ([Ingram et al, 2023](#)) show that, despite the improvements seen in Wales’s PISA scores in 2018, there has since been a notable fall. The negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on pupils’ learning were clearly evident in the PISA 2022 outcomes. Across the OECD countries on average, and particularly in Wales, there were substantial declines in pupils’ assessment scores in each of the three domains of maths, science, and reading, since 2018. The 2022 assessment scores of pupils in Wales were below the OECD averages and below the scores of the other nations of the UK.

Attendance at school is vital if pupils are to make the progress of which they are capable. Attendance following the disruption of the pandemic continued to be a significant concern in 2022-2023, despite the efforts of schools, settings and their support services. In comparison to pre-pandemic norms, absence rates had doubled among secondary school age pupils. The proportion of lessons missed by secondary school age pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM) reached over 20% ([Welsh Government, 2023c](#)). Missing on average one day a week of their formal education had a significant impact on the progress of these pupils. Among this group, the issue of persistent absence was acute, with more than one in three deemed persistently absent in 2022-2023. The Welsh Government’s renewed focus and activity in this area is, therefore, welcome. The proportion of learners being mainly educated other than at school (EOTAS) has nearly doubled since 2009-2010, with primary aged children in particular missing out on school in greater numbers ([Welsh Government, 2023d](#)). On the whole, these pupils do not return to mainstream education and, for those that do, their return is too slow. This limits their access to the full curriculum and the wider social interactions available at school. Increases in both fixed term and permanent exclusions, particularly at secondary school level and among pupils eligible for free school meals ([Welsh Government, 2023e](#)), are a further concern.

With around 28% of children in Wales living in relative income poverty between April 2021 and March 2022 ([Welsh Government, 2023f](#)), mitigating the impacts on learning and educational attainment is rightly a Welsh Government priority. We have seen that pupils from less affluent households tend to miss more schooling and make less progress in their learning than their peers ([Welsh Government, 2023g](#)). Following on from our focus on this in the 2021-2022 annual report, we describe the features of leadership that enable schools to successfully help pupils to overcome the barriers to learning that are often associated with poverty. Successful schools know their communities well and actively form productive relationships with families. They are aware of the costs associated with schooling and use resources carefully to help struggling families. Underpinning these approaches are the high aspirations and expectations that these schools maintain for all their pupils. However, practice is variable across Wales and the substantial fall in school attendance among pupils from less affluent households over recent years is compounding the difficulties that these children, and their teachers, face. The Welsh Government's programme to develop Community Focused Schools is a welcome development aimed at building on existing effective practice and strengthening relationships between schools, support agencies, parents and their communities ([Welsh Government, 2022](#)).

Across the post-16 sectors of further education (FE), work-based learning, employability programmes and adult learning in the community, learners are generally well motivated in their lessons, practical sessions and review meetings. The proportion of young people reporting issues with anxiety and mental health was growing before the pandemic and this remains a priority for providers. FE learners know how to access the valuable additional support that colleges provide, and apprenticeship providers too are focusing on learner well-being. Apprenticeship providers are expanding the range of support they offer, and they are increasingly able to recognise and provide support for additional learning needs that any apprentices have. However, our inspections have consistently found that the proportion of apprentices who successfully complete their frameworks in the health and social care sector is too low. This reflects the recruitment and retention challenges that employers in these sectors have faced. The Jobs Growth Wales+ youth employability programme has been introduced across Wales to engage young people with training and work experiences. These sessions are worthwhile, with effective teaching and comprehensive support, but too few participants access meaningful work experience as part of this programme. We saw effective provision within adult learning in the community, making use of on-line and in-person delivery according to learner need. However, there remains a need to develop the way that the broad range of provision available across the post-16 sectors in Wales is matched to individual learners. It can be difficult for learners to view and understand the full range of options available to them. The information and guidance that prospective learners receive is not always clear and consistently useful.

Many post-16 learners have successfully built upon the digital literacy skills they developed during the mass adoption of online remote learning across the different sectors during the pandemic. However, post-16 learners' numeracy skills remain less well developed than those of similar cohorts before the pandemic. Across the post-16 sectors, providers' approaches to the development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills do not take sufficient advantage of the vocational contexts and interests of learners. This can be demotivating for learners and limit the progress that they make. The makeup of external Essential Skills Wales assessments, as reported in our recent thematic review ([Estyn, 2023](#)), has compounded this issue and I'm glad that this is being reviewed.



Effective leadership is key to ensuring that providers respond to the Welsh Government's ambitions for the Welsh language. Across the education and training landscape, we see that the provision for developing learners' Welsh language skills is inconsistent. In Welsh-medium settings, many learners make good progress in developing their Welsh language skills. However, pupils at English-medium schools often do not make as much progress as they could in developing their Welsh language skills. Where we see effective practice, leaders show strong commitment to the Welsh language and this is reflected in their improvement plans. They ensure that practitioners are offered professional learning and support to develop their own Welsh language skills as well as their teaching. This has a positive impact on learners and their ability to communicate in Welsh. Across further education and apprenticeships provision, very few learners undertake any written work in Welsh. There are also limited opportunities through adult learning in the community for learners to access Welsh-medium courses or to develop their Welsh language skills. Leaders across the sectors face significant ongoing challenges such as the scarcity of suitably skilled staff. This problem is exacerbated by too few students enrolling to train as secondary school teachers, particularly through the medium of Welsh.

The topics of attendance and attitudes to learning, the Welsh language in education and training, the implementation of Curriculum for Wales, and how providers are tackling poverty, each feature as key themes within this year's annual report. We also outline the recently published results of PISA 2022 (Ingram et al, 2023) and we explore the provision and support for refugees and asylum seekers in Wales. The report includes a short section on post-inspection follow-up activity, featuring useful case studies and an overview of recommendations left for maintained schools that go into a statutory category. The annual report concludes with a summary overview of each of the thematic reports we produced in response to our remit letter from the Minister for Education and Welsh language for 2022-2023.

I believe that my report provides a comprehensive picture of how education and training is performing in Wales. It highlights the successes and outlines some of the challenges that continue to face education and training; I hope it prompts constructive reflection and discussion about how we can collectively improve. I would like to thank my colleagues as well as all those educators across the sectors who worked with us during the year. Finally, we as an organisation, and I personally, would like to thank all the educators across Wales for their continuing efforts. We recognise the way they work diligently to build on their successes and respond to the challenges involved in supporting our children, and learners of all ages, to learn and to flourish.

Owen Evans

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales

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Our approach

2022-2023

The findings of this report are based on analysis of a wide range of evidence including:

- Evidence from core inspections conducted between September 2022 and August 2023. Inspections include activities such as observations of teaching, learning walks, scrutiny of learners' work, discussions with leaders, staff and learners and scrutiny of documentation.
- The evidence gathered on visits to providers in follow-up categories and multi-agency meetings.
- Results from our questionnaires, including pre-inspection questionnaires which are administered to providers in advance of an inspection. These typically include questionnaires for staff, learners, governors and parents/carers.
- Evaluative evidence from link visits and meetings with providers, for example local authority link visits and visits to independent schools.
- Evidence from engagement visits.
- Evidence from visits to gather evidence for thematic reports, or in relation to key themes in education and training.
- Further desk-based research, including a rapid review of external research literature.
- Feedback from stakeholder meetings.
- At the end of the academic year, the evidence for activities carried out in each sector was analysed to identify common themes. This included analysis of the recommendations given to providers in sectors.
- The analysis of official statistics provided by the Welsh Government.

Key themes



Key themes

Education and support for refugees and asylum seekers

2022-2023

Wales welcomes refugees and asylum-seekers¹ from all over the world and aims to become the world's first recognised '[Nation of Sanctuary](#)' where people seeking sanctuary 'are met with welcome, understanding and celebration of their unique contribution to the rich tapestry of Welsh life' ([Wales: Nation of Sanctuary, 2023](#)). Since 2020, the number of asylum applications logged in the UK has notably increased ([UK Government, 2023](#)). In 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that around 40% of global refugees were under the age of 18 ([UNHCR, 2022, p.3](#)). Research by the Welsh Government highlighted that the challenges faced by refugee learners were often exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic ([Welsh Government, 2023, p.4](#)).

In 2020, as part of its report on education transitions for young refugees and asylum seekers, UNICEF included a series of helpful recommendations for schools and further education (FE) colleges in England. The report highlighted that the impartial advice and guidance made available to learners transitioning from schools into FE was insufficient ([UNICEF, 2020, p.10](#)). A separate review of research on the educational needs and experiences of asylum-seeking and refugee children by [Peterson et al \(2017\)](#) found the following:

- Education and schooling plays a crucial role in supporting the inclusion of asylum-seeking and refugee children within their new communities;
- Schools, school leaders and teachers therefore need to take seriously their role in responding to the educational needs of asylum-seeking and refugee children – including those who are unaccompanied;
- Whole-school approaches built on hospitable and holistic responses to asylum-seeking and refugee children are productive, and can challenge wider discourses and practices which are hostile to asylum-seeking and refugee people and children;
- Schools and teachers are likely to need and benefit from professional learning and development activities through which they can build and enhance their understanding of the educational and cultural histories, needs and experiences of asylum-seeking and refugee children;
- Asylum-seeking and refugee children require, and stand to gain substantially from, more focused support for their educational pathways into further and higher education in ways which engage with their high aspirations. Such support is likely to include focused guidance and counselling, as well as the availability of supportive role-models (p.5).

¹ The definition of an asylum seeker is someone who has arrived in a country and asked for asylum. Until they receive a decision as to whether or not they are a refugee, they are known as an asylum seeker. In the UK, this means that they do not have the same rights as a refugee or a British citizen would. For example, people seeking asylum aren't allowed to work' ([Refugee Action, 2023](#))

Local authorities in Wales play an important part in supporting schools before the arrival of asylum-seeker and refugee pupils, as well as during their time in school. Specialist local authority teams work with refugee families to achieve a smooth transition into school and to monitor progress. In most cases, initial contact and support by the local authority is provided to new arrivals within a week. Children and young people are subsequently enrolled at school or college, usually within two weeks.

Older refugees and asylum-seekers also have access to a range of education and training at further education (FE) colleges or through adult learning in the community partnerships. Adult refugees and asylum seekers have a very broad range of prior education experiences. They range from those with little schooling and low levels of literacy, to those who have postgraduate qualifications but may need to develop their English language skills to secure employment.

To learn about the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers and the ways in which they have been supported, during the summer of 2023, we met with six local authorities and visited 13 schools, three colleges and two adult learning in the community partnerships. These providers were chosen because of their work to support refugees and asylum seekers and, as such, this sample of providers was not representative of all providers across Wales as a whole.

Teaching and learning

Schools and local authorities

In most cases, refugee and asylum seeker pupils were motivated and enjoyed learning. They spoke positively about their progress, and how their confidence had developed as a result of their learning.

Many refugee and asylum seeker children had suffered significant breaks in their schooling before arriving in Wales and had limited or no English language skills. Local authority and school staff were committed to supporting pupils to learn English as a second language and provided learning materials to support parents and carers at home. As a result, pupils often acquired the language quickly and were able to express themselves clearly. In many cases, these children learned English ahead of their parents or guardians and acted as translators for them when needed. As well as developing quickly into articulate English speakers, overall, primary age pupils also made suitable progress in their ability to communicate in Welsh. They were eager to learn Welsh, and a few had developed rapidly to reach a high level of fluency.

Local authorities worked well with schools to overcome the challenge of having limited or inaccurate background information about new arrivals. They talked to the pupils' families and carefully assessed pupils' abilities. They aimed to build progressively on pupils' skills as they moved through the school via the discrete teaching of language, literacy and numeracy in a way that met their individual needs. In general, taking age and stage of development into consideration, these pupils made strong progress in developing their oracy skills, their phonological awareness, and their reading and writing skills.

Welsh language immersion for refugees at Ysgol Gynradd Llanfairpwll and Ysgol Y Borth, Ynys Môn

Refugees and asylum seekers who arrive at the schools are given an initial period to settle into their new environment and develop their confidence. Staff at the schools provide a warm welcome and celebrate these pupils' native languages and their home cultures.

The pupils then attend Canolfan Newydd-ddyfodiaid Môn Welsh language immersion unit at Moelfre. Following this period, the pupils return to their schools and a teacher from the language unit visits them regularly to continue to support their Welsh language learning. This provides continuity for the pupils as well as helping the schools to cater for the pupils' individual needs. This provision is very effective and builds well on the initial language immersion work. The pupils' English language skills are developed through integrated activities at school.

As a result, the refugee pupils currently at both schools have made strong progress with their language skills. These pupils, who arrived with no Welsh and limited English language ability, can now confidently speak both languages with a good level of fluency.

Specialist local authority teams worked closely with schools to help them support refugees and asylum seekers. They provided advice and support to teachers, as well as home-school liaison and additional language tuition to individual or small groups of pupils. Often bilingual or multi-lingual, these specialists were strong language role models and supported individual pupils' learning and well-being effectively.

In many schools, teachers used a range of effective teaching approaches and dedicated resources to ensure that pupils made the progress of which they were capable. Local authorities had developed their own teaching resources and identified others available online, to support asylum seekers and refugees. Teachers planned carefully to ensure that literacy activities were accessible, relevant and purposeful. They modified their language and used gesture and sign effectively to communicate with children who had little or no English. Effective use was also made of technology, such as translation apps, to support communication. As a result, pupils gained confidence and further developed their learning as their English improved.



During their time in Wales, refugee and asylum seeker pupils in Year 10 and Year 11 were being encouraged to undertake language qualifications in their first language, such as GCSE Ukrainian or GCSE Russian. However, many of these pupils, together with those undertaking AS and A levels, were disadvantaged when sitting their examinations for other subjects in English or Welsh. This was particularly true if they were relatively recent arrivals in Wales and had not had much time to learn either English or Welsh. In these cases, pupils struggled to understand, use and apply complex language and subject terminology in their assessed work. At the time of our visits, school leaders reported that they were awaiting further guidance about any concessions and support that could be made available to these learners. In a few instances, schools were able to make arrangements for pupils to sit different subject examinations in their first language by working with awarding organisations overseas.

The role of Llanwern High School, Newport as a Ukrainian Hub School

Newport City Council has designated Llanwern High School and Milton Primary School as Ukrainian Hub Schools. This approach facilitates the support of new arrivals from Ukraine by established Ukrainian families as well as dedicated support staff.

At Llanwern High School, a bilingual teaching assistant works with each refugee learner to identify their interests and the subjects that they studied and enjoyed in the past. They encourage them to pursue these further, for example by engaging in relevant extra-curricular activities. Assessments are used to establish pupils' prior learning in terms of their knowledge, skills and goals, including their language ability. Pupils are provided with individual learning strategies and are partnered with buddies who support them in their first week at their new school.

The bilingual teaching assistant also establishes strong links with parents and plays a key role in each admission meeting. They support the integration of each pupil into their new school by liaising closely with the headteacher, head of year and form teacher to help establish positive, supportive relationships. They work with parents to ensure that they understand how children go about acquiring a new language and that they understand the differences between the Welsh education system and the one in Ukraine.

Using literature to support refugee and asylum seeker integration at Severn Primary School, Cardiff

The school ensures that refugee and asylum seeker pupils are represented in school resources.

They provide a range of books that pupils can relate to and see themselves in, or books that are written in their home language. These books are used as stimuli for learning experiences and provide opportunities for pupils to explore powerful themes relevant to their lives. For example, they consider the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers in text such as 'The Island' and 'The Boy at the Back of the Class'. Pupils recall topics such as the story of Floella Benjamin and the Windrush Generation. They respond well to these topics because the stories reflect their own experiences.

Sharing such stories with other pupils helps to nurture tolerance and respect.

FE colleges and adult learning in the community partnerships

Most adult refugees and asylum seekers were focused on developing their English language skills. These, often vulnerable, learners valued the social aspect of coming together as well as the education on offer within the welcoming environments of FE colleges and adult learning in the community partnerships. Teachers praised, encouraged and promoted respect among their diverse groups of learners. Teachers recognised the barriers and challenges that these learners faced and worked flexibly to accommodate the demands placed on them, such as childcare responsibilities and appointments with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). In a few instances, particularly if learners were awaiting relocation, they had to bring their children along to lessons, which could be distracting for them and others.

Post-16 and adult learning teachers generally employed a range of strategies and resources effectively to ensure that learning activities were interesting and topical. Learners had opportunities to bring real-life experiences and language into lessons; they asked probing questions, checked their understanding, and actively contributed ideas. Refugees and asylum seekers valued learning about Welsh and British culture alongside being able to bring their own cultures and experiences into their learning.

Learners generally developed a positive rapport with teachers, support staff and leaders. They spoke positively about their progress, and how their confidence had developed. This was enabling them to apply for jobs and gain employment; identify volunteering opportunities; organise medical appointments; understand English language television programmes; and integrate more into their local communities.

Some providers acknowledged that there remained gaps in provision for this age group with only a minority of providers offering courses specifically designed for learners who wanted to access vocational learning but who also needed to develop their English language skills.

Recognising the qualifications that refugees and asylum seekers had achieved in their home countries was a challenge for providers. The need to ascertain qualification equivalences caused delays for learners wanting to start programmes or progress onto further or higher learning.



Supporting refugees to drive safely on UK roads – Adult Learning Wales (ALW)

In response to learner need and the desire to secure employment, ALW has worked in partnership with third sector organisations and local authorities to develop a programme of support for those wanting to pass their UK Driving Theory test. The course covers elements such as road sign recognition, breaking distances, and road and car safety. Where appropriate, tutors also support with the provisional licence application process. These helpful online courses have enabled the provider to cater in this way to refugees and asylum seekers across Wales.

Well-being, care and support

Schools and local authorities

Schools and local authorities aimed to place the well-being of every child at the heart of their work. They focused on providing safe and nurturing environments where vulnerable pupils could feel secure. Refugee children often arrived having suffered trauma and living with fear or anxiety. Local authorities played a key part in providing training and advice for school staff on a range of aspects including different cultural values as well as the impact of trauma.

Local authorities supported refugees and asylum seekers with practical arrangements for accommodation, school uniforms and transport. This helped families to settle quickly and establish a sense of normality. Local authorities supported schools by providing specific training and resources to help school staff members to support the well-being of these pupils. This enabled school staff to be flexible and effective in responding to the specific challenges involved, and they were able to get to know the pupils and their families well. School leaders and local authority specialists worked openly, positively and productively with these vulnerable families in a non-judgemental way.

Pupils and their families benefited from a diverse range of tailored interventions both within school and in conjunction with external partners. Where these multi-agency arrangements were most effective, they addressed housing, education and health needs with detailed assessments of the families' conditions and needs prior to pupils' arrival in school. This enabled the provision to be carefully planned in a holistic way.

Refugee parents and children who initially felt anxious or afraid on arrival explained that they had been helped to feel safe and welcome. Local authorities and schools used innovative and sensitive approaches to support these families. Parents were invited to friendly induction meetings or coffee mornings where they learnt about how the school day was organised and what the expectations were, and they were also helped to complete any necessary paperwork. These events helped parents to form social and support networks with each other and within the school community.

Many schools raised awareness of the culture and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers through personal and social education (PSE) lessons. They planned valuable enrichment experiences that focused on celebrating different cultures and diversity alongside the school's Welsh identity. As a result, pupils recognised the important role they have to play as citizens in Wales; this helped to stimulate pupils' interest and enthusiasm for local and Welsh history. Most schools provided valuable wider experiences that their refugee and asylum seeker pupils may not otherwise have benefited from, such as visits to the cinema or swimming pool, as part of their planned curriculum. Parents and pupils appreciated the many additional activities that these schools offered.

Consolidated support services via 'Teulu Môn', Ynys Môn

Ynys Môn provide a single point of contact 'Teulu Môn', for all children, families and related professionals who need additional support. They provide a range of services including information, advice and assistance. Local headteachers appreciate this single point of contact as they are able to refer refugee and asylum seeker families for a range of support services. This joined-up approach is flexible, with staff members ready to adapt provision according to what is best for the well-being of each family.

To complement the work of this service, the local authority has promoted the use of a 'traumainformed' approach across all schools. The associated training has provided schools with a firm foundation upon which to build relationships with vulnerable children and their families.

Summer activities for Ukrainian refugee children by Gwent Adult Learning in the Community Partnership

Monmouthshire Community Education service works in partnership with the leisure and tourism department to deliver a summer programme for children residing at a welcome centre for Ukrainian refugees. The service, provided by the partnership's 'English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)' team, enables the children to benefit from language skills development opportunities via informal arts and craft sessions. This not only supports language development, but also helps new arrivals to form friendships and learn about cultural norms in preparation for the new school year.

Wider family support at Maindee Primary School, Newport

The school has an open-door policy to provide accessible support to families and the community. Their after-school club 'Wicked Wednesday' brings local families and outside support agencies together within the welcoming school environment. This extremely popular club is open to the families of both current and former pupils; it regularly attracts around 90 participants. In addition, the school works alongside different organisations to provide families with access to household appliances, computers and internet connections.

School leaders are keen to develop the skills of the local adult refugee, asylum seeker and immigrant community. The local authority has been able to help with this by providing a teaching assistant course for parents. This has equipped several suitable parents with the knowledge and skills that they need to access employment at local schools. It also ensures continuity of support for pupils by helping to develop a diverse staff workforce to meet the different linguistic and cultural needs of refugee and asylum seeker pupils and their families.

In addition to assisting families, local authorities also welcomed unaccompanied asylum seeker children (UASC). Once such a child was identified, social workers arranged foster care and selected an appropriate school. A personal education plan was developed, which considered the views of the child, including their interests and aspirations, and a review was conducted after eight weeks of schooling. A few local authorities struggled to cater for unaccompanied children sent to them from other authorities without notice. Corporate parent authorities and private fostering companies did not always communicate well with local authority education departments.

In general, absence rates among refugee and asylum seeker pupils were a concern for schools and local authorities. A number of families lived in hotels or temporary accommodation and could be moved between different locations at short notice. In some cases, the lack of room at nearby schools meant that children had to travel to schools outside of the area where they were housed, making regular attendance more challenging. Highly effective schools placed a high priority on tracking pupils' attendance and they operated a rigorous first day response to any absences. However, asylum seeker or refugee status was not captured via the pupil level annual school census (PLASC) and this hindered wider monitoring and evaluation work.

Overall, the refugee and asylum seeker pupils we spoke to felt that their voices were heard in school and that they could suggest ways to improve their lives and their communities. School councils were increasingly placing value on celebrating their school's cultural diversity. Overall, refugee and asylum seeker pupils had very positive attitudes to learning and showed high levels of resilience and ambition for their futures.

Overall, schools included in this study all had a strong inclusive ethos. The Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE) of the new [Curriculum for Wales](#), as well as the relationship and sex education (RSE) aspect of the curriculum, was helping to support this. These aspects were becoming increasingly embedded into the curriculum and into wider aspects of school life. This was benefiting refugees and asylum seekers, particularly at primary schools, as the Curriculum for Wales was introduced for all primary-aged pupils in September 2022. Assemblies, pastoral activities and dedicated days and weeks were used well to celebrate diversity of language and culture.

Helping refugee and asylum seeker pupils and their families to integrate at Ysgol Gymunedol Plascrug, Ceredigion

Over the last decade, Ysgol Plascrug primary school has increasingly become a welcoming, cherished sanctuary for refugee children and their families. The school has catered for refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, alongside children from other countries, and helped them to integrate seamlessly into Welsh life.

The school's staff includes two teaching assistants who, being fluent in Arabic, are able to help pupils from a range of countries to feel at home. In addition, the local authority employs a Ukrainian former teacher of English, herself a refugee, who works closely with children who are new to the area and need help to integrate. The work of each of these staff members is highly valued by the pupils, other staff members and the wider school community. One has learnt Welsh to a good standard and serves as a language role model for the pupils.

A notable feature of the school is the way in which families from a diverse range of cultures, including refugees and asylum seekers, contribute to the school community. Adult refugees help to maintain aspects of the school buildings and grounds. The school's highly anticipated annual international evening sees families from all over the world offer a range of traditional home cooked foods in a celebration of multicultural integration.

The school's nurture unit 'PLAS' caters well for the needs of pupils, including those who have English as an additional language. The school's emphasis on nurture succeeds in allowing refugees not just to settle, but to flourish alongside their Welsh friends. 'Empathy days' engender a sense of sympathy among all pupils, towards those who have suffered, and continue to suffer, from the effects of war and persecution.

Alongside a focus on developing the pupils' English language communication skills, the school is effective in helping refugees and asylum seekers to gain an interest in, and respect for, the Welsh language. Pupils, and in some cases their parents, are able to speak competently as learners of the language.

Enterprise and entrepreneurship support at Bridgend College

ESOL learners at Bridgend College, including refugees and asylum seekers, can access support to develop their enterprise and entrepreneurship skills to help them start their own business. In recent years, ESOL learners have attended various in-person and online events including 'start your own business' workshops. One ESOL learner set up a mobile hairdressing business, another couple opened a halal restaurant, and another learner is setting up as a self-employed accountant with the support of Business Wales.

FE colleges and adult learning in the community partnerships

At the three colleges and two adult learning in the community partnerships we visited, support for the well-being and personal development of post-16 and adult refugee and asylum seeker learners was extensive and took many forms. Examples included simplified application processes; a range of courses, locations and modes of delivery; personal support and coaching; and extra-curricular activities that provided enrichment and boosted well-being. These older learners also benefited from links with external partners such as housing associations, Jobcentre Plus, and Citizens Advice. In some cases, entrepreneurship support was available for those hoping to start their own businesses.

In most cases, adult refugees and asylum seekers were motivated learners and enjoyed learning. However, some were anxious about their futures in terms of relocation within the UK, or the possibility of returning to their home countries. Many were also struggling with the effects of trauma and its impact on their ability to focus on learning. Their teachers recognised this and responded sensitively and appropriately.

In addition to the support given by teachers, providers and external organisations, learners appreciated the benefits of being part of a learning community. For many, the relationships formed with their peers helped to provide a sense of community that extended beyond the learning environment. They valued the opportunity to learn about one another's countries and cultures as well as being able to spend time together and support one another.

The Welsh Government is supporting its FE colleges to develop anti-racist curriculum modules as part of its [Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan \(2022, p. 46\)](#). However, refugee and asylum seeker learners did report that they had witnessed or suffered isolated incidents of racism or bullying. These incidents nearly always took place outside of the learning environment. If they felt support was needed, learners said that they knew who to contact.

Supporting ESOL learners who had confirmed or suspected additional learning needs (ALN) was a challenge for providers. This was partly because the language barrier limited the effectiveness of the diagnostic tools that they normally used. Where issues were identified, finding appropriately skilled staff members could also be difficult because both ESOL and ALN expertise was often needed by those who were supporting these learners.

Newly arrived adult refugees and asylum-seekers hoping to access English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses and other relevant support could turn to the [Regional ESOL Assessment Central Hubs \(REACH\)](#). These one-stop shops offered helpful information but also acted as valuable conduits for pan-Wales sharing of information and good practice. Hubs were located in Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and Wrexham. The Cardiff REACH hub has assessed and supported over eight thousand ESOL learners since it was established in 2017.

Colleges and adult learning in the community partnerships helpfully provided hardware resources to learners where appropriate. This included loaning digital devices and dongles to support learners, particularly for those in more remote areas or those struggling with childcare demands, to access learning remotely.

Identifying additional learning needs among ESOL learners at Cardiff and Vale College

The ESOL Support and Inclusion Project (ESIP) helps teachers identify hidden learning barriers. A specialist team have developed three distinct areas of support: cascading learning to the teaching team; developing specialist classes and learning coach support for learners with low literacy in their native language; and working closely with specialist ALN teams to ensure that learners and staff can access expertise. Using this approach, the college succeeds in helping its learners break through hidden barriers and achieve their learning goals.

Leading and improving

Schools and local authorities

A number of local authorities in Wales had adopted the vision and values of 'City of Sanctuary' to build a culture of hospitality and welcome for individuals fleeing war and persecution. They were generally highly effective in supporting refugees and asylum seekers, helping them to integrate into their communities and celebrating their contributions. In general, officers within local authorities and senior school leaders successfully promoted an inclusive ethos that focused on meeting the learning and well-being needs of all pupils.

Thanks to the professional learning of local authorities over recent years, their officers, school leaders and staff members had a good understanding of the specific challenges faced by asylum seekers and refugees. This awareness helped those involved to respond sensitively to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers and their families, enabling staff, pupils and parents to work together productively. However, funding pressures were affecting schools' and local authorities' capacity to employ specialist support staff such as engagement officers who could provide bespoke intervention.

In general, the local authorities included in our review worked very well with partner organisations to help schools provide suitable support for the learning and well-being of refugees and asylum seekers. They promoted an inclusive culture and used professional learning effectively to help staff members understand the range of challenges faced by these pupils and their families. Each of the local authorities recognised that a multi-agency, collective response was essential to effectively address the cultural, social, health, emotional, academic and housing needs of these vulnerable families. Strong collaboration, aligned to the 'City of Sanctuary' vision, was supported through dedicated meetings involving multiple agencies. This had helped staff within different organisations to better understand each other's work, resulting in a purposeful culture where different specialists tapped into each other's expertise. This was particularly effective when problemsolving on behalf of different refugee and asylum seeker families.

Local authorities and schools recognised that pupils' learning was best supported through productive partnerships between themselves and parents. Generally, parents felt that whatever their circumstances, they knew who to turn to for support. This strong parental engagement helped to build the skills, confidence and self-esteem of parents. As a result, parents saw the school as a place where they could access advice and support. This would help them resolve issues relating to their children as well as wider concerns around housing, money, skills or family well-being. Many parents viewed their schools as a sanctuary and safe place. Local authorities ensured that schools had access to live telephone-based interpreting services as well as access to inperson interpreters when needed.

The effectiveness of communication and collaboration between schools and post-16 providers to support refugees and asylum-seekers as they transitioned between them was too variable. Leaders recognised the need to develop this aspect further given the increased number of individuals from these communities, including unaccompanied children, who were preparing to leave school.

Multi-agency approach to holistic, person-centred support in Flintshire

Flintshire local authority recognise that all families are unique, with their own culture, history and educational experiences as well as housing, medical and social needs. The local authority provides a holistic multi-agency person-centred approach to meet the needs of each refugee and asylum seeker family.

- Emergency Management Response Team (EMRT) – brings together senior leaders responsible for education, social services, health, housing, police, communications, fire safety, DWP and finance. This provides educational services with timely information enabling a rapid response to different families' changing needs.
- Education and Youth Response Team – supports school admission, transport, play team, youth services, family information services and collaboration from a range of inclusion services, for example English as an Additional Language (EAL) teaching, counselling and ALN.
- British Red Cross – provides orientation services for Ukrainian and Afghan refugees.
- Adult community learning – provides refugee and asylum seeker parents and other adults with access to education and training.
- Youth services – provide a range of community activities for parents and children dispersed across the county to facilitate networking between compatriots.

Communication between refugee and asylum seeker parents/carers and Cathays High School, Cardiff

Cathays High School have put in place bespoke support packages for pupils and their parents or carers, which cater for their emotional and learning needs, raise their aspirations and prepare them for the future.

Collaborative working helps to establish positive behaviours as refugee and asylum seeker pupils settle into a new way of life. Regular two-way communication between the school and the families or carers is prioritised. Partnership working in this way ensures a consistent approach for pupils at school and at home. The school and the parents or carers also benefit from clear and timely understanding of the children's needs, and any related challenges, as they arise. The school's high expectations help to ensure that refugee and asylum seeker pupils are well prepared for their future pathways.

Overall, these pupils are successful in achieving their goals, for example by going on to study at university or to start their own businesses.

FE colleges and adult learning in the community partnerships

Leaders in FE colleges and adult learning in the community partnerships were responding well to the increased demand for ESOL provision. Providers had reacted quickly to meet demand and, where possible, they planned their provision in partnership with other stakeholders to secure an appropriate educational offer, avoid duplication of provision, and ensure that relevant support was available. Partners included other education providers, third sector organisations, local authority departments, Careers Wales and the DWP. Expanding ESOL provision had presented challenges in terms of recruiting new staff members, in particular those who were qualified and experienced in trauma informed practices. Providers recognised that this approach was not generally addressed as part of initial teacher training and that coverage as part of ongoing professional learning activities was also inconsistent.

The perception among refugees and asylum-seekers of the existence of a hierarchy in the support that different communities received could be difficult for leaders and teachers to manage. Some groups could access benefits that others could not, such as free public transport, and this could lead to tensions that needed to be sensitively managed. Where possible, providers tried to compensate to ensure parity, for example by using alternative funding streams sensibly to fund services for those missing out.

Leaders expressed frustration that different grants with similar objectives seemed to have been set up with little consideration of existing grants. For example, they were unclear how they should use the 'levelling up' funding allocated by the UK Government alongside the Welsh Government funding streams.

Drop-in sessions for refugees at Grŵp Llandrillo Menai

The Gwynedd and Môn refugee resettlement scheme provides additional support for refugees in the form of one-stop-shop drop-in sessions held in various locations, including on Grŵp Llandrillo Menai college sites. These one-stop shops offer support with job searches as well as links into volunteering opportunities, and many refugees take advantage of this support. In addition, specialist advice and guidance are available to help refugees secure accommodation and access financial support. There are also monthly clothes swap banks that allow refugees to swap or acquire new clothes.

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Key themes

The Welsh language in education and training

2022-2023

During 2022-2023, our inspection findings showed an inconsistent picture in terms of the Welsh language. The influence of the pandemic period continued to have a negative effect on the ability of learners to use the Welsh language. In the 2021-2022 annual report, we identified the impact of the pandemic on learners' confidence in using the Welsh language in Welsh-medium, bilingual and English-medium schools. In 2022-2023, we found that many learners were making consistent progress in their Welsh skills, particularly in their listening and speaking skills in Welsh-medium settings. This was often the result of work done by providers to target learners' oracy skills. However, pupils often did not make as much progress as they could in developing their Welsh overall, particularly in English-medium schools. Often, leaders in these schools did not prioritise the development of pupils' Welsh language skills well enough. As a result, in those schools and in a majority of providers across sectors, learners' Welsh skills were not developing strongly enough.

The development of pupils' ability to communicate in Welsh in English-medium schools has been a cause for concern over a long period of time. In 2012-2013, Ann Keane, the chief inspector at the time, noted that inspectors made a recommendation to improve pupils' Welsh skills in a quarter of the English-medium schools that were inspected ([Estyn, 2013, p.26](#)). A decade later, this continues to be the case. In 2022-2023, 30% of the English-medium primary schools and 18% of the Welsh-medium primary schools inspected received a recommendation on the Welsh language. A quarter of the secondary schools inspected in 2022-2023 received a recommendation relating to the Welsh language.

In December 2022, the [Welsh Government \(2022a\)](#) published the results of the 2021 Census on the Welsh language skills of people aged three or above who live in Wales. Between 2011 and 2021 there was a decrease of six percentage points in children aged between 5 and 15 who were reported as being able to speak Welsh ([2022a, p.5](#)). Education and training providers face many challenges in developing the Welsh language skills of learners, including:

- Recruiting staff to teach through the medium of Welsh across the sectors. For example, in 2020-2021 the numbers completing their initial teacher education programme through the medium of Welsh were far below the targets introduced by the Welsh Government. Recruitment problems affect many sectors, including the secondary sector, with the numbers training to teach in some specialist subjects being very low. The recruitment of practitioners with the necessary specialist skills to support pupils with additional learning needs was also a cause for concern.
- Ensuring suitable and flexible professional learning to support practitioners to develop their personal Welsh language skills.



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- Ensuring suitable professional learning to support practitioners to develop their understanding of how learners acquire language and the most effective pedagogy to support learners.
 - Effective transition arrangements from one phase to another, for example between primary and secondary schools and on to post-16 education.
 - Ensuring provision to meet the needs of post-16 learners, including opportunities to apply their Welsh language skills.
 - Ensuring that leaders in English-medium providers place a priority on developing their learners' Welsh language skills and understand the value of those skills for future employment.

During 2022-2023, the Welsh Government published several plans to support the Welsh language, including the Welsh in education workforce plan ([Welsh Government, 2022b](#)) and a consultation document on proposals for a Welsh Language Education Bill ([Welsh Government, 2023a](#)). These documents recognised the significant challenges in growing an education workforce with the necessary language skills to expand Welsh-medium education and improve the linguistic outcomes of pupils in all schools. The Welsh Government has identified the need to continue to increase the number of pupils who are educated through the medium of Welsh. It recognises that provision needs to improve and that contact with the Welsh language across all schools is important so that pupils have enough opportunity to develop their language skills and make sufficient progress.

According to Welsh Government statistics, in January 2023, there were 378 Welsh-medium schools, 27 dual stream schools, two schools that were in the transition process and 32 bilingual schools from a total of 1,463 schools in Wales ([Welsh Government, 2023b](#)). There were also 35 English-medium schools where significant use was made of the Welsh language. Since 2018-2019, the proportion of schools that provide education through the medium of Welsh has remained consistent at 30% of the total number of schools in Wales. In addition, the proportion of pupils in schools where at least half of the subjects are available through the medium of Welsh has remained consistent at 23%. The percentage of pupils taught in designated Welsh-medium schools has increased from 16% in 2012-2013 to 17% in 2022-2023 ([Welsh Government, 2023b](#)).

Where the support and enthusiasm to develop learners' Welsh language skills was robust, leaders prioritised the Welsh language and set a clear vision and a strategic and purposeful improvement plan to develop provision. In settings with the most effective practice, leaders provided valuable professional learning opportunities and support for practitioners to develop their skills to support learners to acquire the Welsh language constructively over time. This fostered enthusiasm and confidence among practitioners, which had a positive effect on learners' readiness to speak and use the Welsh language spontaneously in a variety of situations. For example, schemes such as the Welsh Language Sabbatical Scheme played a key role in developing practitioners' Welsh language skills and their ability to teach through the medium of Welsh in some schools and clusters ([Welsh Government, 2021a](#)). In the best examples, we saw the effect of provision not only on individual teachers, but on how they used what they had learned to influence others. Most importantly, this had a positive effect on the teaching and standards of Welsh in these schools. Read about how St David's R.C. Primary School, Cwmbran [developed the Welsh language supported by purposeful professional learning](#).

In settings with less effective practice, leaders did not prioritise the Welsh language or promote the benefits of being bilingual and multilingual sufficiently. Often, they did not properly consider pupils' progress or provision for the Welsh language when self-evaluating and planning for improvement. Too often, they considered that using a very few Welsh greetings and words with pupils was sufficient and there was no plan to develop Welsh language provision beyond a few specific lessons. In addition, very little professional learning was provided to help staff develop their skills and confidence in using the Welsh language with pupils. It is a cause for concern that this situation has continued in some schools over a long period of time.

The Welsh Government has provided a resource to help leaders [develop Welsh in their schools](#). However, it is not clear how many leaders are aware of this resource or use it when self-evaluating their journey to develop the use of Welsh.

In line with the Guidance on Welsh in Education Strategic Plans ([Welsh Government, 2021b](#)) all local authorities have submitted a 10-year plan aiming to make 'every learner one in a million' and help achieve the ambition of having one million Welsh speakers in Wales. Although strategic plans have been introduced by local authorities, it is too soon to gauge the effect of these plans on leadership in providers across the sectors, or the impact on teaching and learning. In November 2021, the Welsh Government announced an investment of £2.2 million to support local authorities to develop their late immersion provision. This funding has enabled all local authorities across Wales to build on their existing provision or establish new late immersion provision ([Welsh Government, 2021c](#)).

Key messages from the sectors

In **non-maintained settings**, a majority of children who were new to the language in both Welsh and English-medium providers made progress in line with their stage of development. Practitioners ensured that pupils had opportunities to listen to, and use the language, for example by introducing simple Welsh instructions and songs. Children demonstrated their understanding by following instructions successfully. Children often used some English vocabulary when trying to communicate, for example when responding by saying '*Dw i'n gallu torri banana by myself*' while preparing a snack. However, in a very few Welsh and English-medium providers, practitioners did not plan the next step in pupils' Welsh language development effectively enough as they acquire the language.

As children moved to the **primary sector**, many pupils in Welsh-medium and bilingual schools, including those who were new to the language, made sound progress. In the best practice, practitioners planned pupils' language development effectively in an interesting range of contexts across the areas of learning and experience. By doing so, pupils developed vocabulary and language patterns that supported their confidence to speak and use the Welsh language with increasing independence in formal and less formal situations. The reading and writing skills of many pupils were developed appropriately by practitioners as they provided valuable opportunities for pupils to apply them in various contexts.



In the **secondary sector**, in most Welsh-medium and bilingual schools, pupils expressed themselves appropriately using a wide range of vocabulary. However, a minority of pupils expressed themselves more awkwardly. Often in these cases, pupils' vocabulary was more limited, they used incorrect sentence structure or slang, or their sentences often included too many English words. Overall, many pupils located facts and gathered information from reading texts successfully. Pupils could combine information from various texts appropriately. A majority of pupils wrote appropriately in Welsh with a few writing particularly effectively using sophisticated vocabulary and well-crafted sentences and paragraphs. However, a minority of pupils' writing contained errors; they spelt words incorrectly or used awkward sentence structure.

Across most providers in the non-maintained, primary, secondary and all-age Welsh-medium and bilingual sectors, provision for developing pupils' Welsh language skills was appropriate. In a minority of schools where we saw effective practice, settings provided professional learning opportunities to help practitioners deepen their understanding of pupils' language development over time. As a result, practitioners planned the development of the Welsh language purposefully and provided valuable opportunities for pupils to speak and use the Welsh language in interesting and meaningful activities. This led to pupils making strong progress in their Welsh language skills. Read more about how Ysgol Caer Elen [developed and promoted the Welsh language across the school](#).

Overall, when given an opportunity to do so, many pupils had a positive attitude to learning the Welsh language and were keen to learn about their local area, Wales and further afield. Read how leaders and practitioners at Ysgol Penclawdd [focused on developing the ethos and culture of Wales and the Welsh language, rather than just the language](#). By doing so, pupils gained a holistic and comprehensive experience of learning Welsh and valued Welsh history and heritage as a key part of their learning experience.

In many **English-medium primary and secondary schools**, teaching did not focus well enough on how pupils were supported to make progress in their Welsh language skills. Pupils often did not build on their prior knowledge and understanding of the language or were not provided with sufficient opportunities to use their skills, in particular their spoken Welsh. Practitioners were not confident in their knowledge and understanding of language teaching methods, including immersion methods, to support pupils to acquire language systematically. There was often a lack of professional learning opportunities for staff to develop these aspects of their work. As a result, they did not plan activities to build on pupils' previous knowledge of the Welsh language or allow them to develop and apply their skills constructively over time. They also did not provide enough opportunities for pupils to speak and use the language outside of Welsh lessons, particularly as pupils progressed through the school. This hindered the ability and confidence of many pupils to communicate confidently and speak Welsh spontaneously. A lack of understanding of effective pedagogy and linguistic planning, together with limited opportunities for pupils to develop their Welsh language skills, has been a cause for concern for over a decade.

One of the principles of the **additional learning needs (ALN)** education system is to develop a bilingual system that 'provides additional learning provision through the medium of Welsh' ([Welsh Government, 2021d, p.37](#)). A series of strategic duties have also been planned to move towards a bilingual ALN system ([Welsh Government, 2020, p.13](#)). In 2022-2023, inspection activities and communication arrangements with stakeholders showed that, to date, the transformation programme has had very little effect on improving the quality of provision for children and young people who need support through the medium of Welsh. A significant challenge in this sector is recruiting staff who can speak Welsh to maintain the necessary support.

Local authorities have improved their Welsh-medium specialist provision for pupils with additional learning needs gradually. Overall, this was done by providing specialist classes maintained by the authorities within mainstream Welsh-medium schools. However, recruiting practitioners with the necessary specialist and Welsh language skills is a continuous challenge. There were also very few teaching and assessment resources available in Welsh to support pupils with additional learning needs who are educated through the medium of Welsh. Read about the work of Cyngor Gwynedd to [develop Welsh-medium resources for pupils with additional learning needs and their families](#).

Over recent years, **post-16 providers** have identified the need to deliver or expand the opportunities available for learners to develop their Welsh language skills. They have also identified the need to provide opportunities for learners who are already fluent in Welsh to undertake some of their learning through the medium of Welsh. Providers face significant challenges in providing for learners with different levels of ability and fluency across the very wide range of post-16 courses. During the last five years, many further education and apprenticeship providers have introduced valuable basic Welsh lessons for selected cohorts of learners. However, overall progress in ensuring that learners develop their Welsh language skills from their individual starting points, particularly in the context of their main studies or training, has been slow. Providers have not done enough to innovate or encourage effective collaboration across different departments, faculties and providers to address these challenges.

A scheme to provide free courses for 16 to 25-year-old learners began during 2022-2023 ([Welsh Government, 2022c](#)). The scheme provided free-of-charge courses with the National Centre for Learning Welsh for 18 to 25-year-olds and a new e-learning resource was piloted with 16 to 18-year-olds who attend school, college or an apprenticeship scheme. All teachers, headteachers and teaching assistants were also able to access free Welsh lessons. Between 22 September 2022 and 31 March 2023, over 1,500 16 to 25-year-olds joined Welsh language learning lessons along with 450 teachers and prospective teachers ([Welsh Government, 2023c](#)). It is too early to evaluate the impact of this professional learning on how teachers support and develop pupils' Welsh language skills.

Overall, many students studying **Initial Teacher Education (ITE)** programmes made suitable progress in their personal Welsh language skills. In some cases, where students made very good progress, leaders prioritised the Welsh language alongside developing the students' teaching skills. Where student progress was not as strong, there was very little connection between what was studied at university and the students' school experiences. As a result, there was not enough focus on effective pedagogy which, in turn, limited pupils' progress in their Welsh language skills. What was meant by 'studying through the medium of Welsh' also varied and there was no consistency in provision across the partnerships. Where students were given opportunities to experience Welsh-medium education early in their programme, this had a positive effect on their confidence and willingness to teach through the medium of Welsh. Read more about the support for Welsh in Initial Teacher Education in our thematic report ([Estyn, 2023](#)).

During 2022-2023, two of the three **adult learning in the community (ALC)** providers that were inspected did not offer any Welsh learning provision and did not provide courses through the medium of Welsh. While acknowledging that more needs to be done, Cardiff and Vale ALC Partnership, for example, had some provision available to enable English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners to learn basic Welsh expressions. The three providers were given recommendations to improve their Welsh-medium provision.



All three **apprenticeship providers**, together with the further education (FE) college that was inspected, had used Welsh Government funding to introduce Welsh language teaching for specific groups of learners. The targeted groups aligned with the priority subject areas of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, as stated in its FE and Apprenticeship Welsh-medium action plan ([Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, 2018](#)). One of the inspections led to a recommendation to ensure that provision is implemented to develop the Welsh language skills of learners meaningfully, taking into account students' individual starting points.

Overall, inspectors noted that few learners who enrolled at FE colleges, apprenticeship providers or ALC providers with a moderate or better level of Welsh language ability, went on to develop their Welsh language skills as part of their programmes. Apart from those undertaking A Level Welsh or the Welsh Baccalaureate through the medium of Welsh, very few vocational FE or apprenticeship learners who speak Welsh produced any written work through the medium of Welsh. Providers were not doing enough to ensure that learners benefited from completing even a small part of their work through the medium of Welsh. Inspectors found that providers have been slow to present opportunities for learners to develop their written Welsh in the context of their job roles or chosen subjects.

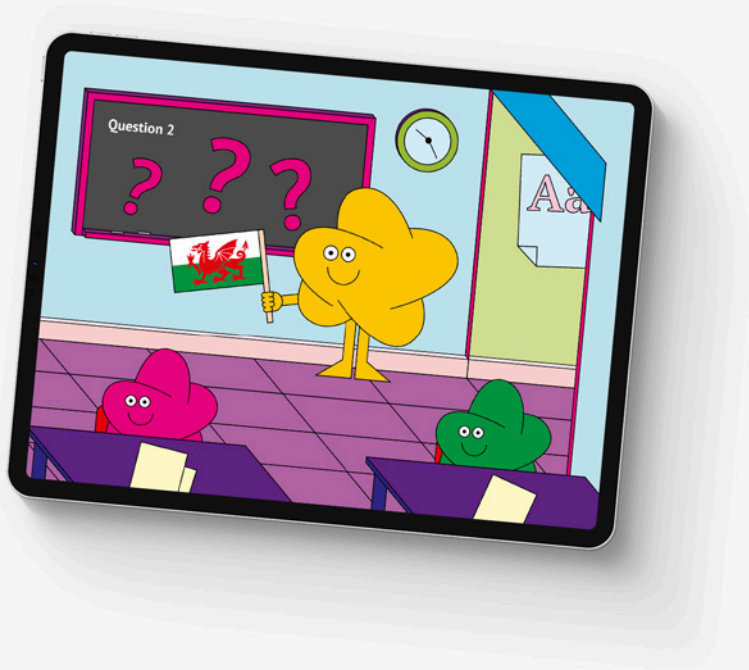
Overall, in the **Welsh for adults** sector, providers had a clear vision that aligned with the policy of the National Centre for Learning Welsh and the Welsh Government to increase the number of Welsh speakers. As a result, they played an important role in the actions of their host institutions to promote and increase the use of the Welsh language. The number of Welsh for adults learners increased during the inspection cycle and providers offered a wide range of courses and learning options. On the whole, the outcomes of core inspections in this sector were positive, with many learners making sound progress in their skills.

Estyn's inspection and thematic reports

At the request of the Welsh Government, Estyn has published a number of thematic reports to evaluate and support practitioners and leaders as they develop different aspects of their practice in relation to the Welsh language. These reports include resources to help providers to improve.

- [A Level Welsh First Language](#) (June 2020)
- [Post-16 partnerships](#) (January 2021)
- [Welsh language acquisition](#) (March 2021)
- [The teaching of Welsh history including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic history, identity and culture](#) (October 2021)
- [Language immersion remains a priority to support children learning Welsh](#) (February 2022)
- [Welsh Immersion Education – Strategies and approaches to support 3 to 11-year-old learners](#) (February 2022)
- [Support for Welsh in Initial Teacher Education](#) (September 2023)

Materials to support key theme



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Key themes

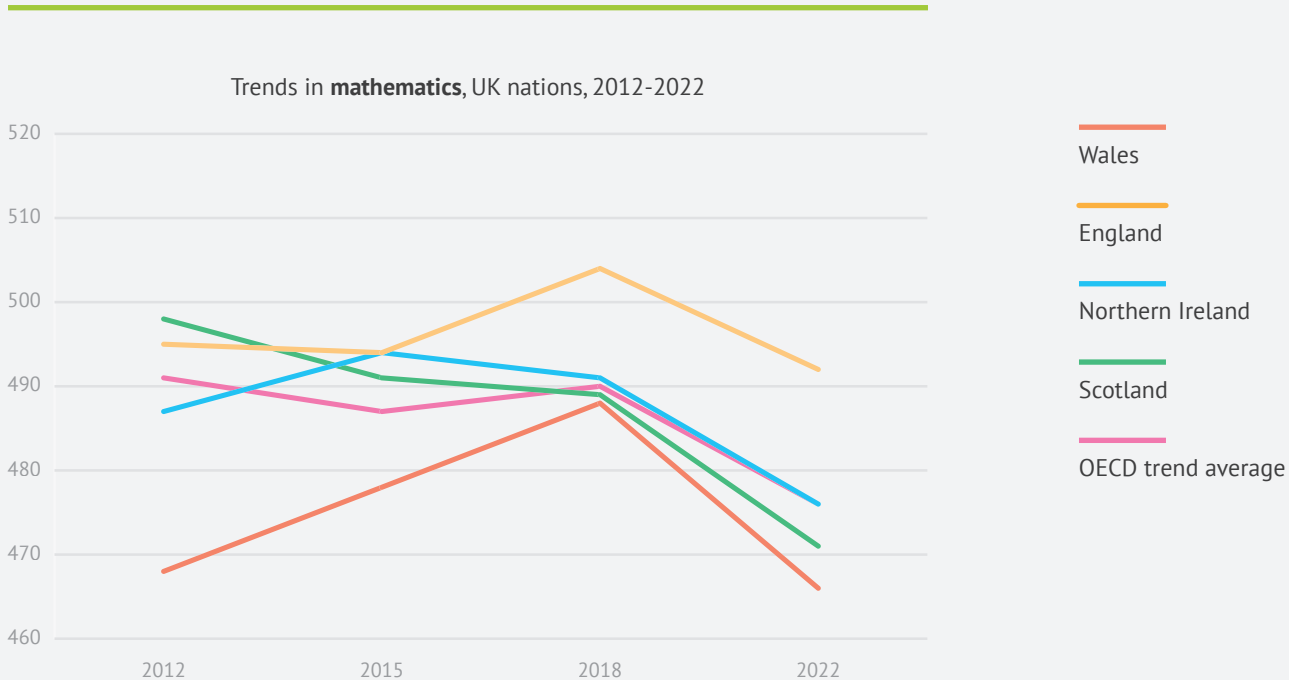
PISA 2022

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is the world's largest international education study carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Every three years, a representative sample of 15-year-old pupils from schools in participating countries are tested on their ability to use their reading, mathematics and science in real-life challenges. During each cycle, PISA focuses on one of these three domains in greater detail. During the latest cycle of assessments, conducted late in the autumn term 2022, the major domain was mathematics. To enable detailed analysis of the assessment outcomes, pupils were also asked questions about their school experience and wider life.

Wales has been part of the PISA study since 2006. In 2022, a sample made up of 2,568 pupils from 89 schools, representing 7% of all 15-year-olds in Wales, completed the 2-hour computer-based assessment and the learner questionnaire. Over 97% of the learners taking part in the assessments in Wales were in publicly run schools compared to an average of 83% of learners across the OECD countries. Since the previous cycle of assessments in 2018, the performance of pupils in Wales undertaking the assessments in mathematics, reading, and science in 2022 fell by more than the OECD average. In 2022, the performance of Welsh pupils in mathematics, reading and science were significantly lower than the corresponding OECD averages ([Ingram et al, 2023](#); [OECD, 2023](#)).

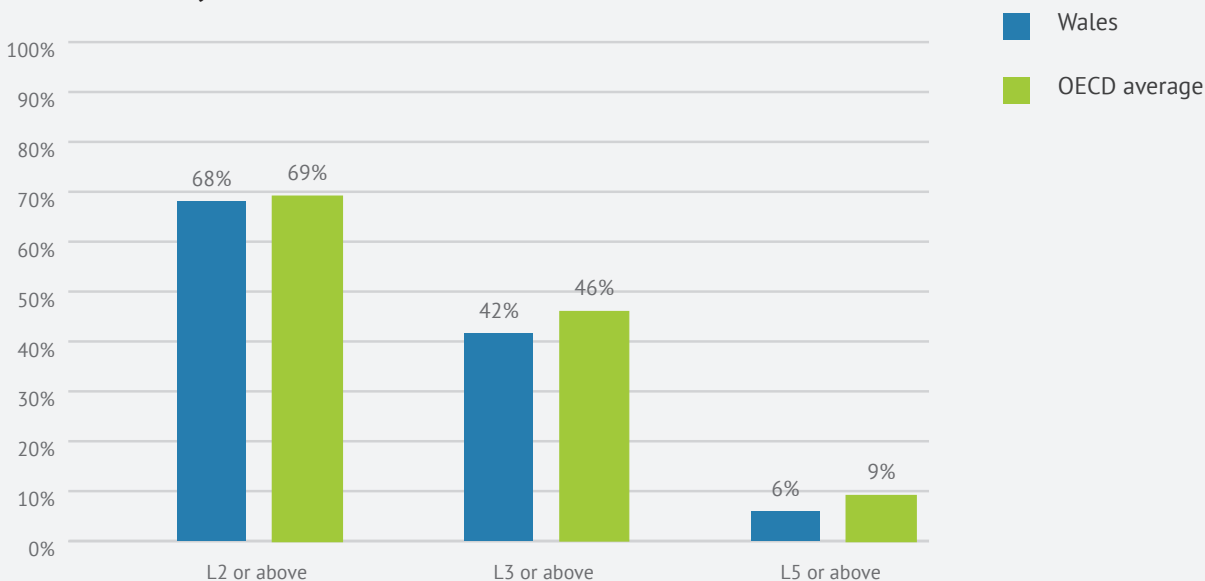
Mathematics

The performance of Welsh pupils in PISA's mathematics assessments had increased substantially between 2012 and 2018, leading to a narrowing of the gap between Wales and the rest of the UK. However, the gap once again widened in 2022. In 2022, Wales's overall mean average score in mathematics was 466. This was significantly lower than the OECD average of 472. In 2018, Wales's performance was close to the OECD average, and close to the score of Scotland and Northern Ireland. While there was an average fall of 15 points in the trend average of OECD countries between 2018 and 2022, Wales's performance had fallen by 21 points.



The PISA describes pupil performance using six proficiency levels, with proficiency level 6 being the most challenging and level 2 being considered a basic proficiency in that domain.

Percentage achieving different proficiency levels in mathematics, 2022



The proportion of pupils in Wales who achieved a basic proficiency of level 2 or higher in mathematics fell substantially between 2018 and 2022, from 79% to 68%. In 2018, Wales had a higher percentage of pupils that had a basic proficiency of level 2 or higher in mathematics than the OECD average, but in 2022 the proportion was in line with that of the OECD.

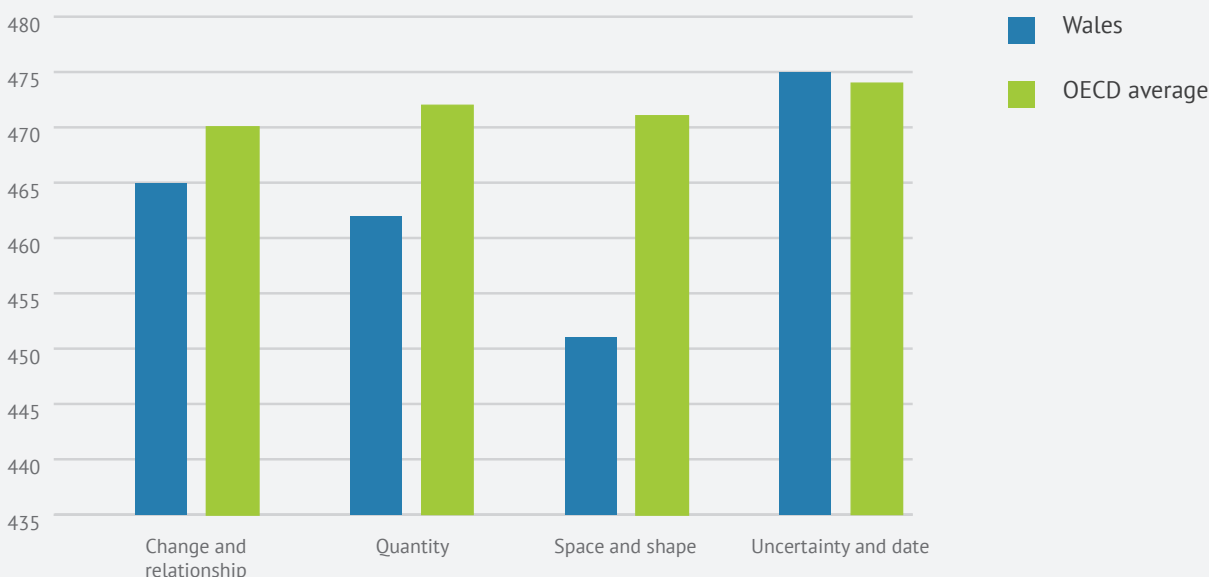
The performance of middle ability pupils followed a similar trend, with the percentage of pupils achieving proficiency level 3 or above falling from 53% in 2018 to 42% in 2022. In 2018, the proportion of pupils achieving proficiency level 3 or above was in line with the OECD average, but in 2022 this proportion had fallen to be four percentage points below the OECD average.

In 2022, there was a slight decrease in the percentage of pupils in Wales who achieved proficiency level 5 or above in mathematics. Six per cent of pupils in Wales achieved this level, which remained lower than the OECD average of nine per cent. In Wales, boys outperformed girls significantly by nine points in 2022, with boys achieving a score of 470 and girls 461. There was also a gap of nine points between the OECD averages for boys and girls in 2022. In 2018, boys outperformed girls by only two points in Wales.

In Estyn's Annual Report for 2021-2022, we stated that, in the majority of secondary schools, shortcomings in provision meant that pupils did not develop their numeracy skills well enough across the curriculum ([Estyn, 2023a](#)). During the 2022-2023 academic year, our inspectors noted that the teaching of mathematics and numeracy was ineffective in a large minority of lessons, with too much emphasis on procedural fluency and insufficient focus on developing pupils' mathematical proficiencies. This was reflected in the weak performance of Welsh pupils in the mathematics element of PISA 2022. In our interactions with school leaders, one of their biggest concerns continues to be the recruitment of specialist mathematics teachers ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)).

In 2022, mathematics was the major domain of the PISA assessments. Information is therefore available on performance in mathematics in different subscales. Mathematical literacy was assessed in relation to four content categories, these were: change and relationship; quantity; space and shape; uncertainty and data.

Performance in the mathematics content subdomains, 2022

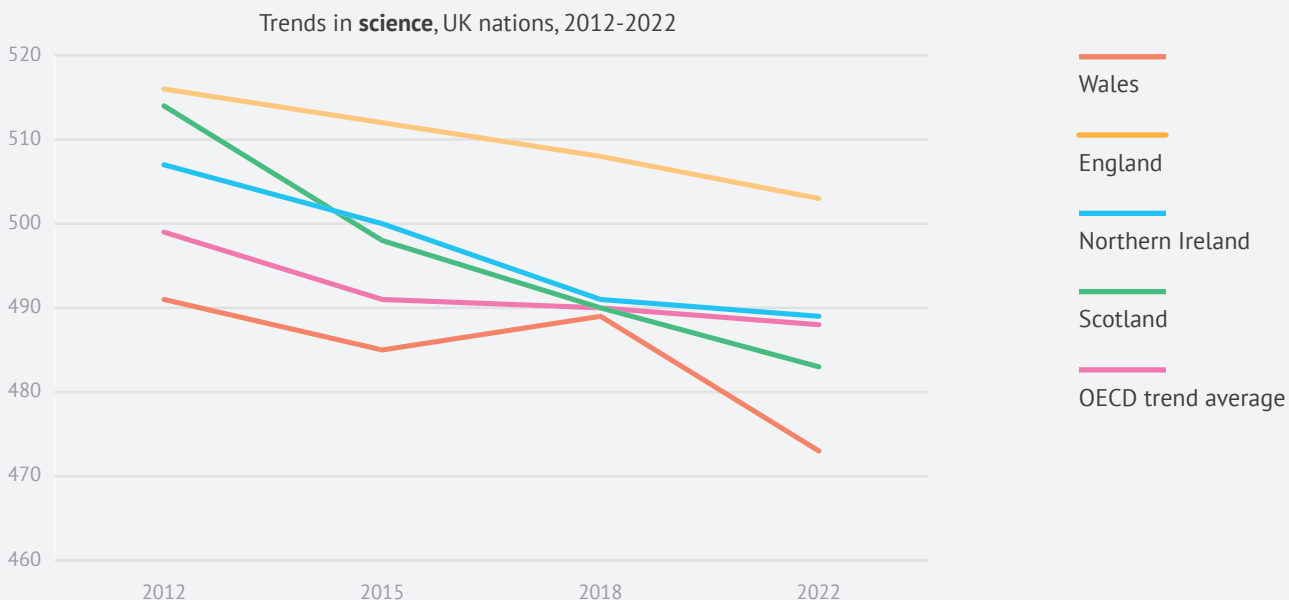


Pupils in Wales performed significantly lower than the OECD averages in each of the change and relationship, quantity, and space and shape content categories, but performed better than their counterparts in other OECD countries in the uncertainty and data category.

Our inspection of secondary schools during 2022-2023 found that pupils were given valuable opportunities to develop their understanding of matters relating to data analysis, and graphs in particular. However, opportunities for pupils to develop other numeracy skills, such as their understanding of number and matters related to shapes and measures, and their ability to solve problems in real-life contexts, are generally underdeveloped across secondary schools in Wales.

Science

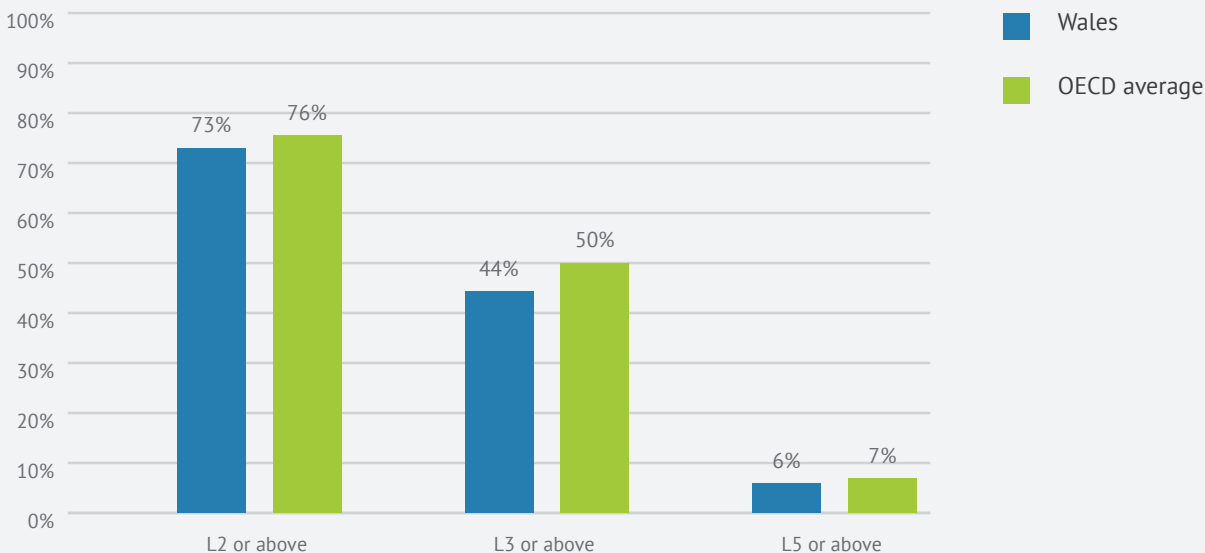
In 2022, Wales's overall mean average score in science was 473. This was significantly lower than the OECD average of 485. In 2018, Wales's performance was close to the OECD average. However, while there had been an average fall of two points in the trend average of OECD countries between 2018 and 2022, Wales's performance had fallen by 15 points, a significant decrease. Despite a slight increase between 2015 and 2018, the science scores of pupils in Wales have generally followed a downward trend since Wales first participated in the PISA study in 2006.



Overall, each of the UK nations saw a fall in their performance between 2018 and 2022. However, the decrease in Wales's score was substantially bigger than for each of the other UK nations.

The proportion of pupils who achieved a basic proficiency of level 2 or higher in science fell substantially between 2018 and 2022, from 81% to 74%. For the same period, the corresponding proportion for the OECD fell by only two percentage points. The performance of middle ability pupils followed a similar trend, with the percentage of pupils achieving proficiency level 3 or above in Wales falling from 52% in 2018 to 44% in 2022, while the corresponding OECD average fell by only two percentage points.

Percentage achieving different proficiency levels in science, 2022



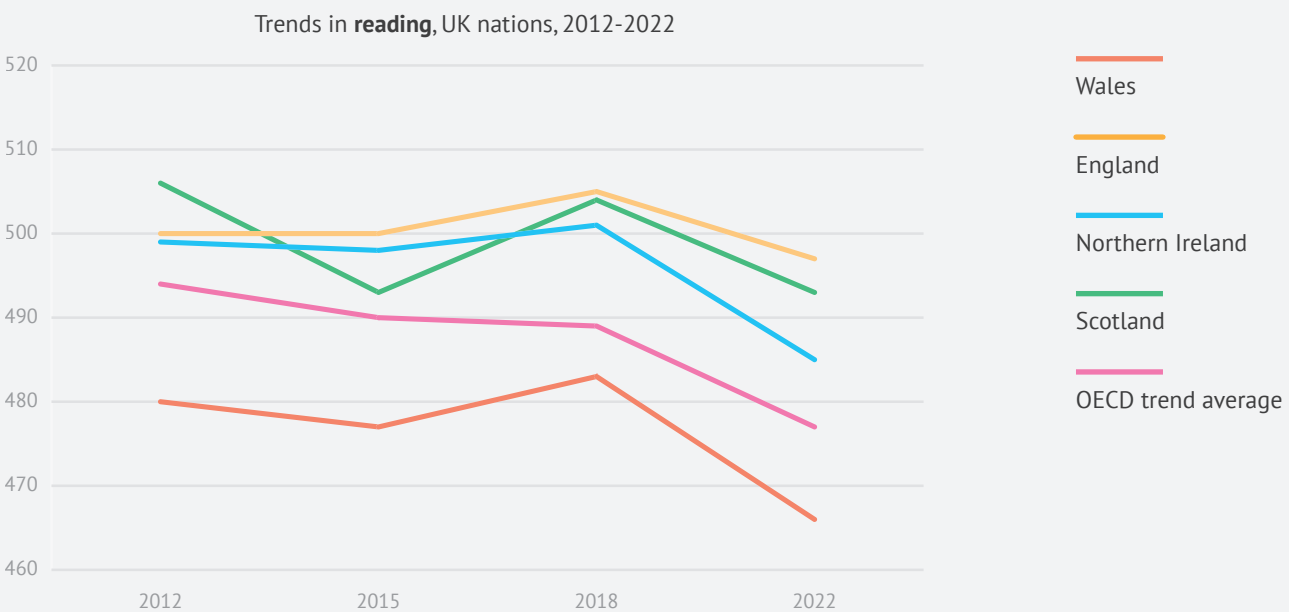
In 2022, there was a slight increase in the percentage of pupils in Wales who achieved proficiency at level 5 or above in science. Six per cent of pupils in Wales achieved this level, which is close to the OECD average of seven per cent.

The weak performance of Welsh pupils in the science element of the PISA assessments reflects Estyn’s conclusions in the 2017 thematic report on science at Key Stages 3 and 4 ([Estyn, 2017](#)), where we stated that, while teaching was better at Key Stage 4, pupils only made good progress in about half of lessons in Key Stage 3. In a minority of primary schools, pupils do not develop their scientific knowledge and understanding well enough. In addition, schools in Wales have recently found the recruitment of specialist science teachers to be a particular challenge, especially for physics and chemistry ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)).

With the exception of 2018, boys in Wales have always outperformed girls in PISA’s science assessments. This was the case again in 2022, with boys outperforming girls by seven points, although this gap in performance was not significant. This was similar to the picture across the rest of the UK with boys having, on average, higher scores than girls, although this differs from the average for the OECD where there is no difference between the performance of boys and girls.

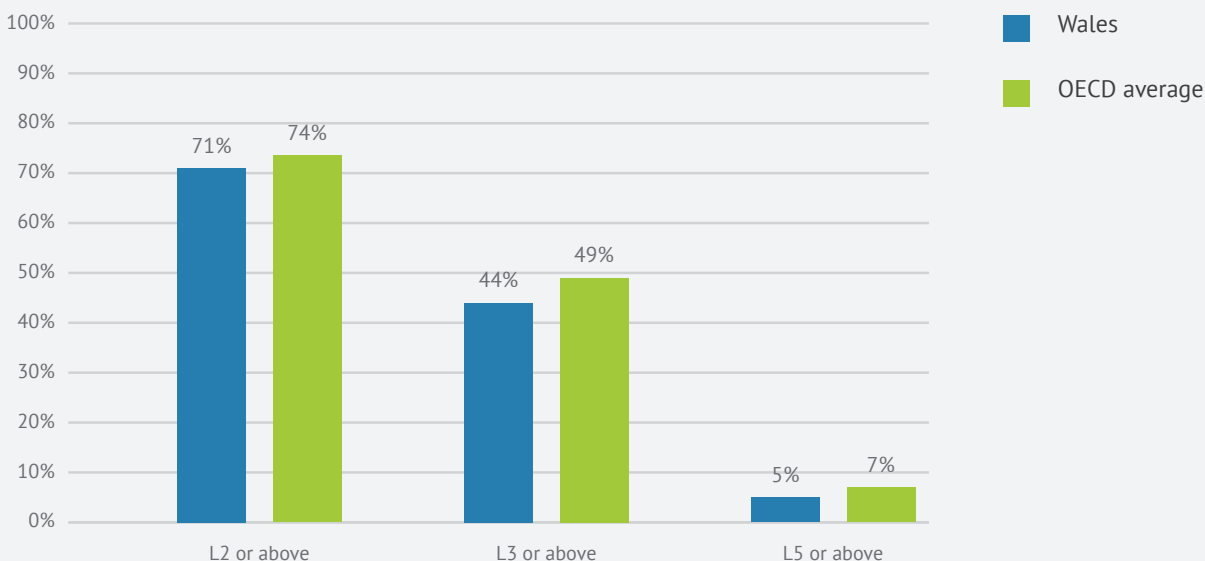
Reading

In 2022, Wales’s overall mean average score for reading was 466. This was significantly lower than the OECD average of 476. Between 2015 and 2018, Wales’s performance improved and the gap between the performance of Wales and the OECD average narrowed. However, between 2018 and 2022, Wales’s performance in reading fell more than in the other UK nations and the OECD average. This left the performance of Wales’s pupils significantly below the OECD average and substantially lower than the averages for the rest of the UK.



The proportion of pupils who achieved a basic proficiency of level 2 or higher in reading fell substantially between 2018 and 2022, from 78% to 71%. In 2018, Wales had a similar proportion of pupils that had basic proficiency of level 2 or higher in reading to the OECD countries overall, but in 2022 the proportion was three percentage points lower. The performance of middle ability pupils, as measured by the percentage achieving proficiency level 3 or above, also fell, from 52% to 44%. It remained below the OECD figure of 49%. There was also a decrease from seven per cent to five per cent in the percentage of pupils in Wales who achieved proficiency level 5 or above in reading. The corresponding OECD figure fell by one percentage point to seven per cent.

Percentage achieving different proficiency levels in reading, 2022



Our thematic on ‘Developing pupils’ English reading skills from 10-14 years of age’ and our inspection reports recognised that, although the pandemic had a negative impact on pupils’ reading skills, only a few secondary schools had developed a culture of reading where reading for pleasure was a priority alongside reading to learn ([Estyn, 2023b](#)). The support of senior leaders was essential for this to happen. Very few school clusters planned effectively for the progressive development of pupils’ reading skills from Year 6 into Year 7. Only a minority of secondary schools provided regular opportunities for pupils to develop reading skills across the curriculum or monitored and evaluated the impact of these opportunities rigorously enough. In general, primary school teachers focused suitably on developing pupils’ reading skills, although in secondary schools the focus was mostly upon subject knowledge, understanding and skills.

Similar to previous PISA assessments, girls’ performance in reading (475 in 2022), was significantly higher than that of boys (456). The extent of the gap in the performance of boys and girls was generally similar to the gap seen in other OECD countries and the other UK nations.

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Key themes

Mitigating the impacts of poverty on educational attainment

2022-2023

As part of our 2021-2022 annual report ([Estyn, 2022](#)), we published an overview of the work of providers that were particularly effective at tackling the impact of poverty and disadvantage on their learners. This year, we expand on that overview by providing further examples of strong practice and also highlighting what needs to improve overall.

Mitigating the impact of poverty on children's educational attainment continues to be a significant challenge in Wales and remains a Welsh Government priority ([Welsh Government, 2022](#)). Children and their families are considered to be living in relative income poverty if the household's total income is less than 60% of the median average UK household income (after housing costs). A recent Welsh Government report found that around 28% of children were living in relative income poverty during the three-financial-year period ending April 2022 ([Welsh Government, 2023a](#)).

A review of UK poverty research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggests that, in general, there is a gap in educational attainment by parental income level, which continues throughout different stages of a child's education ([Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2023, p. 107](#)). This report suggests a 27-percentage point attainment gap between pupils aged 16 eligible for free-school meals and those not eligible in Wales ([p. 109](#)). They indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic generally widened the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged pupils in the UK, as a result of factors such as digital divide, varied home learning environments and potentially deepening poverty ([p. 111](#)).

The Welsh Government is prioritising the need to address socio-economic inequality. This is strengthened by the Socio-economic Duty ([Welsh Government, 2020](#)), which came into force on 31 March 2021 and makes addressing the impact of poverty a statutory duty for local authorities.



What's going well

Our inspection work provides an insight into providers' approaches to tackling poverty and inequality. Our evidence from inspections in 2022-2023 showed clearly that strong leadership, where leaders understood the challenges, identified appropriate actions and evaluated their effectiveness, was key to mitigating the impact of poverty on attainment.

Effective leaders demonstrated that:

- Their clear, inclusive vision set tackling poverty as a key priority. Their vision was based on inclusivity and the need to address inequity. For example, leaders at [Blackwood Comprehensive School](#) developed their vision of a nurturing and aspirational learning environment in which pupils and staff feel safe and supported, and where they strive to succeed.
- Effective, collaborative decision-making recognised the importance of working in partnership with parents to overcome barriers to learning. For example, leaders and staff members at [Borthyn V.C. Primary School, Denbighshire](#), cultivated strong relationships with parents and the community to support pupils to become aspirational and ambitious learners. This helped most pupils, including those with additional learning needs, to make strong progress in their learning across the curriculum. Leaders at [Camau cyntaf – Cylch Meithrin Rhydyfelin, Pontypridd](#), operated an open-door policy and practitioners worked very effectively with parents. Parents felt confident to turn to staff members at any time to ask for advice. The involvement of all staff and the strong relationships with wider stakeholders meant that tackling poverty and removing barriers to learning was everyone's business. This was also evident at schools that adopted a community school approach and worked collaboratively with a range of agencies. For example, leaders at the [Western Learning Federation Riverbank Special School, Cardiff](#), worked purposefully with a range of partners and carers. This work was supported by the school family liaison officer who provided sensitive help and advice across a range of areas. This contributed positively towards mitigating the impact of poverty both on pupils' wellbeing and their attainment.
- They knew their communities well, enabling them to target their funding effectively. For example, [Markham Primary School, Blackwood](#), employed a pupil and family support worker who effectively established and embedded a comprehensive programme of parental and family engagement. The school also secured the involvement of a wide range of relevant agencies as well as members of the local community.
- They reduced barriers to learning effectively and maximised the learning opportunities for children and young people. For example, [Bridgend's adult learning in the community partnership](#) ensured that nearly all tutors took account of learners' responsibilities and commitments beyond the classroom which could act as barriers to their learning. Similarly, [Rhondda Cynon Taf](#) used its youth service effectively to support young people in their schools and in their communities across the local authority's areas of greatest need. These included communities that had few local facilities.

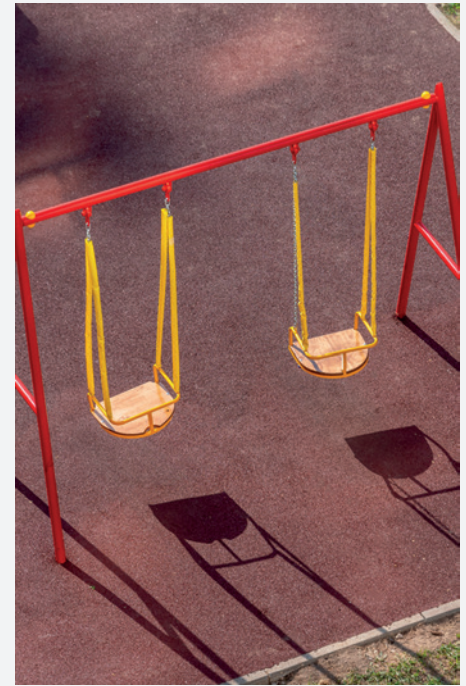


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- Care was taken to consider the financial costs to parents of their child's participation at school. For example, at [Llwydcoed Primary School, Aberdare](#), leaders were working thoughtfully with external agencies, such as the Child Poverty Action Group, to audit school provision and identify and address areas for improvement. As a result, the changes made to school practice helped to mitigate the impact of poverty on learners' attainment and well-being. Similarly, at [Greenhill Special School, Cardiff](#), leaders made certain that family finances did not become a barrier to learning by introducing initiatives such as schoolfunded trips. This contributed to improvements in pupils' engagement and motivation to learn.
 - Grant funding was targeted appropriately to support children and young people who were eligible for free school meals or were from low-income households. They allocated resources carefully to meet the needs of all pupils of all abilities and recognised the intersectionality of the impact of poverty on pupil attainment. For example, at [Idris Davies School, Abertyswg](#), which is an amalgamation of two primary schools and one secondary school, leaders approached national priorities positively, particularly in relation to tackling the effect of poverty. Leaders planned purposeful strategies to raise the aspirations of pupils in low-income families from an early age. Leaders made effective use of grants, including the pupil development grant (PDG). This contributed positively to the opportunities for pupils from low-income families to access experiences that financial constraints would otherwise prevent.
 - The effects of provision and grant spending were carefully monitored to ensure that they were having the desired impact, with adjustments made if needed. For example, at [Adamsdown Primary School, Cardiff](#), monitoring and evaluation procedures were robust and leaders had a clear picture of pupils' strengths as well as any barriers to learning. This enabled the school to provide bespoke support for pupils eligible for free school meals, which helped to minimise the impact of poverty on pupil attainment and achievement.
 - There were high expectations of all children and young people regardless of their backgrounds, and the school recognised the importance of high-quality teaching and learning to enable all young people to achieve. For example, at [Coedcae Secondary School, Llanelli](#), teachers had a detailed understanding of pupils' individual needs. This, together with a comprehensive extra-curricular offer and a wide range of subject choices, ensured that pupils had access to engaging activities that catered well to their individual needs and interests.
 - They targeted professional learning appropriately. For example, at [Ysgol Gynradd Pontyberem, Llanelli](#), school leaders had established a comprehensive programme of professional learning to help staff members support children suffering from trauma, and to support the wider well-being of pupils.
 - Early intervention and effective support were in place. For example, [Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council](#) used a wide range of approaches to help mitigate the effects of poverty in pre-school and children's early years in education. This began before birth with support for mothers-to-be by, for example, encouraging healthy eating and developing budgeting skills.
 - They prioritised and considered the impact of poverty regardless of the area or the school's socio-economic circumstances. For example, [Sketty Primary School, Swansea](#), adopted a community focused approach to tackling the impact of poverty on attainment. As a result, most pupils, including those eligible for free school meals or from low-income families, made strong progress from their individual starting points.

What needs to improve

In order to effectively mitigate against the adverse effects of poverty, there remained aspects of work that needed to improve.

- Leaders did not evaluate the impact of work to address the effects of poverty on educational attainment well enough. For example, whilst most schools planned their use of grants such as the PDG appropriately, they did not evaluate the impact of their use on educational attainment sufficiently well.
- In general, providers did not make enough use of research evidence to ensure that they planned appropriate provision to address the impact of poverty on attainment. As a result, very few schools sufficiently considered the impact of teaching arrangements, such as pupil groupings, on pupil attainment.
- Local authorities, regions, schools and other providers did not focus professional learning on mitigating the impact of poverty on educational attainment well enough. In a minority of schools and settings, leaders did not target professional learning effectively enough to enable all staff to address the impact of poverty on attainment.
- Leaders did not always carefully consider the financial costs for families of fully participating in school. They did not consider well enough how effective teaching could reduce the impact of poverty. They did not ensure that all barriers to learning had been minimised as far as possible.
- Local authorities did not support schools to gain a better understanding of their communities sufficiently well. In a minority of schools and settings, leaders did not know their communities well enough. Leaders in these schools did not have sufficient information to enable them to plan effective support for pupils, including those from low-income households or eligible for free school meals.
- The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals or from low-income households needed to improve. Nationally, attendance during the 2022-2023 academic year was worse among pupils eligible for free school meals than for those not eligible ([Welsh Government, 2023c](#)). The proportion of sessions missed among secondary school age pupils was 20.6% for pupils who were eligible for free school meals and 10.2% for those not eligible ([Welsh Government, 2023b](#)). This gap widened substantially following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; see our [key theme on attendance and attitudes to learning](#) for further details.



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Key themes

Attitudes to learning and attendance

2022-2023

In 2021-2022, we saw an increasing demand for well-being and mental health support across educational settings, and school attendance, particularly amongst the most disadvantaged learners, remained below pre-pandemic levels ([Welsh Government, 2023a](#)). This demand for support persisted in 2022-2023, with attendance continuing to remain too low and leaders reporting that learners continued to struggle to re-adjust to school life. Leaders and staff continued to place a strong emphasis on supporting the well-being of learners. Approaches to supporting well-being often had to evolve in response to the developing needs of children and young people following the pandemic.

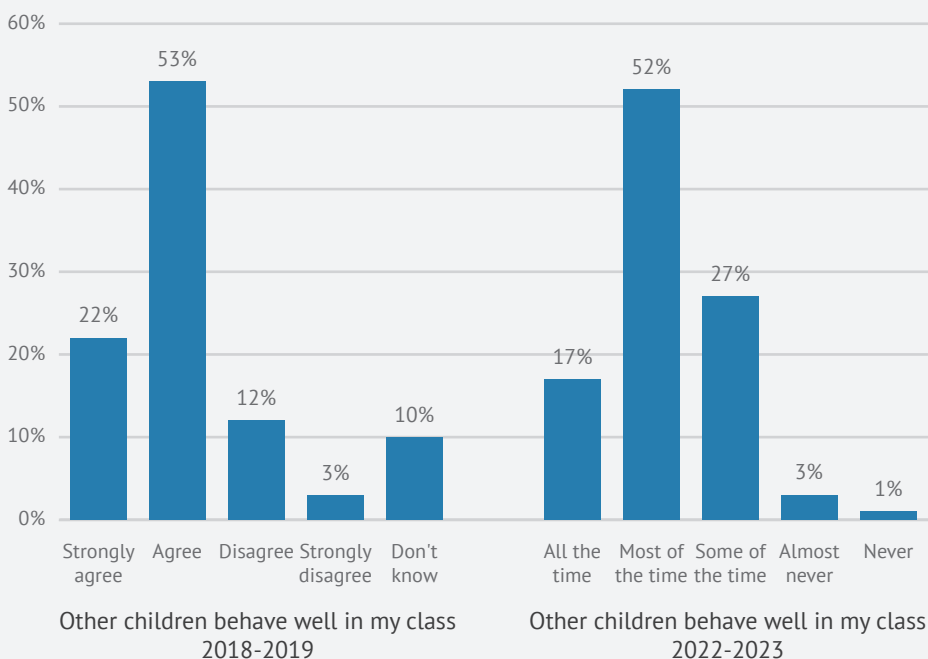
When comparing sector reports from the period before the pandemic (2018-2019) with our reports for 2022-2023, comments around well-being and behaviour were not markedly different. For example, in 2022-2023 most children were happy, secure and eager to learn in non-maintained settings. In primary schools, most pupils enjoyed school, were enthusiastic about their learning and behaved well. In secondary schools, many pupils engaged positively with their learning. A minority of pupils were sometimes content to remain passive in their lessons and a few pupils disrupted their learning and that of others. Across pupil referral units (PRUs), pupils felt that strong working relationships with staff helped them feel safe, secure and well cared for. Generally, inspection reports referred to a similar proportion of pupils showing positive attitudes to learning and displaying good behaviour in 2022-2023 as during the years directly before the pandemic.

It is difficult to draw direct comparisons between what pupils said about behaviour in our pre-inspection questionnaires from 2018-2019 and 2022-2023 as the wording of the questions and format changed as we resumed inspection following the pandemic. Questionnaires are one source of evidence used during inspections to evaluate well-being and attitudes to learning. Findings are triangulated with other evidence sources, including conversations with groups of learners, discussions with teachers, and the views of parents.



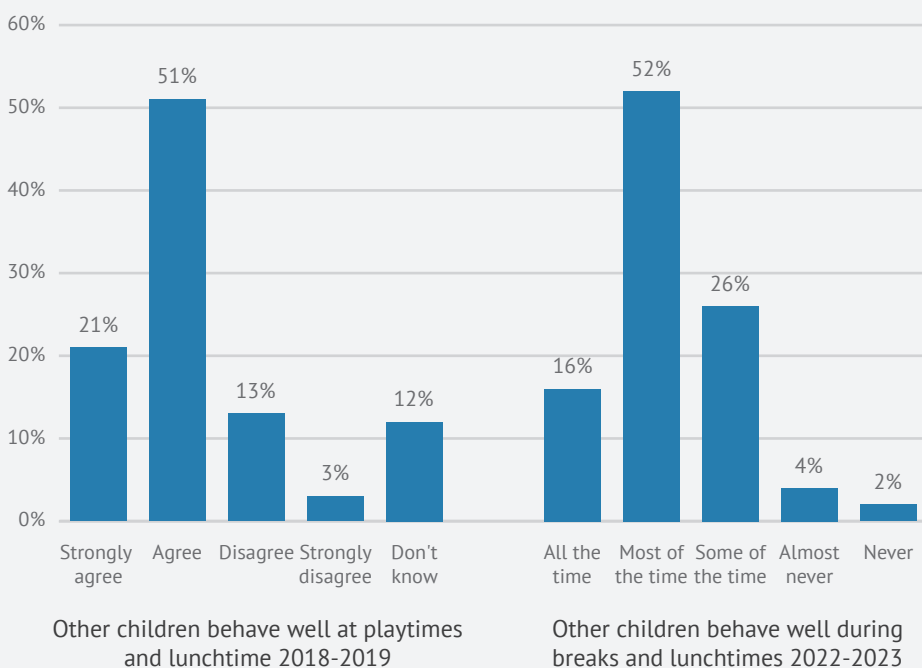
Questionnaire results for pupils in maintained primary, secondary and all-age schools in 2018-2019 and 2022-2023 showed the following:

Figure 1: Comparison of responses to the statement 'Other children behave well in my class' in learner pre-inspection questionnaires, Primary, 2018-2019 and 2022-2023



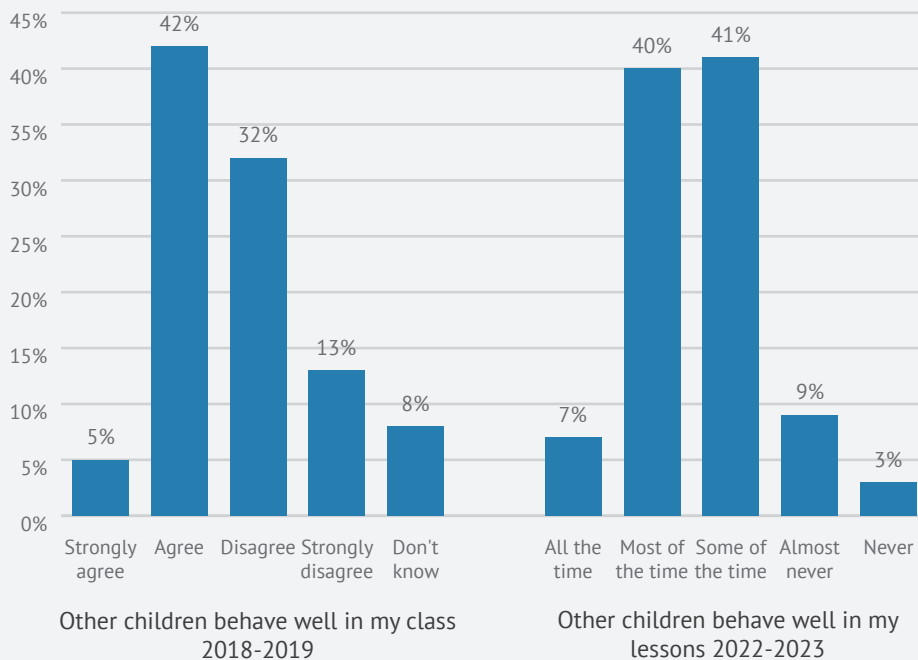
Primary: In 2022-2023, almost 70% of pupils agreed that other children behaved well in class all or most of the time. In 2018-2019, 75% of primary pupils strongly agreed or agreed that other pupils behaved well in class.

Figure 2: Comparison of responses to the statement 'Other children behave well during playtime/breaks and lunchtimes' in learner pre-inspection questionnaires, Primary, 2018-2019 and 2022-2023



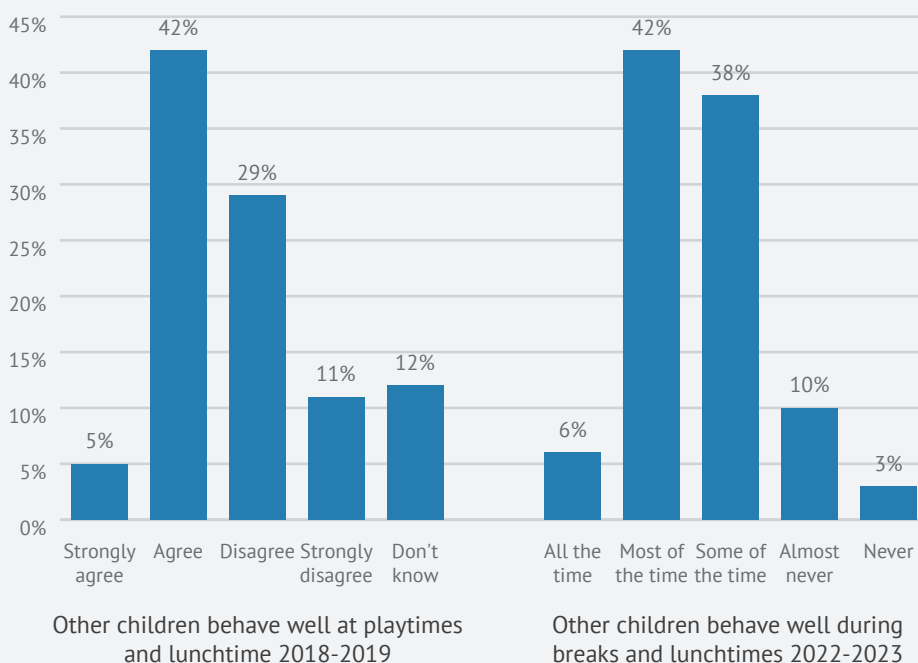
Primary: In 2022-2023, 68% of pupils agreed that other children behaved well during breaks and lunchtimes all or most of the time. Seventy-two per cent of primary pupils strongly agreed or agreed that other pupils behaved well in class in 2018-2019.

Figure 3: Comparison of responses to the statement ‘Other children behave well in my class/lessons’ in learner pre-inspection questionnaires, Secondary, 2018-2019 and 2022-2023



Secondary: In 2022-2023, 47% of pupils agreed that other children behaved well in lessons all or most of the time. Another 41% agreed that pupils behaved well some of the time. In 2018-2019, 47% of secondary pupils strongly agreed or agreed that other pupils behaved well in class.

Figure 4: Comparison of responses to the statement ‘Other children behave well at playtimes/breaks and lunchtimes’ in learner pre-inspection questionnaires, Secondary, 2018-2019 and 2022-2023



Secondary: In 2022-2023, 48% of pupils agreed that other children behaved well during breaks and lunchtimes all or most of the time. Another 38% agreed that pupils behaved well some of the time. Forty-seven per cent of secondary pupils strongly agreed or agreed that other pupils behaved well at playtimes and lunchtime in 2018-2019.

Although pupil behaviour as reported in inspection reports and questionnaires remained broadly similar to the picture before the pandemic, many primary, secondary and all-age schools reported experiencing pupils demonstrating more challenging behaviours. For example, in primary schools, leaders reported more pupils struggling to regulate their emotions and having to put provision in place to support them. In secondary schools, leaders reported more pupils struggling with issues such as anxiety, weaker social skills, low engagement and poor mental health. These issues also contributed to the reasons why some pupils did not re-engage well with their learning following the pandemic. This has impacted on attendance. Leaders also reported that pupils' behaviour in unstructured time, such as breaktimes and lunchtimes, was more challenging than it was prior to the pandemic. This included an increase in incidents of aggressive and authority-challenging behaviour. This was reflected in the increases of both fixed term exclusions and permanent exclusions seen in all maintained sectors. The rate of fixed term exclusion (five days or less) increased from 39.0 in 2018-2019 to 50.6 exclusions per 1,000 pupils in 2021-2022, while the rate of fixed-term exclusions (over five days) increased from 1.7 in 2018-2019 to 1.9 per 1,000 pupils in 2021-2022. Permanent exclusion increased from 0.4 (2018-2019) to 0.5 per 1,000 pupils in 2021-2022 ([Welsh Government, 2023b](#)).

Where secondary schools had responded particularly effectively to the well-being needs of their pupils, they had considered how to adapt their provision to respond to their pupils' evolving needs. They worked purposefully, using expertise they had developed internally and with a range of external agencies to tailor support for pupils. They effectively evaluated provision, including their curriculum offer, to ensure that it met the needs of all pupils. They carefully re-established the routines of the school day to support pupils to engage with their learning. However, in a very few instances this led to over-use of reduced timetables as part of pastoral support plans which remained in place for extended periods.

During 2022-2023, local government education services continued to respond to challenges left by COVID-19. This included support for schools with behaviour and attendance issues that were over and above what was common before the pandemic. Generally, local authorities reported an increase in the referral rates for educated other than at school (EOTAS) provision, with 2,396 pupils accessing some kind of EOTAS provision in January 2023. Of those pupils, 1,891 were mainly educated outside school with PRUs being the most common form of alternative provision. Between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023, there was an increase in the numbers of primary and younger secondary-aged pupils attending EOTAS provision ([Welsh Government, 2023c](#)). Evidence from 2022-2023 noted that most staff in PRUs understood arrangements to promote positive behaviour and succeeded in applying valuable behaviour strategies with pupils. As a result, pupils' behaviour whilst attending the PRUs inspected was appropriate.

In June 2023, we published a thematic report on the curriculum experience of pupils educated other than at school ([Estyn, 2023](#)). We noted that too many primary and younger aged secondary pupils remained with EOTAS providers over the long term. As a result, only a very few of these pupils successfully returned to mainstream school. The main barriers to successful reintegration included the increasing level and complexity of pupils' needs. In particular, their social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs and their social, emotional, behavioural difficulties (SEBD) as well as any underlying additional learning needs (ALN) ([p.2](#)).



Pupil absences

The causes of pupil absence are complex and multifaceted. Focus group research conducted with parents in England identified a number of factors influencing non-attendance. These included changing parental attitudes to the importance of attendance, pupils' mental health, increasing social acceptability of term-time holidays, the cost of living crisis, and breakdowns in the relationship between school and families, especially where sanctions are used ([Burtonshaw and Dorrell, 2023, p.12](#)).

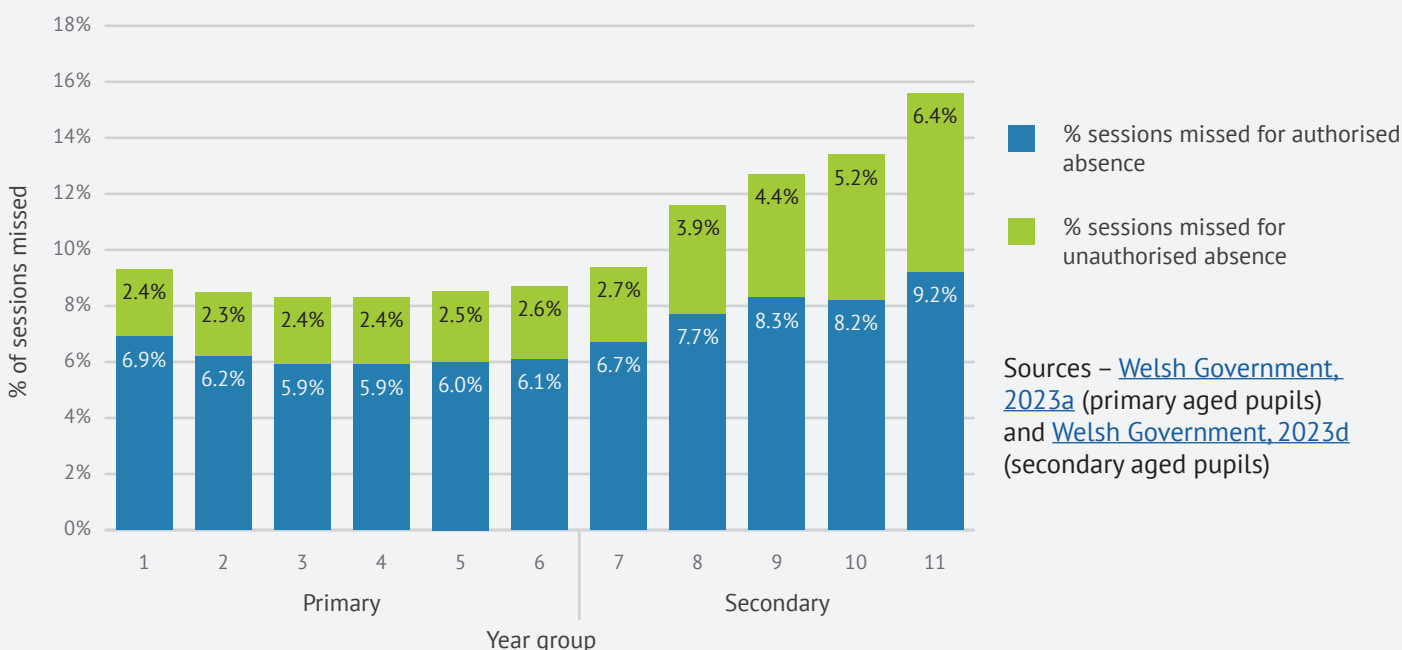
The following commentary on attendance is based on two different data sets. For secondary age pupils we use annual verified data on absenteeism from secondary schools ([Welsh Government, 2023d](#)). This is the latest in the series of annually published data that were reinstated following a three-year pause between 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 due to the disruption of the pandemic. As the comparable validated primary phase data will not be available until Spring 2024, for primary aged pupils we have used figures from the Welsh Government's weekly collections of schools' attendance data ([Welsh Government, 2023a](#)). This data set is provisional, unverified, and not based on the same definitions as the full year validated data to be published in Spring 2024. It should be treated as an indicator of attendance that is subject to amendment.

The secondary phase data accounts for secondary school aged pupils in local authority maintained secondary and all-age schools, the primary phase data accounts for primary aged pupils in local authority maintained primary, all-age and special schools.

The unverified data suggest that attendance rates in 2022-2023 were relatively consistent across the primary school age range in Wales, at around 91%. However, attendance was lower for each successive year group from the beginning of secondary school (Year 7) onwards, with Year 11 having the lowest rate of attendance at around 84%. This appears consistent with research by John et al about absences in Wales, which found that rates of absenteeism increased with age ([2021, p. 2](#)). The data shows that this trend was largely due to higher rates of unauthorised absences among older pupils, with over 6% of Year 11 sessions being missed due to unauthorised absences, compared with just over 2% among primary age pupils.



Figure 5: School absences by year group, 2022-2023

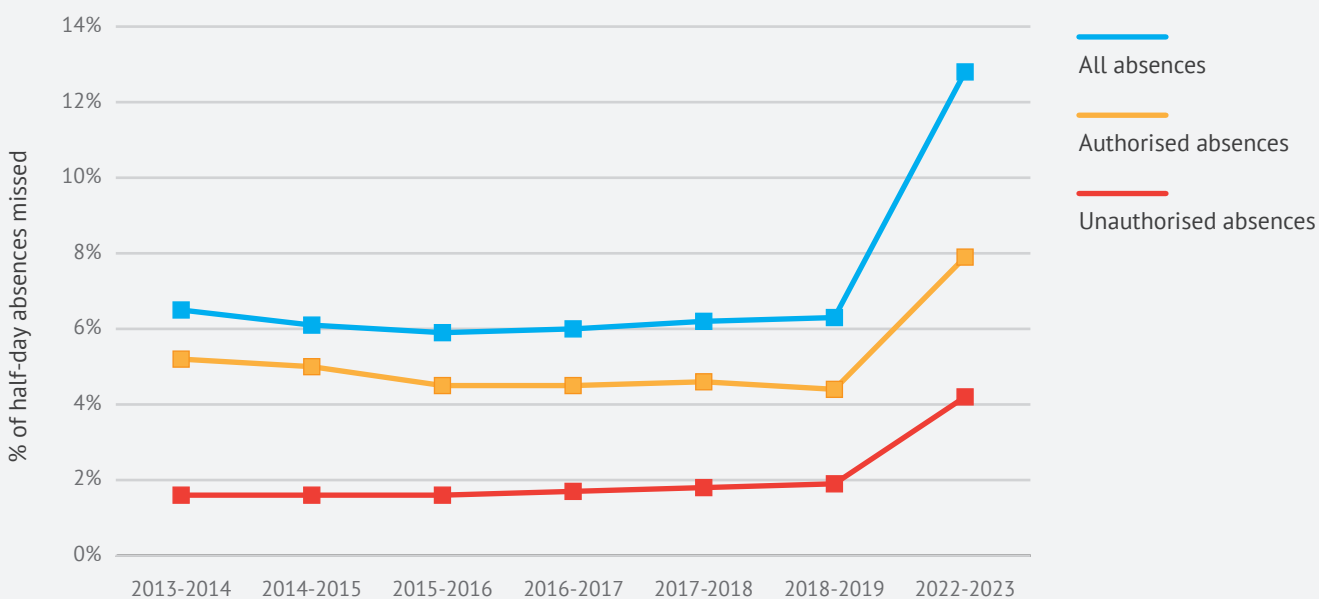


Sources – [Welsh Government, 2023a](#) (primary aged pupils) and [Welsh Government, 2023d](#) (secondary aged pupils)

Note – Attendance data for primary age pupils is based on the Welsh Government’s weekly collection data. This data is unverified management information. This data is for pupils in Year 1 to Year 6 at maintained primary, all-age and special schools. Verified primary data for the 2022-2023 year will be available in Spring 2024. Secondary data is from the Welsh Government’s verified annual collection of attendance data. It includes data for pupils in these school years in maintained secondary and all-age schools.

As reported in its overview of the 2022-2023 secondary attendance data ([Welsh Government, 2023d](#)), in comparison to the pre-pandemic rate, the percentage of half-day sessions missed by secondary school-aged pupils broadly doubled to reach 12.5% in 2022-2023.

Figure 6: Absences among secondary school age pupils according to absence type, 2013-2014 to 2022-2023

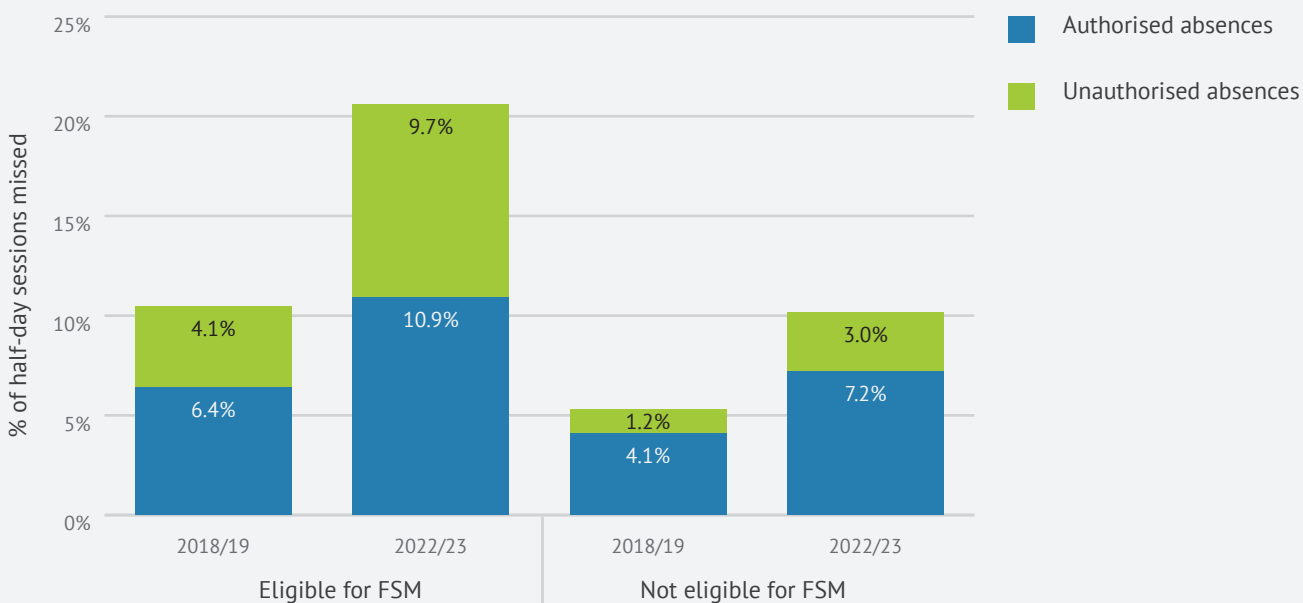


Source – [Welsh Government, 2023d](#)

Note – The years where the Welsh Government was able to publish verified data are indicated by circular markers on the lines.

The absence rates of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) were substantially higher than those of pupils not eligible for free school meals; this difference was most pronounced among secondary-school aged pupils.

Figure 7: Absences among secondary school age pupils in 2018-2019 and 2022-2023 according to FSM eligibility



Source – [Welsh Government, 2023d](#)

The proportion of sessions missed by secondary school age pupils in 2022-2023, of 12.5%, was double the pre-pandemic rate. The overall absence rate for 2022-2023 was 20.6% among pupils eligible for free school meals (eFSM) and 10.2% for those not eligible. On average, this equates to each pupil eligible for free schools missing one day of school per week, and each pupil not eligible missing one day per fortnight. During the pre-pandemic year of 2018-2019, pupil absences were broadly half these levels at 10.5% for those eFSM, and 5.3% for those not eligible. It follows that the 2022-2023 gap between the absence rates of pupils eligible for free school meals and those not eligible, of 10.4% points, was twice as wide as the pre-pandemic gap in 2018-2019.

Among secondary school aged pupils, persistence absence rates were of particular concern. Overall, the proportion of pupils deemed persistently absent in 2022-2023 was 16.3%; this was more than triple the pre-pandemic figure of 4.6% in 2018-2019². Among pupils eligible for free school meals, the issue of persistent absence was acute with more than one in three, 35.6%, deemed persistently absent in 2022-2023; this compared with the pre-pandemic figure of one in eight, 12.7%, in 2018-2019.

Most leaders of schools inspected in 2022-2023 told inspectors that pupil attendance had improved compared to the same time in the previous year, but that the number of pupils persistently absent continued to concern them. Thirteen of the 25 secondary school inspections conducted resulted in a recommendation related to improving pupil attendance. In contrast, only four of the 156 primary school inspections resulted in a recommendation related to attendance. Special schools generally had very secure arrangements to support regular attendance. However, attendance was identified as requiring improvement in one of the seven maintained special schools inspected.

² In June 2023, the Minister for Education published new draft guidance on improving learner engagement and attendance as part of the 'Belonging, engaging and participating' consultation. This resulted in the Welsh Government revising its definition of 'persistence absence' to instances where pupils miss over 10% of sessions. This change to the threshold has since been applied and is used within our annual report. As a result, the proportion of learners falling into the persistently absent category is higher than it would have been using the previously defined threshold of 20%.

Many of the pupils at the PRUs inspected had poor attendance records at their previous schools. Improving the attendance of PRU pupils remained a challenge that had been exacerbated by the pandemic. Despite the efforts of leaders, overall attendance remained below pre-pandemic levels. For three of the four PRUs inspected during 2022-2023, inspectors left recommendations related to pupil attendance. This included strengthening procedures for monitoring attendance as well as improving pupil attendance rates.

In the best cases, inspectors found that schools had established effective systems for promoting good attendance and responding to concerning patterns of absences. At these schools, leaders evaluated their strategies to promote good attendance carefully and adapted their approaches if they were not successful enough. The roles and responsibilities of staff members at these schools were clear and this, together with reliable arrangements for communication with parents and pupils, helped the schools to respond very quickly and effectively to absences. They contacted pupils and their parents promptly to follow up instances when pupils were not present when expected. Among schools who had successfully increased pupil attendance rates, improved parental engagement was identified as one of the key contributing factors.

Arrangements for notifying parents of their child's absence, as well as for parents to notify the school or PRU of the reasons behind any absences, were up to date in the majority of schools and all PRUs inspected. Digital systems, often mobile app, email or text message based, when used well, provided parents with responsive and convenient ways of monitoring their child's attendance and communicating with the school. These arrangements, reinforced by telephone calls and home visits where required, helped to establish a culture of responsible communication between parents and schools, as well as strong attendance among pupils.

Where pupils' attendance was at risk of becoming a concern, the most effective schools and PRUs worked with families to identify the reasons behind this and to address the barriers to attendance on an individual pupil level. Alongside parental engagement, sensitive, supportive strategies to help pupils identified as being absent due to emotional reasons were effective in supporting learners to re-engage with school following the disruption of the pandemic. Often these arrangements were led by specialist staff members, such as a family engagement or liaison officers, who worked in partnership with pastoral leads, local authority officers and specialist external agencies where appropriate.

In schools and PRUs where average attendance rates were low, persistent absence among a small but significant number of pupils was identified as a key factor. Many secondary school leaders reported that they were concerned by the number of pupils who were persistently absent. However, inspectors found that, in too many schools where attendance was weaker, leaders either did not recognise the impact of the issue, or processes to address such persistent absences were ineffective. For example, the first stage of the attendance policy was often enacted, but the follow-up actions specified by later stages did not always take place despite being appropriate.

Improving attendance at St Alban's R.C. High School

St Alban's R.C. High School has a clear and robust focus on improving attendance. Leaders emphasise the importance of developing positive and supportive relationships with families as key to improving attendance. The school regularly communicates the significance of good attendance to parents, beginning with the year 6 transition parents' evening. When pupils join the school in Year 7, form tutors send home a welcome email to further establish the school's relationship with parents. The school's Welfare and Engagement Officer makes early contact with parents to offer support if a pupil's attendance is starting to cause concern followed by home visits from the well-being team. The school provides information on individual pupils' attendance and makes relevant links to their progress, highlighting the impact poorer attendance has on pupils. Parents appreciate this support and work closely with the Welfare and Engagement Officer.

The school has developed clear lines of communication to ensure that form tutors, heads of year, senior leaders, the welfare engagement team and governors have a thorough understanding of attendance data and the interventions needed. There is a robust gradual response system which includes clear roles and responsibilities. Heads of year have weekly meetings to evaluate attendance progress against previous data (previous year, term, and week) and line manager meetings are used to monitor progress and evaluate, and amend where necessary, the impact strategies are having.

As a result of these strategies, pupils' enjoyment of school is reflected well in their level of attendance. Nearly all pupils are proud to belong to an inclusive school and promote its core values of mutual respect, courtesy and kindness.

Promoting the well-being and mental health of pupils at Ysgol Morgan Llwyd, Wrexham

Following the disruption of the pandemic, leaders at Ysgol Morgan Llwyd are paying close attention to promoting the well-being and mental health of all pupils. A notable element of the school's work is the strong and positive support given to the most vulnerable pupils via the 'Hwb Bugeiliol'. The staff at the Hwb collaborate effectively with relevant external agencies such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and social services, in order to offer personal support to pupils and their families.

The school succeeds in supporting pupils who have intense emotional and behavioural needs or who are persistently absent, ensuring that they remain engaged with their education until the end of Year 11.

At the least effective schools, senior leaders often did not recognise, analyse and investigate patterns of pupil absences well enough. Where issues were identified, less effective schools were often too reliant on traditional, often slow and unresponsive, arrangements to involve parents and to work with families to improve attendance. In such cases, leaders had not adapted their arrangements to take account of the changing nature of the barriers to attendance including the increasing cost of living and the legacy effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a few cases, policies and practices relied on attendance thresholds, used to trigger further intervention for pupils and their families, that were too low. For example, at some schools, wider support from a local authority welfare officer was triggered for a pupil if their attendance fell below 60%. In other schools with higher overall rates of attendance, such support was available if a pupil's attendance fell below 80% or 85%.

Inspectors were concerned about the number of reduced timetables that were being put in place for pupils. Where used well, reduced timetables in conjunction with pastoral support plans, were an effective tool to support pupils, for example during a phased return to school after a period of absence. However, in a few cases, inspectors identified pupils that were following reduced timetables for too long and without appropriate reviews, which meant that they were missing out on valuable time at their school or PRU. Within PRUs, pupils who went prolonged periods without access to full-time education generally made limited progress in their learning. In a few cases, local authorities were not monitoring the use of reduced timetables closely enough or challenging any inappropriate use of them.

In some schools, leaders were collaborating successfully with pupil representatives to plan and implement specific initiatives to promote attendance and engagement. A few had successfully improved pupil attendance by working to make the school day more enjoyable for pupils. Often these schools incentivised pupils to improve their attendance by introducing competitions that involved offering small rewards for good attendance. This helped to improve pupils' sense of ownership of their attendance records. Other practical approaches included a 'walking bus' whereby pupils walked to school along a predetermined route under supervision, stopping to collect their peers on the way. This helped to promote attendance and physical activity and also reduced the carbon footprint of commuting to school.

Promoting pupils' ambition and commitment at Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Llangynwyd, Bridgend

The approaches adopted by Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Llangynwyd contribute significantly to pupils' enjoyment of coming to school. The way most pupils espouse the characteristics of 'Dysgwyr Llan', which are 'successful, leading and powerful', is a strength. In lessons, pupils cultivate the mentality of being successful individuals; nearly all pupils are punctual to lessons and attendance, including among those who qualify for free school meals, is above the national rate.

Friday afternoon clubs give Year 7 to Year 9 pupils opportunities to build relationships with each other and to enjoy socialising. This has contributed to improvements in attitudes to learning as well as overall attendance. The school uses assemblies to update pupils about class attendance levels over the preceding six weeks. This stimulates a positive, competitive response among the pupils and motivates them to improve further.

In response to the additional challenges posed by the pandemic, staff members have developed a successful system to track and improve attendance. Effective collaboration with the local authority's education and welfare officer, in combination with the work of the recently appointed family liaison officer, ensures a quick and effective response to absences.

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Key themes

Implementation of Curriculum for Wales

2022-2023

During 2022-2023, providers across Wales continued to develop their approaches towards implementing Curriculum for Wales. Implementing the curriculum was statutory for schools and PRUs with primary aged pupils and for non-maintained settings from September 2022. The implementation of the curriculum for schools and PRUs with secondary school-aged pupils was mandatory from September 2023 for Years 7 and 8. However, around half of secondary schools chose to implement the curriculum for Year 7 a year early, from September 2022, along with around a quarter of special schools and PRUs.

Where curriculum developments were most successful, providers prioritised improving the quality of teaching alongside planning their curriculum. In addition, these providers focused closely on supporting teachers and practitioners to develop their understanding of curriculum design and delivery. Many providers worked to develop their understanding of suitable progression in their curriculum and to consider what effective pupil progress looks like. This aspect of curriculum design, along with the development of assessment approaches to support teaching and learning, are the aspects schools currently find most challenging. School leaders would benefit from more specific national guidance about minimum expectations of progress for pupils at different points. This would help leaders to consider how they plan a progressive curriculum for their pupils.

The Curriculum for Wales is subject to evaluation to understand how the reforms are working and the extent to which they are having the desired impact for all learners, regardless of their background or needs. The Welsh Government published their [evaluation plan](#) in September 2023.



The curriculum within sectors

In **non-maintained settings**, we saw an increasing number begin to implement Curriculum for Wales and the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings successfully. In the most effective examples, practitioners had a clear understanding of how planning in response to children's interests and stage of development supported progress in learning. In many settings where teaching was strong, practitioners knew when to intervene and when to step back to give children time to work things out for themselves.

In **primary schools**, a majority were making good progress as they implemented Curriculum for Wales. A few schools made greater progress and were embedding their approach, including the involvement of pupils in curriculum design, in a meaningful way. However, in a minority of schools, progress to implement the curriculum was still at an early stage. Often these schools did not have a secure enough understanding of the principles of Curriculum for Wales and adapted planning to focus on what pupils learn rather than how they learn. In these instances, their curriculum did not incorporate important aspects such as cross-curricular skills.

A majority of **secondary schools** developed a suitable vision for Curriculum for Wales. Overall, schools' preparedness to roll out their curriculum was too variable. In the best examples, schools trialled approaches before undertaking some evaluation and refinement. A minority of secondary schools collaborated purposefully with their primary schools to develop a common understanding of learning. In a very few instances, this led to a more coherent curriculum to support pupils' progress as they transitioned from primary to secondary. In those instances where the introduction of Curriculum for Wales was less successful, schools often did not focus strongly enough on securing effective teaching or roll-out had been hampered by misinterpretation of key principles.

In some **secondary schools**, we saw pupils start GCSE courses at the beginning of Year 9. As a result, these pupils had limited opportunities to develop and deepen their knowledge and understanding across the curriculum before making their qualification choices. In addition, a few schools introduced a carousel approach to their curriculum where pupils rotated the study of certain subjects across the year. This approach often limited pupils' opportunities to consolidate and progress in their learning. This also made progression into Year 10 more challenging.

In **all-age schools**, leaders established a clear vision for the curriculum, focusing on developing skills and improving teaching. They encouraged teachers to trial approaches to teaching and, through systematic evaluation, adapted their provision based on their findings. Some of the weaknesses in both primary and secondary schools were evident in this sector as well.

The **pupil referral units** we visited continued to consider how best to implement Curriculum for Wales and the education other than at school (EOTAS) guidance ([Welsh Government, 2020](#)). Overall, this was at varying degrees of development and generally we found the quality and impact of this work to be variable. In the most effective examples, the curriculum offer had suitable breadth and depth and supported pupils' learning, progress, emotional health and therapeutic needs. Our report on the equity of curriculum experiences for pupils who are educated other than at school (EOTAS) ([Estyn, 2023](#)) provides further detail.

Maintained special schools continued to focus on ensuring a curriculum that was suitably broad and balanced. We found that collaborative curriculum planning was a generally strong feature in special schools. This incorporated ideas from both pupils and staff members.

In **Initial Teacher Education** partnerships, we found that they introduced students to the principles of Curriculum for Wales suitably. However, students were generally not being supported well enough to develop their understanding of Curriculum for Wales. This was often because their understanding of how Curriculum for Wales worked in practice was limited only to what they observed in their placement schools. In a few cases, schools reinforced misconceptions relating to curriculum design and delivery. Partnerships did not identify and address this well enough through their evaluation and planning for improvement processes.

Key considerations for schools when developing and implementing their curriculum. These include some common challenges and misconceptions, which can impact on curriculum design and delivery.

The four purposes

Where schools explicitly understood how to create an effective purpose-led curriculum, they were less focused on helping pupils know what the four purposes were, and instead focused on planning engaging learning experiences that enabled pupils to progress towards and embody the four purposes. These schools had a clear understanding of how to plan learning that supports pupils' progress and develops their knowledge, understanding and skills. However, in a few cases, schools did not consider how they could develop pupils' knowledge, skills and experiences to realise the four purposes well enough. In addition, in a few cases, schools required teachers to identify which of the four purposes they would include in individual lessons and asked them to attempt to evaluate whether pupils met the purposes in these lessons. This practice was often unhelpful, as it did not support staff to enable pupils to develop towards the four purposes in the intended, holistic way.

A few schools created characters to represent each of the curriculum's four purposes. Although this worked well in some cases, for instance in helping pupils to identify the four purposes, often it led pupils to think that they could only represent one purpose at any given time.

The importance of teaching

Where providers had developed the curriculum particularly successfully, they prioritised improving the quality of teaching alongside planning their curriculum. In the most effective cases, leaders purposefully focused professional learning to support staff to improve their practice. Alongside this work they helped staff to consider how effective teaching and a high-quality curriculum complement each other.

Generally, where the curriculum was less effective in improving learning, leaders focused too much on developing curriculum content at the expense of improving teaching. In these instances, leaders focused too heavily on 'what' they teach and did not provide sufficient time or professional learning to enable teachers to think 'how' best to teach different aspects of their curriculum.

Developing independence

Where teachers developed independence effectively, they thought carefully about the intended learning. They planned learning experiences that built beneficially on one another. Teachers supported pupils to develop the skills, knowledge and understanding they needed and to apply these independently in new and sometimes more challenging contexts.

In a few cases, we saw schools begin to roll out foundation learning practice into upper primary and beyond. Often these schools did not have a strong enough understanding of how this practice can support older pupils. For example, teachers set a range of 'missions' or 'challenges' for pupils to work on independently, without ensuring that pupils had the knowledge, skills and understanding they needed to be successful. In too many cases, the tasks that pupils undertook, with little or no adult support, lacked challenge and purpose and did little to further pupils' learning. As a result, pupils made limited progress.



Non-maintained settings, schools and PRUs continued to develop their approaches to enable pupils to influence their own learning. In the best examples, staff engaged pupils in meaningful discussions about what and how they would like to learn. They also ensured that all adults had a clear understanding of the intended learning. This ensured that teachers could plan carefully to support pupil progress. However, in a few cases, teachers focused too much on what pupils said they wanted to learn and did not consider whether this was appropriate and how it fitted into pupils' learning journey. It is important that leaders help teachers to understand how to lead and direct learning whilst providing pupils with relevant opportunities to influence the way in which, and what, they learn.

Promoting Cynefin and developing an anti-racist and inclusive culture

As part of their curriculum development, many schools and PRUs considered how they enable all pupils to feel like they are part of the school and the local community and how they promote a sense of belonging, Cynefin. Increasingly, as part of this, schools and PRUs considered how they could develop an anti-racist and inclusive culture. In the best cases, teachers considered how they use learning opportunities to develop a sense of Cynefin as well as educating pupils about Wales and the wider world. They included purposeful opportunities for pupils to learn about Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic culture and history. In Jubilee Park School, as part of their [journey towards an anti-racist curriculum](#), leaders and staff used their evaluations well to improve the way in which their curriculum related to pupils' own interests. This resulted in a heightened awareness of the importance of celebrating diversity and of promoting inclusion across the school. However, in a majority of schools, this aspect was in the early stages of development.

In a few cases, schools focused too narrowly on their locality when developing their curriculum approach and did not consider well enough how they taught pupils about Wales and the wider world. This resulted in teachers only planning learning experiences that related to cultures and experiences that were already familiar to pupils in the school. These practises did not support pupils well enough to develop an understanding of the diverse cultures in Wales, both within and outside their communities, and did not help pupils to make links across their learning. Where schools were particularly effective, they had a well-planned curriculum that reinforced an inclusive and anti-racist culture by having clear values that all pupils were proud to uphold. As part of this inclusive culture, these schools were successful at promoting the rights of LGBTQ+ pupils and creating a positive environment where pupils felt safe and valued.

Assessment and progress

The most common concern that leaders and staff raised during our inspections was developing approaches to assessment and progression. Most commonly, staff were worried about how they could effectively measure and track pupils' progress. Often, mistakenly, providers felt that they needed to change all their approaches to assessment as they developed their curriculum. Overall, leaders require more practical guidance about the expectations for pupils' progress throughout their education. In the most effective cases, leaders and staff considered carefully what effective assessment practices they currently employed and how they could continue to use these to inform pupils' learning. Overall, assessment should be used to identify pupils' strengths and areas for improvement and to enable staff to plan teaching to support and address misconceptions and build on pupils' prior learning. During our inspections, we found that, generally, professional learning did not support staff well enough to improve their approaches to assessment and teaching and was not always practical enough to meet teachers' needs. In addition, there has not been a strong enough focus on supporting the development of subject and phase pedagogies, particularly in secondary schools.



References

- Estyn (2023) *Equity of curriculum experiences for pupils who are educated other than at schools (EOTAS)*. Cardiff: Estyn. [Online]. Available from: https://www.estyn.gov.wales/system/files/2023-06/Equity%20of%20curriculum%20experiences%20for%20pupils%20who%20are%20educated%20other%20than%20at%20school%20%28EOTAS%29_0.pdf [Accessed 13 November 2023]
- Welsh Government (2020) *Education other than at school (EOTAS)*. Cardiff: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/designing-your-curriculum/education-other-than-at-school-eotas> [Accessed 13 November 2023]

Key themes

Inspection follow-up

2022-2023

When inspectors identify serious shortcomings at the time of a core inspection, providers are placed in follow-up. Follow-up arrangements vary across sectors and can be found in 'How we inspect' guidance on our [website](#).

Non-maintained settings

Estyn jointly inspects non-maintained settings with Care Inspectorate Wales. Inspection teams consider if settings require either joint focused improvement follow-up or Estyn only follow-up, which is called Estyn review. Guidance on follow-up arrangements in non-maintained settings can be found [here](#).

Where settings were placed in joint focused improvement follow-up, recommendations highlighted the need for leaders and managers to:

- strengthen the way they evaluate provision and address aspects that need to be improved
- develop aspects such as the quality of teaching and use of observations to strengthen the provision for children
- address the areas of non-compliance with regulations highlighted by the inspection team



During 2022-2023, five non-maintained settings were removed from joint focused improvement follow up. These providers had received recommendations relating to leadership and management, highlighting the need to develop their approach to self-evaluation and planning for improvement.

The key improvements inspectors noted when providers were removed from follow up included:

- Leaders established clear roles and responsibilities, so that practitioners understood what was expected of them.
- In some settings, leaders developed effective practice guidance to help practitioners understand how to support play and encourage learning.
- Leaders had a far deeper understanding of the importance of evaluating provision and the impact on children's experiences and progress. They considered the views of practitioners through regular informal conversations and team meetings.
- Concise improvement plans included key priorities, which were broken down into reasonable time-related targets and included clear success criteria.
- Leaders understood the value of professional learning and benefited from professional learning facilitated by partners such as the local authority's early years advisory team, and umbrella organisations that provide advice and practical support for settings.
- Leaders developed suitable systems for practitioner appraisal and supervision and, as a result, staff took on more responsibility for improvement.

Maintained schools and PRUs

On every inspection, inspectors consider if the school or PRU is causing concern that may require placing it in a statutory category. If the school is failing to give its pupils an acceptable standard of education and the persons responsible for leading, managing or governing the school/PRU are not demonstrating the capacity to secure the necessary improvement of the school, it is placed in special measures. If inspectors conclude the school/PRU does not require special measures, inspectors consider if the school/PRU is performing significantly less well than it might in all circumstances reasonably be expected to perform. If this is the case, the school/PRU is placed in significant improvement. If inspectors have seriously considered placing a school or PRU in a statutory category but are concerned that follow-up is needed, they may consider placing the school in Estyn review. Guidance on follow-up arrangements in maintained schools and PRUs can be found [here](#).

In the few schools requiring statutory follow-up, generally there were significant shortcomings in the quality of leadership and management. Too often, leaders did not share a clear vision or provide effective strategic direction to the school. Typically, leaders' expectations of what pupils could achieve were not high enough and, as a result, they did not address shortcomings in pupils' progress with sufficient urgency. The quality of classroom practice in these schools was weak or inconsistent and, as a result, pupils did not make the progress that they should or could. Often, the school had experienced a significant period of staffing turbulence and, too often, staff morale was low.

When schools and PRUs are placed into statutory follow-up, inspectors monitor their progress in addressing the recommendations from the core inspection. Initially, inspectors work with the school's leadership and the local authority to support them to devise a post-inspection action plan (PIAP).

When a school requires special measures, inspectors continue to visit every four to six months, until such time as the school shows that it had the capacity to make improvements unsupported. During 2022-2023, inspectors made regular, termly monitoring visits to 18 schools in special measures. Over the course of the year, six schools (five secondary schools and one primary school) were removed from special measures.

Provider: Denbigh High School

Level of follow-up: Special measures

Removed: June 2023

Denbigh High School was inspected in November 2016. Because of shortcomings in leadership and teaching, pupils were not making enough progress, and the school required significant improvement. A monitoring visit 18 months later indicated that the school had not made sufficient improvement and it was placed in special measures.

Despite having a suitable post-inspection action plan and introducing a range of strategies designed to secure improvement, by the time of Estyn's seventh monitoring visit in May 2022, the school had not made sufficient progress to be removed from follow-up. One of the factors restricting the school's improvement was the fact that it had experienced several years of instability at senior leadership level.

When the current headteacher was appointed in September 2022, he prioritised establishing a culture of trust and collaboration. One of the most important aspects of his vision was that staff should work together on improvement strategies that were focused on pupil outcomes, rather than meeting any perceived requirements of Estyn monitoring teams. He recognised that inspectors are not looking for any specific type of strategy or approach, but instead are only interested in the impact that the school's work has on pupils' progress and well-being.

One of the key features of his approach was the introduction of the 'Quality Enhancement' process. This approach to self-evaluation and improvement planning used joint working between senior leaders, middle leaders and other staff – for example with book scrutiny and lesson observations – as its starting point. This helped teachers and leaders at all levels to come to a shared understanding of the specific strengths and areas for development of each subject area and individual teacher. Not only did this enable leaders to plan for improvement more precisely, the focus on 'learning conversations' rather than 'top-down' accountability helped to strengthen the developing culture of trust and collaboration.

Senior leadership roles were refined and realigned in order to match the school's improvement priorities more closely and also to make best use of individual leaders' skills and experience. Pastoral leadership was reorganised to help these leaders take a more coordinated and collaborative approach to supporting and improving pupil well-being. To address the recommendation regarding provision for the development of pupils' skills, leaders began to take a more strategic and focused approach. This meant that individual subject areas concentrated on specific, designated skills areas, for example developing pupils' ability to summarise information from a range of texts. This helped to increase the impact of this aspect of the school's work.

These strengthened approaches increased the pace of improvement. In the monitoring visits that took place in 2022-2023, inspectors noted that teaching was increasingly challenging and engaging and was helping pupils to make better progress. As a result, the school was removed from special measures in June 2023.

Most of the schools requiring significant improvement make the necessary improvements in around eighteen months to two years. However, schools and PRUs requiring special measures normally take between two and five years to develop the capacity to improve and be removed from further monitoring activity. The amount of time is dependent on many factors, including the size of the school and the amount of staffing and leadership turbulence. Generally, once stable leadership and staff teams are in place, leaders galvanise staff to bring about steady, and occasionally rapid, improvements to the provision, which results in improvements to pupil outcomes and the removal from monitoring.

Malpas Church in Wales Primary School

Level of follow-up: Special measures
Removed: November 2022

Malpas Church in Wales Primary School was inspected in November 2019 and placed in special measures. Inspectors identified fractured relationships between staff and leaders, as well as a lack of a clear, strategic direction. The school's tracking systems did not support leaders to identify whether all pupils were making the progress that they should. Leaders' monitoring did not identify or address weak classroom practice.

During the spring term 2020, prior to the pandemic, an interim acting headteacher from a neighbouring school worked with the deputy headteacher for a term to create a suitable post-inspection action plan. In the autumn of 2020, an acting executive headteacher was appointed to lead the school for a year, while the governing body recruited a substantive headteacher.

The new headteacher took up his post in September 2021. This leadership stability enabled the school to redefine everyone's roles and responsibilities, and to establish clear and agreed minimum expectations for classroom practice. Over the course of the year, the pace of improvement gathered momentum and staff and leaders at all levels worked together collaboratively. Strong channels of communication ensured that everyone was well informed and kept abreast of events. As a result, the school rapidly established a clear sense of community and identity, focused on improving the provision and outcomes for pupils.

In addition, leaders established regular professional learning events, alongside weekly staff and leadership meetings. They devised a series of essential guides that spelled out the robust expectations agreed by all staff, covering distinct aspects of the school's provision. Consequently, the quality of classroom practice began to improve. Teachers raised their expectations of what their pupils could and should achieve. They worked together to develop the extensive outdoor space into a purposeful, well-used learning environment, and classrooms became productive, stimulating places to learn. The additional learning needs co-ordinator monitored the additional support that adults provided for pupils with additional learning needs and ensured that the provision matched their individual needs.

By the autumn 2022, following termly monitoring, inspectors noted that leaders and staff worked together constructively and productively to create a shared sense of purpose and ownership. They identified a developing pride in the quality of education that staff deliver, following improvements to the classroom provision. As a result, the school was removed from special measures in November 2022.

Overview of recommendations from schools placed in statutory follow-up as a result of their core inspection:

As might be expected, inspectors often left recommendations for **leadership to improve aspects of their work** in schools and PRUs placed in statutory follow-up.

Leadership

- In all of these schools, inspectors left at least one recommendation related to improving the quality of leadership and management. Furthermore, around a half of these schools received two or more recommendations in this area. Generally, these identified a need to strengthen or stabilise leadership, clearly define roles and responsibilities and hold staff and leaders to account.
- Messages around strengthening leaders' impact on improving standards or elements of provision, for example the quality of teaching, were also a focus for recommendations in many of these schools.
- A further prominent theme was the need to strengthen self-evaluation and improvement planning to ensure its impact on identifying what needed to be improved and how to deliver that improvement. Inspectors left this recommendation in around a half of the providers placed in special measures and most of those placed in significant improvement.

Recommendations around improving aspects of **teaching and learning** experiences were prevalent in all of the schools placed in statutory follow-up. Most received at least two recommendations relating to this inspection area.

- The main theme from these recommendations was the need to provide appropriate challenge to pupils and to ensure that teachers plan to develop pupils' skills systematically and cohesively (often linked to the recommendations the school received for learning).
- Other recommendations from this area varied, including for example the need to improve the quality of teaching and assessment (for instance through establishing consistency across the school) and improving elements of the curriculum.
- Additionally, nearly all of these schools received at least one recommendation related to learning and progress. These were invariably in relation to improving one or more of pupils' core skills, such as numeracy, writing, reading or Welsh (or some form of combination of these).

There were fewer recommendations related to improving pupils' **well-being** or the school's systems for **care, support and guidance**.

- Around a half of schools placed in statutory follow-up had a recommendation relating to safeguarding and safety issues identified during the inspection. The remainder of schools received recommendations either related to strengthening the provision to support pupils with ALN, or the provision to improve pupils' attendance or behaviour.
- There were very few recommendations to improve pupils' well-being. However, a few schools placed in statutory follow-up received a recommendation to improve attendance and punctuality.



Overview of recommendations from schools requiring Estyn review as a result of their core inspection:

Nearly all of the schools and PRUs requiring Estyn review had a recommendation to improve the quality of leadership and management. In general, most of these recommendations focused on strengthening or sharpening the impact of leaders' work to bring about improvements. Additionally, around a half of leadership recommendations for these schools and PRUs identified a requirement to strengthen the cycle of self-evaluation and improvement planning and activity. Most schools and PRUs requiring Estyn review had a recommendation to improve pupils' standards, and many had a recommendation to improve teaching and provision. Around a half of the providers requiring Estyn review had a recommendation to strengthen their systems for care, support and guidance, or to improve pupils' well-being and attitudes to learning.

Post inspection action plans and the local authority statement of action

Under the requirements of the Education Act 2005, where a school or pupil referral unit has been placed in the category of requiring significant improvement or in special measures, the school's governing body or the PRU's management committee is required to produce a post-inspection action plan (PIAP). Additionally, local authorities are required to prepare a written statement of action to support the school.

The action plan should set out the work proposed to enable the school to make sufficient improvement to address the deficiencies identified by Estyn as soon as possible. Schools should aim to make the required improvements within around a year of being found to require significant improvement, or within around two years for those requiring special measures. However, in practice this can often take longer, depending on each school's individual circumstances.

The format of the action plan is a matter for schools. As a minimum, however, for each area for improvement (recommendation) identified in the inspection report, the action plan should specify:

- the action the school proposes to take
- lead responsibility for the action proposed
- the support the school will access to address the area for improvement
- the timescale for the work to be completed with key milestones
- resources to be applied to the work
- success criteria (including quantitative targets for improvements in learner outcomes), against which progress will be judged
- how progress will be monitored e.g. who, when and how
- how it will inform parents about the actions planned for the school, ascertain parents' views on these actions and how it will take those views into account

The local authority statement of action must also address all the recommendations in the inspection report, including the criteria specified above. In addition, the local authority statement should identify whether the authority intends to use its powers of intervention to require the governing body to secure advice or collaborate, give directions to the governing body or headteacher and take any other steps, appoint additional governors, withdraw the school's delegated budget, or replace the governing body with an interim executive board (IEB).

It should be clear that the local authority and school/PRU have worked together to create their plans.

Reflective questions

These questions are designed to help providers and local authorities consider their post inspection action plans and how they bring about sustained improvements:

- Overall, does the action plan address the key issues requiring improvement?
- Is the timeframe for the planned improvement activity realistic and measured? For example, are the milestones coherent and suitably paced? Are the priorities spaced appropriately over the proposed timeframe?
- Are the aims identified in the plans suitably aspirational, given the current position? Are they likely to lead to the improvements proposed by the success criteria?
- Is there a clear read across and cohesion between the school's/PRU's plan and the local authority's planned actions?
- Are the roles and responsibilities of staff and governors suitably clear? For example, who is monitoring what, when, how, and what form should their report or feedback take?
- Does the planned professional learning match tightly with the planned improvements? How will leaders evaluate the effectiveness of professional learning?
- Does the plan clearly identify sources of funding, support, time and the other resources required for the plan to be realised successfully? Are planned developments, for example staffing changes or professional learning opportunities, cost effective?
- How manageable and realistic is the governing body's proposed involvement in the improvement process? Do members of the governing body have the skills they need, for example to monitor and evaluate the plan's success?
- How do the school and local authority intend to involve parents in contributing their views? Are there appropriate and meaningful opportunities for pupils to contribute their ideas and opinions?



Local government education services

At the start of the academic year, three local authorities were in a follow-up category. Two were judged to have made sufficient progress during monitoring visits and removed from any further follow-up activity. Both local authorities improved their leadership capacity and their approaches to evaluation and planning for improvement, which were important aspects to enable leaders to secure improvement across the recommendations from their inspections. Questions to help local government education services reflect on self-evaluation and planning for improvement are included within our sector summary. They can be found [here](#).

We continued to work with one local authority to monitor and support its improvement process. We piloted a new approach to supporting and monitoring progress through more regular visits and engagement. The aim of this approach is to provide the local authority with more direct and timely feedback on its progress.

Independent schools

One of the three independent schools inspected, and six of the 25 schools visited as part of monitoring visits in 2022-2023, failed to meet one or more of the [Independent School Standards \(Wales\) Regulations 2003](#). This represents a greater proportion of schools being compliant with the regulations compared to the previous academic year. During 2022-2023, inspectors visited two out of five schools who did not meet the standards for registration during the previous academic year. Inspectors evaluated the schools' compliance with the standards following a series of supportive follow-up visits. Both schools were found to have met the Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003. They were therefore removed from follow-up.

Overview of providers requiring follow-up

Over the course of the year, the proportion of providers overall requiring follow-up was similar to pre-pandemic levels, at around 23%. The tables below include information on the numbers of providers who went into some form of follow-up.

Maintained schools and PRU sectors	Total number of providers inspected 2022-2023	Special measures	Significant improvement	Estyn review
Primary	219	12	5	29
Secondary	28	1	4	6
All-age	6			1
PRU	4	1	1	1
Special	7			1
Proportion of providers needing follow-up		5.3%	3.8%	14.4%

Sector	Follow-up	Follow-up Number inspected	Number placed in follow-up 2022-2023
Non-maintained settings	Joint focused improvement or Estyn review	92	2 (Joint focused improvement)
Adult learning in the community	Follow-up	3	1
Independent special schools	Does not meet Independent School Standards (Wales) Regulations 2003	ISS 28 (3 inspections, 25 visits)	7
Initial Teacher Education	Causing significant concern and in need of re-inspection or Enhanced Estyn Engagement	2	2 (1 causing significant concern and one in need of enhanced engagement)

Providers that made enough progress to be removed from statutory follow-up (schools, pupils referral units and local authorities), joint focused improvement (non-maintained settings) and follow-up (adult learning in the community and independent schools) during the academic year 2022-2023.

It is difficult to identify trends in the numbers of providers being removed from follow-up over recent time. This is due to the individual circumstances of providers requiring follow-up activity, alongside the impact of the pandemic on inspection activity. Typically, providers placed in special measures require the longest time to make the required improvements. There is no evidence to suggest that, over time, providers in follow-up are making progress at a faster or slower rate than those in follow-up before the pandemic.

Provider	Sector	Local authority	Level of follow-up	Date removed from follow-up	Core inspection start date
Sŵn y Don Playgroup	Non-maintained	Conwy	FI-J	17/11/2022	24/05/2022
Greenfield Playgroup	Non-maintained	Flintshire	FI-J	11/10/2022	29/03/2022
Presteigne Little People	Non-maintained	Powys	FI-J	01/03/2023	14/06/2022
Pips Bach - Cefnlllys	Non-maintained	Powys	FI-J	18/04/2023	11/10/2022
Cylch Meithrin Llangadog	Non-maintained	Carmarthenshire	FI-J	11/07/2023	25/01/2022
Malpas Church in Wales Primary School	Primary	Newport	SM	15/11/2022	04/11/2019
Denbigh High School	Secondary	Denbighshire	SM	20/06/2023	15/11/2016
Ysgol Rhosnesni	Secondary	Wrexham	SM	27/03/2023	26/11/2018
The Greenhill School	Secondary	Pembrokeshire	SM	12/12/2022	13/05/2014
Newport High School	Secondary	Newport	SM	27/03/2023	20/11/2017
Ysgol Gyfun Gwynllyw	Secondary	Torfaen	SM	01/02/2023	08/04/2019
Pembrokeshire County Council	LGES	Pembrokeshire	ACSC	28/07/2023	14/10/2019
Wrexham County Borough Council	LGES	Wrexham	ACSC	28/07/2023	14/10/2019
Pembrokeshire adult learning in the community	Adult learning in the community	Pembrokeshire	FU	14/03/2022	01/08/2023
Mynydd Haf	Independent	N/A	FU	23/05/2022	21/07/2023
Summergeil House	Independent	N/A	FU	14/03/2022	21/07/2023

SM – Special measures

SI – Significant improvement

FI-J – Joint focused improvement

ACSC – Authority causing significant concern

FU – Follow-up

We also removed seven schools from Estyn review during 2022-2023.

Sector reports



Sector report

Non-maintained nurseries

2022-2023



Providers

529

Number of providers 2023

529

Number of providers 2022

537

Number of providers 2021

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **92**
Welsh-medium: **42**
English-medium: **50**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **8**

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2022: **5**
No. removed 2022-2023: **5**
Downgraded: **1**
No. went into follow-up 2022-2023: **2**
Total in follow-up in August 2023: **3**

During 2022-2023, overall, non-maintained nursery settings continued to provide strong care, support and guidance that had a positive impact on children's well-being. Leaders and practitioners focused well on developing Curriculum for Wales and implementing the Curriculum for Funded Non-maintained Nursery Settings ([Welsh Government, 2022](#)). This improved opportunities for children to learn and explore independently, with practitioners developing an effective understanding of when and how to intervene in children's play to help them make progress. Settings were beginning to develop their assessment and observation processes appropriately, although not all settings used these well enough to support children effectively. Generally, leadership in settings continued to be strong with leaders having a clear vision for their settings. However, the sector continued to face difficulties with recruiting suitably qualified staff, especially in Welsh-medium settings. There also continued to be some inconsistencies in the effectiveness of self-evaluation processes. As a result, leaders did not always identify the most relevant areas for development or include all practitioners in self-evaluation.

Teaching and learning

Throughout the year, we saw an increasing number of settings beginning to implement Curriculum for Wales and the Curriculum for Funded Non-maintained Nursery Settings successfully. The Curriculum for Funded Non-maintained Nursery Settings links closely to the principles of child development, as well as to the four purposes, the statements of what matters and the six areas of learning and experience of Curriculum for Wales. These settings provided more purposeful opportunities for children to influence and lead their own learning.

Where this approach was most effective, practitioners had a clear understanding of how planning in response to children's interests and stage of development supported progress in learning. They provided hands-on, engaging experiences in an authentic context that was meaningful to the children. Practitioners achieved an appropriate balance between allowing children to make their own decisions about where and with what they wanted to play, and their own plans and knowledge about what skills different children needed to develop. They refined their planning regularly in response to the needs of the children.

In many settings, where teaching was strong, practitioners made good use of highly effective questioning to develop children's learning and thinking skills. They encouraged children to make purposeful decisions about their play, for example by finding the correct container to refill a water tray. Practitioners knew when to intervene, and when to step back to give children time to work things out for themselves.



In a few settings, where provision was not as strong, practitioners did not always plan well enough for developing children's skills. They did not provide beneficial opportunities for children to experiment with new experiences or to challenge themselves. In these cases, adults over-directed the learning with few opportunities for children to find things out for themselves. In a very few settings, practitioners did not plan enough valuable opportunities for children to use the outside area to develop their skills progressively.

Throughout the year, settings began to revise their observation and assessment arrangements suitably in line with the draft assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings. Many practitioners knew their children well from talking to them and observing them playing. They used this information appropriately to provide opportunities for children to build upon their existing knowledge, skills and understanding. A majority of practitioners made useful assessments and observations of children, noticing what they could do well and where they needed support, and identifying the next steps in their learning. In a minority of settings, the use of observations and assessments to plan experiences to deepen and extend learning was in the early stages of development. In these settings, practitioners did not always use information well enough to plan the next steps in children's development. They did not consider sufficiently what skills they wanted children to develop or whether activities challenged children at the right level.

As last year, most children developed their communication and literacy skills effectively. They listened well to practitioners, and many listened respectfully to each other's views, for example when selecting a story and settling down to share it. Many children chatted happily with their friends and practitioners and asked sensible questions. They used suitable language in their spontaneous and structured play, such as discussing ingredients in a recipe book before shopping in the setting's role play area. Many children chose to visit their setting's reading area readily. They enjoyed the content of books, demonstrating good early reading skills such as exploring and handling books independently, retelling familiar stories and making connections between books and their own experiences. Many children asked practitioners to read to them in different areas of the learning environment.

Many children's physical skills developed well. They climbed and balanced on different obstacles and a majority used large toys such as toy cars, bikes and trikes with increasing dexterity. They used a range of equipment with increasing control and developed their strength and co-ordination both indoors and outdoors. A majority of children used mark making tools effectively to support their play, for example when writing shopping lists in the role play area or using chalk on the yard. Many children developed a good range of numeracy skills successfully and were beginning to use mathematical language confidently in real life contexts. For example, children visiting an allotment used their knowledge of weight and measure to describe the size of pumpkins. Overall, practitioners provided children with opportunities to be creative in their play, appreciating the creative process rather than focusing on a finished product. This meant that most children developed their creative skills appropriately through art and craft activities, choosing the materials and resources they wanted to use. Many children showed enjoyment and pleasure as they developed their creative skills effectively, for example, as they danced expressively and played percussion instruments successfully to familiar songs. Many children developed their thinking and problem-solving skills effectively, for example when making a den in the outdoor area and devising ways of stopping the tarpaulin being removed by the wind.

Effective planning at Caban Kingsland in Holyhead, Anglesey

The setting has embraced Curriculum for Wales and practitioners have developed a highly effective approach to responsive planning. They have struck an excellent balance of allowing the children to make their own decisions about where and with what they would like to play, alongside their own plans and knowledge about what skills different children need to develop. This is particularly important and effective for children who may be experiencing challenges to their learning. This balance of open access free play, combined with a wonderful range of resources, and the practitioners' skills in knowing when to intervene and when not to intervene, is highly effective. Their whole approach is based upon developing every child as an individual. This allows the children to develop their confidence, resilience and self-esteem effectively.

In a majority of English-medium settings, practitioners provided worthwhile opportunities for children to practise and develop their Welsh language skills. They used songs with the children and read simple stories to them. They used Welsh to ask simple questions and encourage children to name colours and numbers appropriately when playing. However, in a minority of settings, practitioners did not provide enough opportunities for children to hear or use Welsh as part of daily routines. Most practitioners in Welsh-medium settings planned well for the development of children's Welsh language skills and supported those who were new to the language effectively. They provided a wide range of exciting learning and play activities that meant that many children, including those who did not speak Welsh at home, made good progress with their Welsh speaking skills.

Most settings celebrated and provided a few suitable opportunities for children to experience Welsh culture. For example, in addition to celebrating important days in the Welsh calendar, many settings also provided valuable opportunities for children to learn about their local area through regular visits to local amenities and historic buildings. Most settings provided a few suitable opportunities for children to learn about other cultures and beliefs such as through learning about Diwali and Chinese New Year. However, too often, resources and experiences to develop children's understanding of equality and wider cultural differences were limited. As a result, children did not always learn about their wider society and the diversity of Wales.

Care, support and well-being

As in previous years, most settings continued to provide strong care, support and guidance to children that had a positive impact on children's well-being. Most children arrived at their settings feeling happy, secure and eager to start their day. Many greeted one another happily and talked excitedly with practitioners about their news.

Nearly all practitioners interacted well with children and forged positive relationships with them. They interacted in a warm, friendly manner, helping to create calm and relaxing environments for children. In the best examples, practitioners were very attentive and supported children to become more engaged and independent in their play and learning, taking an interest in each child's life.

Where practice was strongest, children had valuable opportunities to express themselves clearly. They had a strong voice and contributed positively to the way practitioners developed the provision. Where this was most effective, practitioners considered their interests and views and incorporated them into the planned activities, for example providing children with cameras to photograph autumn leaves in response to their questioning about the different colours. As a result, many children explored areas freely and confidently and decided what to play with and where to explore. They expressed their feelings and made effective choices about how they spent their time and with whom they played. Many children approached practitioners frequently with requests and engaged naturally in conversation with them.

Practitioners continued to place a strong emphasis on encouraging children to be healthy and active. They used positive routines and activities to promote healthy lifestyles. For example, they offered children a suitable range of healthy food and drink choices for snack. Nearly all leaders put suitable systems in place to manage allergies and, when necessary, the specific health needs of individual children.



Where practitioners ensured a good balance of adult and child led age-appropriate activities, children developed their independence skills well. For example, older children chose and prepared their own fruit at snack time. They collected their own bowls, tipped away unwanted food and put their dishes in the sink. Most children attended to their personal care skills appropriately, such as washing their hands at appropriate times and getting tissues to wipe their nose. In a few settings, children learned to help others by arranging place names, plates and cups, serving themselves with tongs and pouring milk at snack time.

In nearly all settings, leaders developed a comprehensive range of relevant policies and procedures to support practitioners to keep children safe. Nearly all leaders and practitioners had a secure knowledge of how to protect children and knew what to do if they had any concerns. In the very few cases where we identified issues with safeguarding, practitioners did not have a sufficient understanding of the setting's safeguarding policy and procedures and did not implement them well enough. In a very few settings, health and safety procedures were not robust enough, such as procedures for signing adults in and out of settings or recording fire drills appropriately.

Most practitioners were positive role models for children showing them how to treat each other with respect and courtesy. They managed children's behaviour skilfully, using positive strategies and clear explanations in line with their behaviour management policies. Many practitioners supported and anticipated children's emotional needs well. For example, they prepared children and introduced them to unfamiliar adults visiting the setting.

Most practitioners used their knowledge of children well to provide suitable care that was appropriate for their needs. In the best examples, they used all information provided by parents and carers, including one-page profiles to adapt their provision according to individual needs. They identified children who may have additional learning needs (ALN) accurately and had effective systems for supporting them and their families. Many practitioners made effective use of support from the local authority.

Leading and improving

Leadership in most settings was strong. Nearly all leaders provided a clear vision for their settings. In the strongest examples, they shared their vision with all staff and parents, and reviewed their policies and procedures to ensure that these reflected their vision.

Many leaders engaged practitioners effectively when reviewing their own practice, provision and progress of children. In the best examples, leaders considered the views of parents and advisory teachers well to help them form an accurate picture of their provision. The most effective settings utilised this comprehensive information well to identify strengths and areas for improvement. These settings had a good link between the priorities they identified and plans for development. They identified clear actions to address the priorities. These led to clear improvements in children's progress, the quality of provision and practitioners' understanding of the curriculum. However, in a few settings, although leaders often understood the need for these processes, monitoring and evaluation to support ongoing improvement was limited.

Understanding children's individual needs at Meadowbank Day Nursery, Abergavenny, Monmouthshire

Practitioners have extensive knowledge of children's individual needs. They carry out observations as part of the daily session and use the information gathered to inform their planning and the next steps in children's individual learning. Practitioners have an excellent understanding of every child's needs, including those with emerging or additional learning needs. The Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo) provides effective advice and leadership on all issues relating to ALN. Practitioners make excellent use of the links formed with specialist services such as the local authority's Early Years ALN Lead Officer and speech and language professionals. Practitioners engage very well with parents when identifying children's individual targets and reviewing their progress.



Many leaders conducted regular supervisions and appraisals with practitioners. They ensured that practitioners understood their roles and responsibilities well and encapsulated these in detailed job descriptions. Where this was most effective, leaders identified practitioners' training needs and opportunities for continuous professional development effectively. In the most effective practice, this led to good quality provision that was regularly evaluated and refined. In the few cases where practice was not as effective, staff appraisals were too informal and did not focus well enough on identifying strengths, targets for improvement and training needs.

Nearly all leaders ensured that children were cared for in a safe and secure environment that was well maintained, clean, and a suitable space for children to play and learn. Many leaders and practitioners provided children with rich and stimulating environments that supported all areas of their learning and development well. These had a positive impact on children's learning such as helping to develop their physical, social and communication skills.

However, a few settings did not always have robust enough risk assessments to identify and mitigate foreseeable dangers. These often needed updating or tailoring to the specific characteristics of the individual setting.

In most settings, leaders made effective use of funding to enhance provision for children's learning and development. They used the Early Years Development Grant and other grants efficiently. These had a positive impact on children's physical, social and communication skills. A few settings also supported helpfully those pupils with additional needs, for instance by providing sensory whiteboards to help children develop early mark-making skills.

As in previous years, most settings continued to have strong links with parents and carers. They provided valuable information for them to support their children's learning at home and understand the progress their child was making in the setting. Many settings held stay and play sessions to increase parents and carers' knowledge of what their children did during the day, and how they liked to learn. These sessions created a strong bond and a sense of belonging between the settings and the families.

Many settings worked closely with their Early Years Advisory Teachers. They engaged in regular professional dialogue and acted on advice to improve the provision for their children. They also accessed beneficial training which supported them well in implementing the curriculum. This enabled them to keep up to date with the curriculum and put in a system to support children with additional learning needs. A very few Welsh-medium settings accessed valuable training opportunities on language immersion methods that have had a beneficial effect on improving children's Welsh language skills. However, a very few settings failed to make beneficial links with the local authority, or wider community groups and businesses. As a result, a very few settings did not always make suitable use of the range of opportunities available to develop children's learning and their understanding of the world around them.

Arrangements for transition between settings and schools were variable. In a majority of settings, leaders had secured effective partnerships with schools to ensure smooth transition for children. Where transition arrangements were well established, communication between settings and schools was regular and useful. Settings arranged for children to visit schools prior to starting their time there. For example, a few were able to have lunch in the school, while many attended occasions such as concerts, assemblies, or sports day. Many leaders arranged for teachers from the schools to visit the settings to meet the children in a familiar environment and to learn more about them.

Providing a rich and stimulating learning environment at Mini Miner's Club, Ystrad Mynach, Caerphilly

Leaders work hard to provide an inviting, child-friendly and stimulating indoor environment that ignites children's curiosity. They use an effective balance of natural and man-made resources. Each of the playrooms is bright and well organised, with clearly identified areas. Leaders ensure a level of consistency within the various playrooms to aid transition and develop a sense of belonging as children move through the setting. Practitioners provide a beneficial range of resources to engage children as they wait to enter the playrooms, for example a cosy book area where children can sit and share books with their parents and carers. Leaders make good use of real-life furniture and resources and see this as central to their vision for the setting. Each room contains attractive, child-sized furniture, ornaments, real clothes and kitchen utensils. These resources support children's imagination and curiosity effectively and provide valuable inspiration for role play.

References

Welsh Government (2022) *A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings*. Cardiff: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/b1801d78-38c3-4320-9818-d9996c21aef8/220914-a-curriculum-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings.pdf> [Accessed 16 November 2023]

Sector report

Primary

2022-2023



Providers

1,219

Number of providers 2023

383

Number of providers Welsh-medium 2023

Pupils

263,072

No. of all pupils

267,185

No. of pupils 2021-22

273,063

No. of pupils 2020-21

23%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 eligible for free school meals

7%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 with English as an additional language (A,B,C)

12%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 able to speak Welsh

13%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 with additional learning needs

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **219**

Welsh-medium: **52**

English-medium: **167**

Engagement visits: **4**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **57**

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2022

SM: **4** SI: **1** ER: **10**

No. removed 2022-2023

SM: **1** SI: **0** ER: **4**

Downgraded 1 from ER to SM

No. went into follow-up 2022-2023

SM: **12** SI: **5** ER: **29**

Total in follow-up in August 2023

SM: **16** SI: **6** ER: **34**

During 2022-2023, primary schools continued to place a strong emphasis on supporting the well-being of pupils and their families. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools strengthened their pastoral systems to provide the additional emotional support that many pupils and their families needed. Many schools also refined their approach to monitoring and encouraging attendance. However, despite the best efforts of many schools, rates of attendance remained below pre-pandemic levels ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)). The rates of attendance of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts were a particular concern. A majority of schools started to implement Curriculum for Wales well and most schools planned effectively to develop pupils' speaking, listening and reading skills. Many leaders knew their schools well and had clear systems and processes in place. However, too many leaders did not prioritise the development of pupils' and staff members' Welsh language skills well enough. Progress in the development of pupils' Welsh language oracy skills in English-medium schools remains a cause for concern and has been further hampered by the impact of the pandemic.

Teaching and learning

Throughout the year, schools considered how best to implement the requirements of Curriculum for Wales. However, as with the previous year, the quality and impact of this work remained variable with a majority of schools making good progress. Staff in these schools often benefited from collaboration between teachers within their own setting as well as with other schools. They focused on the trial, review and refine processes and ensured that they looked closely at how they delivered the curriculum, not just what the curriculum contained. They also began to think about what progression through the curriculum should look like for the pupils in their school and how pupils could apply the skills they developed in areas across the curriculum. Often, this entailed developing overarching themes that allowed pupils to make links to their own life experiences. A few schools made greater progress. Often these had been on their journey to reform for some time, were beginning to embed their approach and, in a few cases, implement a third or fourth version of their curriculum. Often this included involving pupils in curriculum design in a meaningful way and ensuring that parents had opportunities to contribute to and understand the purpose of the changes. Read how Pendoylan C.I.W. Primary School in the Vale of Glamorgan has developed [a bespoke and collaborative curriculum journey in response to Curriculum for Wales](#).

For a minority of schools, progress in implementing Curriculum for Wales was still at an early stage. These schools had often only recently engaged with curriculum reform and did not have a secure enough understanding of the principles that underpin the Curriculum for Wales framework. Many of these schools adapted planning to focus on **what** pupils learn rather than **how** they learn. As a result, they often lacked rigour in important aspects such as cross-curricular skills and their understanding of assessment and progression was limited.

In the best cases, where schools gave serious consideration to how teaching needed to change to align with Curriculum for Wales, teachers maintained a clear focus on the impact that any changes would have on the quality of learning experiences for pupils and the progress they would make. Leaders provided them with the opportunity to experiment and trial new approaches. In these schools, teachers engaged purposefully with research information, worked with colleagues in their own school and others. In addition, this ensured that they adapted any new ideas and methodologies to suit the needs and context of the pupils and staff in their school. They were also willing to abandon or modify their approach based on sound evidence about what worked and what did not.

In most schools, leaders and teachers recognised the benefits of important changes to pedagogy, such as ensuring that pupils take increasing responsibility for their own learning, and that they should deliver teaching and learning across all Areas of Learning and Experience. However, where changes to teaching were less effective, teachers planned activities to nurture pupils' independent learning skills that did not challenge them sufficiently and did not help them to progress with their learning. Often, these activities involved pupils choosing which tasks to engage with, but at a level that was below their capabilities, and which did not challenge them to apply their learning at a suitable level and make progress.

In general, many pupils, including those with additional learning needs (ALN), made good progress with the development of their skills, knowledge and understanding during lessons and activities and over time. Pupils' oracy skills were increasingly strong in many schools. This was often a reflection of changes in pedagogy that provided more time for pupils to collaborate and discuss. Teachers included planned opportunities for pupils to practise their oracy skills to compensate for the negative impact of the pandemic. Many primary schools identified evidence-based strategies to improve pupils' reading skills. In the most successful cases, these approaches were applied consistently and were supported by effective professional learning for staff. The thematic report on [developing pupils' English reading skills from 10-14 years of age](#) in English medium and bilingual schools includes cameos and case studies of effective practice. As a result, by the time they had reached Year 6, many pupils read with appropriate fluency and a majority summarised and evaluated suitably challenging texts. In many schools, pupils had a good understanding of the features of different types of writing, but similarly to last year, in too many schools, pupils did not write at length frequently enough and made basic errors in grammar and punctuation that were not addressed well enough through teacher feedback. Read how Cwmbach Community Primary School near Aberdare used [a whole-school approach to developing pupils as effective writers](#) to improve pupils' writing skills.



Progress in the development of pupils' Welsh language oracy skills in English-medium schools remained a concern and this had been further hampered by the impact of the pandemic. There has been little sign of improvement in this area over the last 10 years. Indeed, in her [annual report for 2012-2013](#) the then Chief Inspector, Ann Keane, reported that:

“Inspectors make recommendations to develop pupils’ Welsh second language skills in over a quarter of English-medium schools. Pupils’ progress in learning Welsh decreases as they get older, so that, although a majority of pupils make good progress in Welsh language development in the Foundation Phase, their progress slows down in subsequent key stages.”

This has been a consistent theme over recent years and the findings of inspectors in 2022-2023 are very similar with just under one third (30%) of English-medium primary schools receiving a recommendation to improve pupils' Welsh language skills. Nearly one in five Welsh-medium primary schools (18%) had a similar recommendation. Too often, pupils did not build their skills as they moved through the school. Older year groups continued to use basic phrases that had not developed significantly from those they learnt at a young age. Often this was linked to a lack of enthusiasm for the language and the poor skills of staff in the school. However, in a few schools where progress was more solid, leaders had successfully ensured that the Welsh language was well integrated into all aspects of school life, that it featured in a variety of curriculum areas, and that staff had the skills, confidence and enthusiasm to teach and promote the language. Our thematic report on [Support for Welsh in Initial Teacher Education](#) contains resources to help schools consider their provision.

In most schools, pupils acquired sound skills and knowledge in mathematics. They developed a good understanding of number and a range of techniques to complete calculations. In the best cases, pupils at all ages chose from a range of methods to solve mathematical problems, selecting the one that was most appropriate to the context and explaining their approach.

Pupils' ability to apply their numeracy and literacy skills in other areas of learning across the curriculum was variable. Too often, teachers planned independent activities for pupils that did not challenge them sufficiently and did not help them to progress with their learning. As a result, particularly with numeracy, pupils did not apply their skills in work across the curriculum at a high enough level or in sufficiently authentic contexts. In contrast, many pupils continued to make good progress in their ability to apply their digital skills in a variety of areas of learning. Often, teachers found innovative ways to use information and communication technology (ICT) to support pupils' learning and make learning experiences engaging and fun. In particular, the use of media to support pupils' literacy skills was a developing strength.

Care, support and well-being

Pupils' sense of well-being, their attitudes to their learning and the quality of the care, support and guidance that schools provided continued to be a strength in primary schools. In most cases, pupils enjoyed school, were enthusiastic about their learning and behaved well. In working towards implementing Curriculum for Wales, many schools considered ways to improve pupils' skills as learners, for example their ability to collaborate, solve problems and lead their own learning. However, as noted above, planned independent activities were too often of poor quality. As a result, just under one third (29%) of the schools inspected received a recommendation related to improving pupils' ability to work and think independently.

Many schools provided increasingly meaningful opportunities for pupils to contribute to the life and work of the school through pupil voice groups. Inspectors have seen the variety and focus of these groups expand considerably in recent years to cover many areas beyond the work of the traditional school council. Examples include work to support pupils' understanding of diversity and equality, work to improve pupils' knowledge of their rights as a child, and work in collaboration with leaders to support low-income families. In the best cases, leaders involved pupils purposefully in evaluating the quality of teaching and learning and used their feedback meaningfully to consider the quality of their provision and to make improvements.

As they moved beyond the disruption caused by the pandemic, schools continued to place a strong emphasis on supporting the well-being of pupils and their families. Many put in place additional measures to address anxiety and ensure that pupils had ways to share any concerns or worries. For instance, in some schools they ensured that specific adults were available at allocated times and locations to talk to pupils who were unhappy or feeling anxious. Many schools reported more pupils struggling to regulate their emotions and having to put provision in place to support them, such as dedicated calm areas within classes where pupils could engage in 'time out' until they were ready to return to their learning.

Most schools approached ALN reform with positivity and made good progress towards implementing the requirements of the ALN act. In general, additional learning needs co-ordinators (ALNCOs) demonstrated effective leadership in ensuring that systems and processes were updated to meet the requirements of the act, for example by ensuring that targeted pupils have useful one-page profiles that outline their interests and how they like to be supported. They liaised well with other leaders and external agencies to ensure that staff received the professional learning they needed to support pupils with additional needs.

As a result of the pandemic, many schools reviewed and refined their approach to monitoring and encouraging attendance. However, despite the best efforts of many schools, rates of attendance remained below pre-pandemic levels and the attendance of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts was a particular concern ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)).

Most schools provided good opportunities for pupils to develop their understanding of their identity, heritage and culture as part of their local community and Wales. In the best cases, they established links with local community groups and made regular local visits to make pupils' learning more authentic, for instance by working with a local coffee shop on designing branding and exploring issues around sustainability. However, schools did not always provide pupils with sufficient opportunities to learn about the diverse nature of their communities, Wales and the wider world. Jubilee Park Primary School in Newport developed an effective [whole school approach to tackling racism](#), which considers equality, diversity and cynefin.



Leading and improving

In many schools, leadership was strong. Leaders worked with governors to establish clear systems and processes where all members of staff were sure about their roles and responsibilities. Leaders modelled strong professional values, including the ability to reflect honestly on their own performance and that of the school and this encouraged an ethos of self-reflection amongst staff. They placed a substantial emphasis on supporting the well-being of staff. In a few schools this support was formalised through specific measures to support staff well-being, such as access to counselling services. This often resulted in staff having high levels of confidence in leaders and sharing their vision for improvement.

In the few schools where leadership was strongest, leaders had a clear vision for their school based closely on its context and the needs of its pupils and families. Because they were clear about what was best for their school, they made careful choices about the policies and procedures that they adopted, recognising that effective practice in another school may not be the best approach for their own. Conversely, in the few schools where leadership was weak, this was often because of a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities, too much focus on management issues rather than the long-term strategic development of the school, and poor relationships between leaders and staff.

Leaders that successfully introduced measures to tackle the impact of poverty on attainment had a clear strategic vision that encompassed this as a key feature. They used their knowledge of their community well to target grant funding effectively, for example by employing a family engagement officer to support and liaise with targeted families. In many schools, leaders carefully considered the cost of the school day and the effect this could have on families. They mitigated any impact through such measures as ensuring that educational visits were affordable for all and reducing the cost of school uniform by removing the requirement for pupils to wear clothes with a school logo. Llwydcoed Primary near Aberdare adopted a valuable [‘cost of the school day’ approach](#) working with the whole-school community to identify and reduce the financial barriers faced by pupils from low-income households.

Professional learning in effective schools was targeted well to support the school’s improvement objectives with a clear focus on their impact on outcomes for pupils. Many schools co-operated well with other schools in their local cluster and further afield to share effective practice in teaching and learning and address the requirements of curriculum and ALN reform. In a minority of schools, leaders did not ensure that professional learning to develop the Welsh language skills of staff resulted in a positive impact on the standards and progress of pupils.

In many cases, particularly where they had made good progress in implementing Curriculum for Wales, schools strengthened their relationships with parents and the wider community. In a majority of schools, parents felt that the school communicated with them clearly. Where this was not the case, it was often the result of the school using too many methods of communication and parents being unclear about which one they should be accessing.



Most schools began to return to a full timetable of monitoring, evaluation and review as they emerged from the pandemic. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions and challenges during the preceding years, a few schools managed to continue with many aspects of self-evaluation and quickly returned to their normal routines in the 2022-2023 academic year. However, overall, self-evaluation and improvement processes in over one third of schools (43%) required improvement. Often this was because they lacked rigour, did not focus sufficiently on outcomes for pupils and did not identify key areas for improvement in the quality of teaching, particularly in the classes of the youngest pupils.

In many cases, following the pandemic, governors had not returned to their usual routines of gathering first-hand evidence of the quality of the work of the school. This hindered their ability to challenge and support the school as they relied too heavily on the information provided to them by senior leaders and didn't have sufficient first-hand information to ask challenging questions of leaders.

References

Welsh Government (2023) *Attendance of pupils in maintained schools: 5 September 2022 to 24 July 2023*. Cardiff: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.gov.wales/attendance-pupils-maintained-schools-5-september-2022-24-july-2023> [Accessed 13 November 2023]

Sector report Secondary

2022-2023



Providers

178

Number of providers 2023

41

Number of providers Welsh-medium 2023

121

Number of providers with sixth form

Pupils

174,948

No. of all pupils

155,676

No. of pupils of secondary age (compulsory education)

4%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 with English as additional language (A,B,C)

175,957

No. of pupils 2021-22

19,272

No. of pupils in sixth forms

16%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 able to speak Welsh as an additional language

174,133

No. of pupils 2020-21

21%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 eligible for free school meals

15%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 with additional learning needs

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **28**

Welsh-medium: **7**

English-medium: **21**

Engagement visits: **5**

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2022

SM: **8** SI: **3** ER: **3**

No. removed 2022-2023

SM: **5** SI: **0** ER: **3**

No. went into follow-up 2022-2023

SM: **1** SI: **4** ER: **6**

Total in follow-up in August 2023

SM: **6** SI: **5** ER: **6**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **11**

During 2022-2023, leaders and staff in secondary schools continued to respond well to the ongoing challenges facing schools and pupils. They prioritised high levels of care, support and guidance and focused on improving rates of attendance. Despite this renewed focus in many schools, rates of attendance across the sector had not returned to pre-pandemic levels ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)). The majority of schools had developed a suitable and well-understood vision for Curriculum for Wales. However, schools' preparedness to roll out their Curriculum was too variable. Where the introduction of the new curriculum was less successful, it was often because development had not been supported well enough by a strong enough focus on securing effective teaching. There were clear strengths in leadership across the sector but self-evaluation and planning for improvement continued to be a perennial weakness. In the majority of cases, leaders did not focus sufficiently closely on the effect of provision on pupil outcomes. In particular, when evaluating teaching they did not consider carefully enough its impact on pupil progress. This often gave them an overgenerous view of their school's effectiveness and hampered their ability to plan for specific improvements.

Teaching and learning

Following the lifting of the COVID-19 restrictions, schools worked hard to ensure that the routines of school life were re-established so that pupils could engage with their learning and develop their knowledge, understanding and skills. This helped the majority of pupils make sound progress in their lessons and over time. However, a minority did not consistently make as much progress as they could. This was partly due to the ongoing long-term effects of the pandemic, but often was also a result of shortcomings in teaching and low expectations.

A majority of pupils with ALN made sound progress against their individual targets. Many schools started to develop a range of suitable strategies to support the achievement of pupils from low-income households. However, in general, this group of pupils were disproportionately affected by the disruption caused by the pandemic, and the gap between their level of progress and that of their peers remained a concern.

Where pupils made at least satisfactory progress, it is generally because teachers had appropriately high expectations. These teachers thoughtfully planned sequences of activities that built well on each other and challenged pupils to develop their understanding at an appropriate pace. They monitored pupils' progress closely and provided them with helpful feedback to ensure that any misconceptions were addressed swiftly. In a minority of instances, teachers planned for what they wanted pupils to do rather than what they wanted them to learn. This often resulted in pupils carrying out undemanding tasks that did not help them to progress. In these lessons, teachers did not develop pupils' resilience and independence well enough, and they were too accepting of pupils' lack of engagement.

In many lessons, pupils listened carefully to their teachers and peers and participated successfully in discussion activities. Many schools helpfully placed a particular emphasis on developing pupils' oracy skills, as this was an aspect that was particularly impacted by the loss of face-to-face learning during periods of lockdown. However, a minority of pupils still lacked confidence in expressing themselves, providing brief underdeveloped responses to questions. This was especially notable in schools where teachers did not use a variety of questioning techniques consistently well enough.

Many pupils demonstrated sound basic reading skills, and a few confidently used more advanced techniques such as synthesis. However, in the majority of schools, pupils did not have sufficient meaningful opportunities to develop these skills across the curriculum. The majority of pupils wrote with suitable accuracy and clarity for an appropriate range of purposes and audiences, and a few crafted imaginative, sophisticated pieces of extended writing. In the majority of schools, suitable provision ensured that pupils had helpful opportunities to develop these skills across the curriculum. However, planning for the progressive development of pupils' literacy skills remained underdeveloped in a minority of schools. Periods of lockdown during the pandemic had a notable impact on the quality of pupils' handwriting and presentation, and this remained an issue for a minority of pupils.

In most Welsh-medium and bilingual schools, pupils demonstrated a wide vocabulary and could discuss a range of topics with suitable fluency. The majority could produce well-written pieces of work that expressed their ideas clearly. However, a minority of pupils had a limited vocabulary and found it difficult to express themselves clearly in Welsh, using English words or phrases in the middle of sentences. Many of these schools continued to prioritise the use of the Welsh language and promoting Welshness every day. There were valuable opportunities for pupils to develop their Welsh language skills in informal situations through extra-curricular activities.

The majority of pupils exhibited sound basic number skills and used them appropriately across the curriculum to perform a range of calculations. These pupils measured accurately and used their data handling skills suitably, particularly when choosing and drawing appropriate graphs. Around a half of pupils interpreted their graphs suitably and used these to further develop their subject specific knowledge and understanding in relevant subjects across the curriculum. In a minority of schools, pupils developed their numeracy skills well through a beneficial range of challenging, authentic opportunities. However, too often, numeracy-related tasks were not relevant or challenging enough and pupils merely practised what they could already do. This was often because whole-school approaches to developing numeracy skills were not co-ordinated well enough. In a few schools, pupils enjoyed a range of helpful opportunities to improve their digital skills. Read how [Blackwood Comprehensive School developed and improved learners' digital competence skills](#). However, in the majority of schools, pupils did not develop their digital skills well enough because of a lack of meaningful or suitably challenging opportunities. Too often, pupils did not build on the digital skills that they learned in primary school.

In English-medium schools, a minority of pupils had a suitable grasp of basic Welsh but the majority did not make sufficient progress in developing their skills, particularly their ability to speak in Welsh. This was often because the work they were set was less demanding than what they experienced in Years 5 and 6. In the majority of cases, pupils' confidence in Welsh was not supported well enough by opportunities to practise using the language outside of Welsh lessons. In a minority of schools, pupils did not have enough opportunities to learn about Welsh culture and heritage.



A majority of schools developed a suitable and well-understood vision for Curriculum for Wales. However, schools' preparedness to roll out their curriculum was too variable. In the best examples, schools trialled a variety of approaches, followed by some evaluation and refinement. This case study from Lewis Girls' Comprehensive School gives an example of the [curriculum being used to enhance pupils' learning experiences and broaden their horizons](#). Ysgol Gyfun Llangefni developed [an outdoor curriculum to support the development of pupils' knowledge, skills and well-being](#). A minority of secondary schools collaborated purposefully with their local primary schools to develop a common understanding of learning and progression. Generally, this work was in the early stages of development and did not consistently secure improved progress for all pupils. Where the introduction of the new curriculum was less successful, it was often because development had not been supported well enough by a strong enough focus on securing effective teaching. In a few instances, schools' planning for the curriculum was hampered by misinterpretation of some key principles, for example by attempting to plan for and evaluate the four purposes through individual lessons.

Most schools provided older pupils with a suitable range of general and vocational courses. In a few instances, extending the Key Stage 4 curriculum to three years limited pupils' opportunities to study some subjects beyond Year 8 and reduced the breadth of the curriculum. Many schools provided suitable alternative provision for pupils at risk of disengagement. For an example, see how Rhyl High School uses [individualised and tailored curriculum offers to remove barriers to learning](#). In general, schools provided Key Stage 3 pupils with an appropriate programme of personal and social education. However, provision for older pupils was much more variable.

Care, support and well-being

Many pupils welcomed the return to normal schooling following the end of lockdown restrictions and settled back into school successfully with the support of their teachers and support staff. Schools continued to have a strong focus on monitoring and supporting pupils' well-being, particularly that of the most vulnerable. However, a few pupils continued to struggle to re-adjust to school life, and the effects of the pandemic could still be seen on these pupils' engagement with learning.

Many schools provided strong pastoral support and care and met pupils' social and emotional needs well. This work was often supported effectively by a range of external partnerships. As a result, many pupils felt safe in school and free from bullying or harassment. They knew who to turn to if they had a problem and felt confident that any issues would be dealt with. In general, pupils developed a suitable awareness of the importance of equality and diversity and felt that they were encouraged to show tolerance and respect to others. However, a few pupils felt that instances of bullying or harassment relating to sexuality, race or gender were not dealt with consistently enough.

Many pupils engaged positively in their learning. They participated willingly in lessons, showed independence and resilience when faced with challenging tasks, and collaborated successfully in group or paired activities. A minority of pupils were sometimes content to remain passive in their lessons, particularly where the teaching lacked challenge. Many schools had appropriate arrangements to monitor and support pupils' behaviour. Where these approaches were not consistently applied, the behaviour of a few pupils disrupted their learning and that of others.

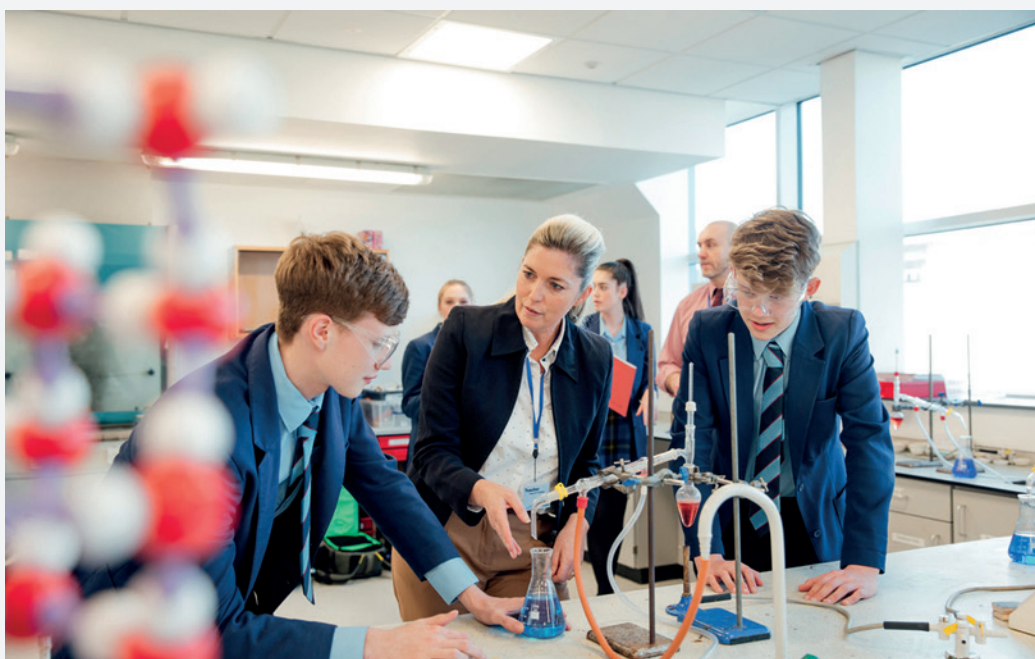


During the pandemic, schools worked hard to develop their systems for monitoring pupils' attendance. In general, they continued to develop these approaches, using a range of strategies to promote the importance of good attendance and tackle persistent absenteeism. In a minority of instances, however, these strategies were not strategic or effective enough. Overall, despite the best efforts of many schools, rates of attendance, particularly those of pupils with ALN and those from low-income households, remained a significant concern ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)) and had a negative impact on the progress of a minority of pupils.

In many schools, pupils had beneficial opportunities to influence school life and develop their leadership skills, both through the school council and other groups. In a minority of cases, leadership opportunities for pupils were too limited and other pupils were not made sufficiently aware of the work of the school council. As a result, pupils in these schools did not always feel listened to.

In many schools, inspectors found that the support for pupils with additional learning needs provided by the ALN team was a strength. In these instances, ALN staff provided carefully planned support for these pupils through targeted interventions and support in mainstream lessons. However, in a minority of cases, teachers did not use the guidance provided by the ALN team well enough to meet the needs of these pupils. Many schools made good progress as they prepared for the requirements of ALN reform. For example, Ysgol Gyfun Llangefni ensured that ALN was everyone's responsibility as part of its [provision for pupils with ALN](#). Where schools had a specialist resource base, they were safe and supportive environments that helped pupils to integrate into mainstream provision successfully. Read how Monmouth Comprehensive School has developed [an integrated approach to specialist provision](#).

In nearly all schools, there were suitable arrangements for training related to safeguarding and child protection, and staff understood their role in keeping children safe. Many schools had a strong culture of safeguarding, where staff maintained a consistent focus on keeping pupils happy and safe through all aspects of their work. In a few schools, however, processes for recording safeguarding incidents were not sufficiently robust. In addition, in around one in three core inspections, inspectors noted a health and safety issue that needed to be addressed.



Leading and improving

Many headteachers had a clear vision for their school that was clearly communicated and well understood by staff. In these schools, leadership roles were equitable and clearly defined, and line management arrangements were suitably robust. Where this was not the case, this made it difficult for leaders to discharge their roles effectively or to be held to account fully for securing improvement.

Restrictions during the pandemic meant that, in nearly all schools, self-evaluation activities such as lesson observations were significantly curtailed. Once they were able to resume this aspect of their work, many schools carried out a range of appropriate evaluative activities. In a minority of schools, this first-hand evidence was used suitably to identify areas for improvement. However, in the majority of cases, leaders did not focus sufficiently closely on the effect of provision on pupil outcomes. In particular, when evaluating teaching they did not consider carefully enough its impact on pupil progress. This often gave them an overgenerous view of their school's effectiveness and hampered their ability to plan for specific improvements. As a result, self-evaluation processes and planning for improvement needed to be strengthened in the majority of schools. In only a few, highly effective schools, leaders consistently synthesised a range of accurate, precise self-evaluation evidence to plan for and secure improvements. Read how Blackwood Comprehensive School has [developed an effective culture of self-evaluation and continuous professional learning](#).

In many schools, leaders developed a suitable focus on reducing the effects of poverty on pupil attainment. They used grant funding such as the pupil development grant appropriately to improve the experiences and outcomes of pupils experiencing poverty, for example by providing funding for enrichment activities including trips or music tuition. In a few schools, leaders established a coherent whole-school approach to mitigating the effects of poverty and had a notable impact on the aspirations, engagement and achievement of these pupils.

Leaders in many schools promoted a positive culture of professional learning. See, for example, how Lewis Girls' Comprehensive School has used [professional learning to impact teaching and learning, curriculum development and leadership](#). They ensured that staff had a range of opportunities to share good practice both within and across departments and, in the best examples, with other schools. In a few cases, strong, carefully planned links between self-evaluation evidence, performance management arrangements and professional learning activities helped schools to secure improvements in the quality of teaching. However, in a minority of schools, leaders did not plan for or evaluate professional learning well enough.

In general, governors were highly committed supporters of their school. They monitored school finances closely and, in many cases, challenged senior leaders appropriately. In a few instances, governors were not provided with sufficient information to be able to challenge school leaders or play a full role in setting the school's strategic direction.

Robust self-evaluation activities and planning for improvement, Coedcae School

Most leaders have a secure understanding of the specific strengths and areas for development in their areas of responsibility, garnered from a range of robust self-evaluation activities that focus sharply on pupil progress and well-being. This helps them to plan for improvement precisely, identify developmental needs in a timely manner and adapt provision accordingly. Leaders at all levels make good use of an extensive variety of data. This helps them to monitor pupil progress closely and put in place many timely and highly beneficial interventions. In addition, the views of pupils and well-established links with parents and the wider community are used well to evaluate and strengthen the school's work.

References

Welsh Government (2023) *Absenteeism from secondary schools: September 2022 to August 2023*. Cardiff: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/pdf-versions/2023/10/4/1697704660/absenteeism-secondary-schools-september-2022-august-2023-revised.pdf> [Accessed 13 November 2023]



Pupils

26,168

No. of all pupils

22,308

No. of pupils 2020-21

16,726

No. of pupils of secondary age (compulsory education)

20%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 eligible for free school meals

34%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 able to speak Welsh as an additional language

22,516

No. of pupils 2021-22

5,836

No. of pupils of primary age

1,734

No. of pupils in sixth forms

11%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 with additional learning needs

2%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 with English as additional language (A,B,C)

Providers

27

Number of providers 2023

15

Number of providers with sixth form

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **6**
Welsh-medium: **2**
English-medium: **4**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **3**

15

Number of providers Welsh-medium 2023

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2022
SM: **1** SI: **0** ER: **0**

No. removed 2022-2023
SM: **0** SI: **0** ER: **0**

No. went into follow-up 2022-2023
SM: **0** SI: **0** ER: **1**

Total in follow-up in August 2023
SM: **1** SI: **0** ER: **1**

During 2022-2023, all-age schools have worked hard to offer pupils more opportunities to develop their oracy skills and re-establish classroom routines including paired and group work. In the strongest cases, leaders' careful planning to develop pupils' skills across the whole age range ensured that, as they progressed through the school, pupils built effectively on what they learnt at an earlier age. However, in most schools across the sector, planning to develop pupils' skills was not always co-ordinated well enough. Despite strong working relationships between staff and pupils across the sector, in a half of schools inspected, the quality of teaching remained inconsistent mainly due to lack of challenge and low expectations of what pupils could achieve. Many schools had overcome the initial hurdles involved in establishing themselves as a new school and staff morale had improved. However, in the majority of cases, leaders did not focus well enough on the impact of provision on pupils' learning. For example, when evaluating the quality of teaching, they did not consider its impact on pupils' progress closely enough.

Teaching and learning

In the schools inspected, pupils' levels of language and social skills on entry to school were generally lower than those expected for their age. This was particularly the case regarding oracy which was adversely affected by periods of lockdown and lack of social contact during the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools worked hard to offer pupils more opportunities to develop their oracy skills and re-establish classroom routines including paired and group work. Across the schools, the majority of pupils made at least suitable progress over time, and a few made strong progress. Pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) generally made appropriate progress from their starting points.

Once they started school, pupils' communication skills developed well. By Year 6, many pupils read confidently and fluently from a suitable range of texts, using intonation well. Pupils of secondary age, to a varying degree, analysed texts and used inference and deduction as well as identifying different viewpoints. However, pupils' higher order reading skills were less well developed. This was often linked to a lack of purposeful opportunities to read in lessons other than language lessons. This was similar when developing pupils' writing skills. When given the opportunity, pupils wrote with a clear sense of purpose and audience, while the more able pupils wrote with increasing sophistication to engage the reader. In Welsh-medium schools, pupils developed their communication skills equally as well in Welsh and English. However, in English-medium schools, pupils were not given enough worthwhile opportunities to develop their Welsh language skills outside Welsh lessons. This was often because leaders did not place a high enough emphasis on developing pupils' Welsh and did not include references to Welsh in their improvement plans.



Overall, pupils' basic numeracy skills were sound. In four out of the six schools inspected, pupils received suitable opportunities to develop these skills in relevant subjects outside of mathematics. In the best cases, teachers planned beneficial opportunities for pupils to apply their numeracy skills in everyday contexts. In half of the schools, teachers provided good opportunities for pupils to develop their digital skills. Where this was the case, from an early age, pupils engaged with digital devices and nurtured the skills required to produce, edit and develop their work. When they reached secondary age, pupils benefited where schools' planning for progression for digital skills was sound. As a result, pupils in these schools were able to display more advanced skills such as programming, manipulating data and creating images and videos.

In the strongest cases, leaders' careful planning to develop pupils' skills across the whole age range ensured that, as they progressed through the school, pupils built effectively on what they learnt at an earlier age. This led to pupils making rapid progress in their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills. Read about how Ysgol Caer Elen uses [co-ordinated planning to develop pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital competence skills](#). However, in most schools across the sector, planning to develop pupils' skills was not always co-ordinated well enough.

Teachers formed strong working relationships with pupils and ensured an appropriate pace of learning that met the needs of individuals. However, in a half of schools inspected, the quality of teaching was inconsistent mainly due to lack of challenge and low expectations of what pupils could achieve. In addition, the quality of teacher feedback and assessment varied too much and did not always help pupils improve their work. This has led to a recommendation to improve aspects of teaching for these schools.

Since the pandemic, schools continued their developments to implement Curriculum for Wales. Leaders established a clear vision for the curriculum and focused clearly on developing skills and improving teaching. They encouraged teachers to trial new aspects of teaching and, through systematic and accurate evaluation, they adapted their provision. Many schools made good use of outdoor areas and their local communities to enhance pupils' experiences. The case study provided by Ysgol Penrhyn Dewi VA highlights how they [make good use of the local area to enhance pupils' learning](#). However, in a half of the schools, the choice of courses for pupils in Key Stage 4 was limited and schools did not always allocate sufficient time for personal and social education for older pupils.

The development of pupils' digital skills, Ysgol Caer Elen

Pupils across the school are making strong progress in developing their digital skills. Most primary age pupils research on the web with confidence, for example to find information about birds and create a file of fun facts. By Year 2, pupils are programming correctly to move a digital tool along a specific path. Many Year 6 pupils present information competently. For example, they access information from the web about body organs including a voice recording to describe the purpose of the organs.

The digital skills of secondary age pupils build successfully on their previous experiences. Many pupils have highly competent digital skills. For example, they create a suitable chart to display the data on the proportional change in life expectancy in African countries. Many are adept at using complex software to compose music, create digital games and design packages to a certain size and layout. Many pupils demonstrate bespoke coding skills, for example to create their own renewable energy websites.

Care, support and well-being

In the schools inspected, the care, support and guidance provided for pupils and their families has been a strength. Pupil well-being has been a priority following the pandemic and, since then, schools have created a safe and inclusive environment for pupils of all ages. They successfully created a culture of safeguarding and care to benefit nearly all pupils. Consequently, most pupils felt safe in school and knew who to turn to if they required support or advice.

Most schools catered well for pupils' emotional and social needs. They worked well with external partners to offer provision that was well co-ordinated and beneficial to pupils and their families. All-age schools benefited from being familiar with pupils and their families from an early stage. They also worked closely with partner primary schools to ensure smooth transition.

In many schools, older pupils took on responsibilities to support younger pupils in the school. They organised events and clubs as well as playing a leading role in committees and groups. Most schools provided suitable opportunities for pupils to contribute to decision-making. Pupils voiced their opinion on a range of matters. In a few cases, pupils influenced what and how they learn, especially lower down in the school.

In most schools, provision for pupils with ALN was effective and was a strength. Staff provided carefully planned and monitored support to improve pupils' skills and respond to their emotional needs. They tracked these pupils' progress carefully and provided teachers with useful information to help them plan to meet their needs in lessons. As a result, pupils with ALN made at least suitable progress against their targets.

All schools had focused on strengthening routines and systems to promote good attendance. Staff monitored attendance carefully and followed procedures to deal with absences and poor punctuality. However, despite continued efforts, attendance continued to be a concern and there had not been a marked increase in attendance levels, particularly for vulnerable groups of pupils.

In nearly all schools, most pupils displayed positive attitudes to learning. They behaved well, respected each other and adults and worked well together in groups and pairs. However, teachers and leaders told us that managing pupils' behaviour was far more challenging than it was before the pandemic.

Leading and improving

Inspectors found that most headteachers had a clear vision for their school that was well understood by staff. Leadership roles were well defined, and responsibilities increasingly spanned the whole age range. Most leaders realised the benefits of working across all ages and establishing common policies, for example on teaching and assessment. Many schools had overcome the initial hurdles involved in establishing themselves as a new school and staff morale had improved. In only a few cases, primary and secondary phases were treated quite separately and did not reflect the true nature of an all-age school.

Leaders in most schools addressed most national priorities well. They paid due attention to ALN reform and changes to the curriculum. In most schools, particular emphasis was placed on mitigating the impact of poverty on pupil attainment and well-being. In a few cases, schools had been inventive in how they supported pupils and families. This included providing food, school uniforms, subsidised educational visits and free musical instrument lessons. Leaders worked hard to ensure that pupils affected by poverty were given equal opportunities to flourish.

Support for transition and intervention strategies for pupils' social, emotional and academic needs, Ysgol Idris Davies

Leaders plan a wide range of intervention strategies to address the social, emotional, and academic needs of pupils. They match the correct level of support to their needs and this provision is delivered by a highly skilled and dedicated team of teachers and support staff.

A particular strength of the school is its thoughtful approach to supporting pupils' learning and progress as they transition from Year 6 to Year 7 within the school and from partner primary schools. For example, the school's basic skills class supports pupils to make strong progress in their literacy and numeracy skills and also in their well-being.

Support for additional learning needs (ALN), Ysgol Cwm Brombil

Staff monitor the progress of pupils with ALN effectively and know their pupils well. They use this information purposefully to ensure that any additional provision is tailored to meet the needs of these pupils. Staff involve pupils, parents and outside agencies effectively to plan pupils' next steps in learning. The ALN co-ordinators provide beneficial professional learning for all staff.

Most schools carried out a range of appropriate evaluative activities that collected first hand evidence from the scrutiny of pupils' work, learning walks and lesson observations, as well as gathering pupil and parent opinions. In a minority of schools, leaders used this information appropriately to identify areas for improvement accurately. However, in the majority of cases, leaders did not focus well enough on the impact of provision on pupils' learning. For example, when evaluating the quality of teaching, they did not consider its impact on pupils' progress closely enough. Instead, they looked for teacher compliance and did not identify precisely what needed to be addressed to improve provision.

Leaders in most schools promoted a culture of self-reflection and professional learning. They provided staff with worthwhile opportunities to work with each other and partner primary schools. Professional learning was suitably tailored to individual and school needs. Staff benefited from each other's specialisms across phases, which contributed further to continuity in provision and approaches across the age range.

Governors were generally supportive of their schools. They managed budgets carefully and understood their statutory roles regarding safeguarding and promoting healthy eating and drinking. They were suitable critical friends but, in a few cases, were not always informed well enough to be able to challenge leaders fully.



Sector report

Maintained special schools

2022-2023



Providers

39

Number of providers 2023

Pupils

5,684

No. of all pupils

5,473

No. of pupils 2021-22

5,220

No. of pupils 2020-21

46%

Percentage of pupils aged 5 to 15 eligible for free school meals

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2022 SM: **1** SI: **0** ER: **1** No. went into follow-up 2022-2023 SM: **0** SI: **0** ER: **1**

No. removed 2022-2023 SM: **0** SI: **0** ER: **0**

Total in follow-up in August 2023 SM: **1** SI: **0** ER: **2**

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **7**
Welsh-medium: **1**
English-medium: **6**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **6**

Maintained special schools provide education for children with complex needs. Many of these schools cater for pupils across a wide range of ages, from 3 to 19 years. Due to the complex and multiple additional learning needs (ALN) of pupils at special schools, their ability range varies considerably and is not necessarily related to their age.

The number of pupils at Wales's special schools continues to grow year on year ([Welsh Government, 2023](#)). Our visits and inspections during 2022-2023 found that, overall, the care, support and guidance for pupils within the sector continued to be a significant strength. Inspectors found that schools maintained positive working relationships between staff members and pupils, which had a beneficial impact on the progress pupils made. In all schools inspected this year, family and community engagement was also a strength.

Although many pupils made sound progress from their initial starting points, at three of the schools inspected, quality assurance and self-evaluation activities did not focus well enough on pupils' progress or the quality of teaching.

Special schools generally reported that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had continued to lessen during the year. However, challenges remained, such as the lower than usual attendance rates of some pupils. In addition, schools reported that, overall, the profile of pupils referred to them was becoming more complex, for example due to increased mental health needs.

Teaching and learning

At all maintained special schools inspected, most pupils made at least suitable progress from their initial starting points. Across all of the schools visited, pupils made appropriate progress in developing their independence skills in line with their abilities. This ranged from being confident and capable in self-care and dressing, to cooking meals and shopping independently on a budget.



Inspectors found that many pupils made particularly strong progress in improving their communication skills. This enabled them to access the curriculum, engage with each other, make choices and express themselves effectively. Generally, pupils made suitable use of digital technology to communicate and to support their learning. Where appropriate, they used eye-controlled assistive technology and tablet computers successfully to support their communication needs. However, at two of the schools inspected, staff members did not use pupils' preferred communication strategies consistently enough to support their engagement and participation in learning. Overall, where relevant, pupils' Welsh language skills development was inconsistent across the schools inspected. Inspectors found that pupils at one school made strong progress in developing these skills, but that pupils' progress was too limited at two schools.

Across the seven schools inspected, inspectors found that collaborative curriculum planning was generally a strong feature that incorporated ideas on what to learn from both pupils and staff members. Each of the schools provided a curriculum that was suitably broad and balanced and generally prepared pupils well for their next stage of life and learning. Most older pupils gained a wide range of accreditation and meaningful qualifications to support the transition to the next stage of their lives. They successfully progressed to planned destinations that generally reflected their needs and abilities well. However, at two schools, learning experiences were not matched well enough to the needs of pupils. In addition, staffing capacity at one school was insufficient to fully meet the complex needs of some pupils. Recruiting and retaining suitably skilled support staff members continues to be a challenge for the sector.

Inspectors found that three of the schools inspected were making increasingly creative and highly effective use of outdoor learning environments. Pupils learned about nature; they grew plants and vegetables, built dens, engaged in muddy play and cooked food on outside fires. However, inspectors found that the outdoor space at one other school was unsafe for pupils, and this resulted in a well-being letter being issued to the school.

Each of the seven schools had developed appropriate systems to track the progress that pupils made over time. Where appropriate, these were being adapted in line with changes to the curriculum. However, three of the seven schools inspected did not use this information well enough to plan curriculum experiences and set individual targets for improvement.

Staff generally provided pupils with effective verbal feedback. However, at two of the schools, written feedback was not clear enough for pupils to know how to improve.



Work placements for pupils at Woodlands High School, Cardiff

A very few older pupils at Woodlands High School develop highly beneficial independence skills when they attend work placements, which are well matched to their personalities, skills and interests. Pupils gain valuable experience in applying, and being interviewed, for placements at a range of vocational settings including a dogs home, local museum and theatre. In addition, longer internships at local hospitals and universities give pupils a range of wider experiences including laboratory work, catering and information services. This helps them to develop the confidence to adapt to new situations, tasks and challenges, that will serve them well in various aspects of their personal and professional lives.

Learner assessment at Ysgol Pen Coch, Flintshire

Ysgol Pen Coch features in our thematic report on [effective approaches to assessment that improve teaching and learning](#). We note that the school has reframed assessment as part of a holistic narrative of the child. Approaches to assessment have been streamlined to be more closely linked to curriculum planning. They combine a range of existing frameworks to support their planning for learning across the areas of learning and experience. Staff members developed their own frameworks to support pupils with profound multiple learning difficulties or sensory needs. The sharing of the planning of both teaching and assessment with teaching assistants, allows for a wider field of assessments and a clearer focus on ensuring that pupils are progressing at an appropriate rate. In addition, all practitioners' understanding of the intended learning for each activity has improved.

Care, support and well-being

The care, support and guidance provided by each of the maintained special schools inspected was a significant strength. All schools knew their pupils and their families well, and all worked effectively with other professionals to provide a service that was generally very well matched to the needs of pupils.

Inspectors found that, at each of the schools inspected, staff members had built highly effective relationships with pupils. They had created safe and nurturing environments where pupils were encouraged to develop and flourish. Pupils responded well to the structure and routine that their schools provided.

Overall, the respect that pupils showed to each other, to staff members and to visitors was a particularly strong feature of each of the schools. Pupils worked well alongside their peers, they celebrated each other's successes and mostly enjoyed each other's company. Over time, they learned to understand that pupils may think and act in ways that are different to themselves.

Across the schools inspected, pupils enjoyed and relished the opportunities provided to be involved in school councils and other pupil voice groups. Members of school councils represented the interests of pupils well. They became increasingly confident in expressing their views and presenting compelling arguments for improvements in their schools, including developing the curriculum offer.

Schools generally had very secure arrangements to support regular attendance. However, despite their best efforts, overall attendance remained below pre-pandemic levels.



Support for parents and families at Riverbank and Ty Gwyn schools, Cardiff

Riverbank and Ty Gwyn schools, part of the Western Learning Federation, have developed effective practices to engage with parents. This includes providing regular opportunities for parents to meet in a range of different settings, for example informal coffee mornings as well as daytime family workshops for paediatric first aid and language development. In addition, Ty Gwyn provides support to parents of pupils with ALN from other schools. They also plan effectively to support parents and carers where English is an additional language, ensuring that their language needs are met. As a result, the support provided by both schools is highly valued by parents and carers.

The school provision and support panel at St Christopher's School, Wrexham

Staff at St Christopher's School established a provision and support panel as a result of the rapid changes in the complexity of pupil needs linked to the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. Leaders identified that the school also needed to quickly develop its support for pupils' well-being and its approach to staff members' professional learning, to manage these challenges. This multi-disciplinary forum is used to consider in detail the support provided by the school to meet pupils' needs. When it does make referrals to external partners it is assured that these are appropriate. As a result, leaders report that staff feel more confident in planning for, and meeting the needs of, pupils with a range of complex additional needs. The school is now in a strong position to support pupils, parents and staff members as the profile of the pupil cohort changes.

Leading and improving

Overall, at each of the seven schools that were inspected, leaders ensured that the vision and ethos of their schools were formed around the best interests of their pupils. Leaders of maintained special schools continually adapted provision to meet the changing needs of pupils.

Inspectors found that arrangements for quality assuring the work of schools had largely returned to pre-pandemic norms. In the better examples, a full range of activity was used well to both monitor current improvement work and to determine areas for improvement going forward. However, during the learning walks and lesson observations they undertook, a few leaders did not focus well enough on the standard of pupils' work and the progress they were making. In addition, these leaders' evaluations of the quality of teaching were overly generous and lacked adequate focus on identifying areas for improvement.

Governors were generally knowledgeable about their school and its priorities. In the best examples, the skills and broad expertise that individual governors had were used well to help address improvement priorities. These governors could offer insightful support and challenge to school leaders on these priorities.

Across the sector, inspectors found that the professional learning of staff members was generally a strength but was not always strategically planned. Staff members were increasingly involved in networks of professional practice. They accessed relevant courses and events to further improve and refine their knowledge and understanding of national priorities, including developments in the curriculum. Links with other providers, for example local further education colleges, were used to support the professional development of support staff.

All leaders managed their school budgets effectively and grant funding was used well for its intended purpose. However, there was significant variation in the funding available per pupil to maintained special schools across Wales ([Welsh Government, 2022](#)).

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Governing body role in self-evaluation at Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn, Denbighshire

Two special schools were involved in our thematic report about [school governors](#).

At Ysgol Plas Brondyffryn, we note that the governing body has a well-established system in place to self-evaluate its effectiveness. Each year, governors complete a self-evaluation activity, which allows them to identify areas for improvement for the governing body itself. As a result, governors recognised the need for them to have a strong presence in the school and to be involved in first-hand evidence gathering. This led to them revising and expanding the role of their link governors and has strengthened the governing body's ability to evaluate the progress the school is making against the priorities of the school improvement plan.

Sector report

Independent special schools

2022-2023



Providers

42

Number of providers 2023

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **3**

Welsh-medium: **0**

English-medium: **3**

Monitoring visits: **25**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **1**

During 2022-2023 independent special schools continued to provide education for learners from Wales and England with a wide range of additional learning needs (ALN). Compared to the previous academic year a greater proportion of these schools was compliant with the [Independent School Standards \(Wales\) Regulations 2003](#).

Generally, inspectors found that independent special schools provided a nurturing environment and had a strong understanding of their pupils. Staff used this knowledge to engage pupils in their learning and provide a broad and balanced curriculum. However, in around half of the schools visited during the year, assessment processes were underdeveloped and there were limited strategic approaches to ensure the skills development of pupils across the curriculum.

In the majority of schools visited, there had been changes to leadership since the time of the most recent inspection or monitoring visit. In addition to these internal changes, independent special schools were conscious of external changes, for example current work to update the independent school standards (Wales) and proposed changes to primary legislation to eliminate profit from the care of children looked after. In response to ALN reform, independent special schools had begun the process of formally registering with the Welsh Government as schools able to provide additional learning provision.

Independent special schools generally reported that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had continued to lessen during the year. However, challenges remained, for example in rebuilding relationships with work experience placement providers. In addition, these schools reported that, overall, the profile of pupils referred to them was becoming more complex, for example due to increased mental health needs.



Teaching and learning

In all three of the schools inspected as well as during a minority of annual monitoring visits, inspectors found that many pupils made sound progress in their learning. Many made progress in important areas, such as in their literacy, numeracy, independence and life skills and, where appropriate, pupils gained a range of relevant accreditation. However, the low attendance of pupils at a very few schools visited and at two of the schools inspected hindered the progress of affected pupils. Additionally, in all three schools inspected this year, there were limited opportunities for pupils to develop their ICT skills progressively over time.

In around half of the monitoring visits, assessment was identified as an area for development. In these schools, there were limited strategic approaches to ensure the skills development of pupils across the curriculum. In addition, leaders and teachers at these schools did not track the incremental steps of progress pupils made consistently enough, and too often assessment information did not inform teachers' planning or the next steps pupils should take in their learning.

Generally, across the majority of schools we visited, staff knew their pupils very well and made effective use of this to engage them in learning. In a minority of schools, teachers planned lessons carefully to include relevant and engaging learning activities. In these schools, the curriculum offer was enriched by a comprehensive range of learning experiences including offsite activities and interactions with visitors to the school.

Two of the three schools inspected and many of the schools that inspectors visited as part of the monitoring process met all of the requirements of the [Independent School Standards \(Wales\) Regulations 2003](#). These schools provided a broad and balanced range of learning experiences for their pupils. However, a few of the schools did not meet the requirements. In these schools, learning experiences were not matched well enough to the needs of pupils, especially those with a statement of special educational needs or an individual development plan (IDP).

Care, support and well-being

All three schools inspected and a minority of schools visited as part of annual monitoring activity, provided a nurturing environment for pupils. As a result, many pupils settled quickly into their learning and engaged well with their classmates and staff members. Many pupils behaved well in school and enjoyed their learning. In all three schools we inspected, staff knew their pupils very well and developed positive working relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

In all three schools inspected, pupils made suitable progress in their independence and preparation for their future. However, in one of the schools inspected, and in a few schools where we conducted monitoring visits, personal and social education programmes were underdeveloped and did not include important areas such as careers and work-related experiences.

Engaging learning experiences at Amberleigh Therapeutic School, Powys

In addition to the core curriculum, the school provides an extensive range of engaging and authentic learning experiences. For example, pupils make preserves and craft wooden products to sell locally, they repair bikes and grow their own food. As a result, pupils develop a range of beneficial skills across the curriculum, including practical and work-related skills.



Across this sector, safeguarding was generally a strong aspect of schools' work. The three schools inspected had developed safeguarding cultures where staff had a good understanding of their role in keeping pupils safe. However, in a few schools visited during monitoring activity, leaders did not monitor the application of policies and procedures closely enough. In three of these schools, important policies that guide schools' work around safeguarding were too generic and did not have sufficient regard to specific Welsh Government guidance ([Welsh Government, 2022](#)).

Leading and improving

In the majority of schools visited this academic year, there had been changes to leadership since the previous inspection or monitoring visit. In addition, prolonged instability of leadership in a few schools was having a negative impact on teaching and learning.

The majority of schools visited benefited from support and challenge from their wider organisation as part of quality assurance and improvement planning processes. At all three schools inspected, leaders had developed a clear vision for the school and had suitable quality assurance processes in place. At two of the three schools, leaders had a clear understanding of their school's strengths and areas for development.

However, at the other schools visited as part of the monitoring process this year, shortcomings in the quality of leadership ultimately limited the progress pupils made. At these schools, self-evaluation processes lacked rigour and improvement planning did not focus sharply enough on the most important areas for improvement. Overall, these processes did not focus consistently on the impact of teaching on learning. As a result, leaders did not have a clear understanding of their school's strengths and areas for development, and they made slow progress in moving the school forward.

Generally, independent special schools have a professional learning offer, which covers a wide range of topics, including staff training on how to manage incidences of challenging behaviour. However, at two of the three schools inspected this year, the professional learning offer did not focus well enough on teaching and learning. In addition, schools did not use links with other providers consistently enough to help drive improvement.

In a few schools, leaders had made beneficial changes to the learning environment and strengthened the range of resources available. For example, one school had added a workshop and garden classroom. However, inspectors identified the learning environment as an area for development for each of the three schools inspected as well as for a few schools who had monitoring visits. In these schools, the learning environment was not well-maintained or the environment limited learning.

References

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Helping learners to prepare for adult life, Greenfields School, Newport

Pupils benefit from a range of meaningful activities which support their preparation for the experiences of adult life. This includes taking part in mock interviews, as well as activities to develop important life skills such as money management or cooking lunch for their peers as part of 'Feed me Friday'.

Pupil target setting and tracking at Gwenllian Education Centre, Carmarthenshire

At the Gwenllian Education Centre, inspectors found that individual pupil targets are progressive and meaningful. Staff carefully track the small steps of progress pupils make throughout the day. This valuable information is shared with parents and carers daily.

Staff have high expectations of pupils. They plan a range of relevant and engaging activities to meet the individual needs and interests of pupils well. Pupils respond positively to this approach. They transition smoothly between activities and are highly engaged in their learning. During their time at the school, nearly all pupils make exceptional progress from their individual starting points.



Sector report

Independent mainstream

2022-2023



Providers

37

Number of providers 2023

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **4**

Welsh-medium: **0**

English-medium: **4**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **1**

Independent mainstream schools responded decisively to the pandemic and quickly established methods to ensure the effective continuation of learning and pastoral care. Consequently, when inspections resumed, we found that both pupil progress and well-being continued to be strong features of these schools. However, in all schools inspected leaders had yet to re-establish the full range of effective quality assurance work and, as a result, their self-evaluations did not always correctly identify the few areas that may benefit from improvement.

Teaching and learning

Across the schools visited, pupil progress was strong. Communication skills were a particular strength, with nearly all older pupils being articulate, confident and assured when speaking to visitors. Most pupils developed their reading skills well and younger pupils, in particular, exhibited an enjoyment of reading. Older pupils used their reading skills effectively to extract information and develop their understanding of subject contexts well.

In three of the schools visited, the standard of written English was strong. Younger pupils wrote confidently and at length in a variety of styles and had plentiful opportunities to re-draft and improve their work. Older pupils used well-understood processes to write extended pieces of work, often in response to examination questions. However, where writing was less secure, pupils did not consistently apply their writing skills accurately and, when writing in subjects across the curriculum, did not always write at the same high standard as they did in English lessons.

Overall, across the schools inspected, most pupils developed strong mathematical skills. The youngest pupils enjoyed using physical resources such as number cards or number rods. However, in one school, pupils did not always work at the same high standard or level of accuracy when applying their mathematical skills in subjects across the curriculum.

The progress of pupils' digital skills was variable across the four schools. In one example this reflected the education philosophy of the school, where there is less of a focus on digital skills, especially among younger pupils. In one school, pupils developed outstanding independent life skills, while in the other three schools creative and artistic skills were particularly strong.

The strong progress made by pupils in the schools inspected was facilitated by a broad curriculum. This was frequently well tailored to the needs and interests of pupils. In one school, the curriculum was underpinned by a philosophy that focused predominantly on the development of skills and values for life-long learning. In another school, there was a strong focus on the outdoor environment as a resource to stimulate learning.

Staff in these schools knew their pupils' needs, abilities and interests extremely well and built strong nurturing relationships with their classes. Lessons were well planned and well-paced, and used a range of stimulating resources. Teachers used a range of assessment strategies to understand pupils' progress and provide timely feedback to move learning on. Where progress was less strong, this was most frequently because teachers overly scaffolded activities and did not provide pupils with enough opportunities to work independently.



Care, support and well-being

All schools inspected placed an extremely high priority on the well-being of their pupils. Working relationships between staff and pupils were nearly always respectful, caring and supportive. Staff knew their pupils very well and met their needs highly effectively. This promoted a strong sense of community.

Nearly all pupils were proud of their school and knew that they were cared for. Pupils were polite and considerate. Younger pupils co-operated well with each other, taking turns and waiting patiently to start an activity. Older pupils demonstrated confidence and made valuable contributions in lessons. Across the schools, pupils were encouraged to take responsibility for their learning and held positions of responsibility, which developed pupils' leadership skills and their self-confidence. Pupils took pride in these positions.

Two schools had extensive outdoor areas that were well used to develop pupils' understanding of their environment and the importance of a healthy body and a healthy mind.

Pupils are highly motivated and excited to learn in the outdoors. Activities such as growing vegetables in the garden or preparing dough to bake outdoors contribute positively to pupils' well-being. Across the schools, most pupils demonstrated that they work well independently. They also enjoyed the opportunity to work in pairs and small groups, displaying strong levels of respect for one another. However, in one school in particular, few younger pupils exhibited resilience and the ability to improve on their work and learn from their mistakes.

One school visited had embedded a strong culture of safeguarding, whilst the other schools were working to embed a robust culture. The issues raised with schools generally related to record-keeping, for example about staff training.

Leading and improving

For two of the schools inspected, this was their first core inspection since registration as an independent school. In another there had been a recent change of headteacher, whilst in the fourth school the leadership was well established. All schools fully complied with the [Independent School Standards \(Wales\) Regulations 2003](#).

Leaders in all four schools had a clear vision for their school and were ambitious for their pupils and had high expectations of their staff. In the two new schools, leaders had successfully established a family community to which pupils and parents have great loyalty and affection.

Leaders provided all staff with worthwhile opportunities to engage in professional learning. These included training specific to a pedagogical approach, training provided through membership of a school network and training specific to examination boards. However, professional learning was not always linked well enough to the individual development needs of staff.

Effective use of the outdoor environment at Treffos School

Treffos School focuses strongly on using the outdoor environment as a resource to stimulate learning. The school has extensive outdoor areas that are used well to develop pupils' understanding of their environment and the importance of both a healthy body and a healthy mind.

A wide range of learning experiences happens outside including problem-solving activities such as bridge building and orienteering. Teachers make regular use of purposeful trips to local forests and beaches and use these well to stimulate further discussion and learning back at school.



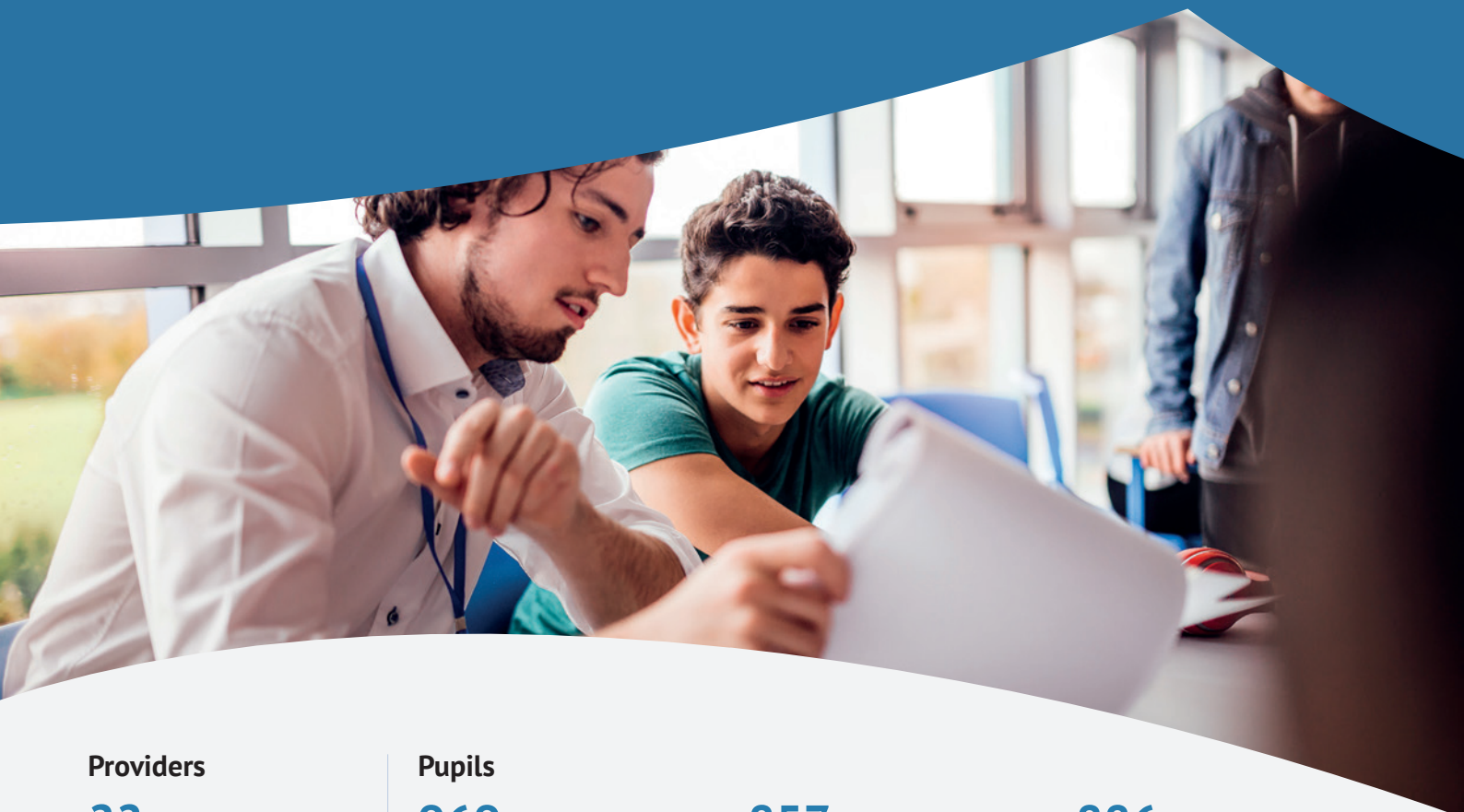
In all schools inspected, we found shortcomings in the quality assurance and school improvement process. In two of the schools inspected, leaders had not yet reestablished their range of quality assurance activities following the period of disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In another school, the comprehensive quality assurance activities lacked focus and frequently concentrated on provision rather than pupils' progress. In the fourth school, much of the quality assurance work was conducted informally and not always recorded. As a result of these shortcomings, leaders' development plans were not based upon strong evidence, had not identified the few areas that may benefit from development or did not focus well enough on improving pupils' outcomes.



Sector report

Pupil referral units

2022-2023



Providers

22

Number of providers 2023

Pupils

969

No. of pupils

857

No. of pupils 2021-22

886

No. of pupils 2020-21

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **4**

Welsh-medium: **0**

English-medium: **4**

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2022

SM: **0** SI: **0** ER: **0**

No. removed 2022-2023

SM: **0** SI: **0** ER: **0**

No. went into follow-up 2022-2023

SM: **1** SI: **1** ER: **1**

Total in follow-up in August 2023

SM: **1** SI: **1** ER: **1**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **1**

During the 2022-2023 academic year, 2,396 pupils accessed some kind of education other than at school (EOTAS) provision. The most commonly used EOTAS provision were pupil referral units (PRUs), having 49.8% of all EOTAS enrolments. Since the pandemic, local authorities reported increases in the referral rates for EOTAS provision. This is particularly evident for local authority tuition services. There had also been an increase in referrals for younger primary-aged pupils. More pupils referred had significant social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs, rather than behavioural needs which historically was the case.

Generally, inspectors found that PRUs were making appropriate progress towards delivery of Curriculum for Wales. The breadth and balance of the curriculum offer across PRUs was appropriate and improving. Nearly all PRUs had strengthened their whole provision approaches to emotional health and well-being in response to their pupils' needs.

Many of the pupils at PRUs had had poor attendance records from their previous schools. Improving the attendance of PRU pupils remained a challenge and was exacerbated by the pandemic.

Whilst local authorities expected EOTAS pupils to access a full-time curriculum offer where appropriate, too many pupils only had access to part-time education. Too many primary and younger-aged secondary pupils remained long-term in PRUs. As a result, a very few pupils successfully returned to mainstream school.

Four PRUs were inspected this year. Each one catered for a wide range of pupil needs and ages. One of the PRUs catered for older primary and secondary-aged pupils. Two of the PRUs catered for the needs of both primary and secondary-aged pupils. Lastly, the fourth PRU catered for the needs of older secondary aged pupils up to and including pupils aged 18. Two of the PRUs were multi-site and one was based at a hospital.

During 2022-2023 we also completed a thematic review of the [Equity of curriculum experiences for pupils who are educated other than at school \(EOTAS\)](#). We visited eight PRUs for this review.

Teaching and learning

A majority of pupils made adequate progress from their initial starting points. As we reported last year, most pupils continued to need additional support for their emotional well-being and mental health. Ongoing attendance issues remained a challenge and impacted pupil progress. In addition, too many pupils had only parttime access to education.

In the four PRUs inspected, to meet the highly complex needs of pupils who attend provisions, leaders adopted a flexible approach to the curriculum, with a particular focus on pupil well-being. PRUs were considering how best to implement Curriculum for Wales, including the Curriculum for Wales education other than at school (EOTAS) guidance ([Welsh Government, 2021](#)). This was at varying stages of development and, overall, we found the quality and impact of this work to be highly variable.

In the most effective practice, leaders and all staff had a carefully considered strategic approach to planning the curriculum. As a result, the curriculum offer provided a breadth and depth of learning experiences. This supported pupil learning, progress, emotional health, and the therapeutic needs of pupils in a meaningful manner. It also supported pupils' transition into their next planned destination well. However, the breadth and balance of the curriculum offer for primary and younger secondary-aged pupils in particular, was inconsistent.

The health and well-being curriculum in around half of the PRUs was developing suitably. As a result, pupils' understanding of how to keep themselves safe and make informed choices was developed through a range of worthwhile activities. PRUs also focused on raising the aspirations of older pupils. In all PRUs, this was further strengthened through collaborative working arrangements with external agencies, for example the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS).

In the most effective lessons, teachers planned well to capture pupils' interests and engage them in learning. Teachers used a range of worthwhile assessments to plan, track and monitor pupil progress.

In two of the four PRUs, planning for the development of skills across the curriculum was under-developed. A lack of opportunities to use skills consistently across the curriculum limited the progress of pupils. Progress in the development of literacy and numeracy skills was too inconsistent and the progression of skill development in ICT and Welsh was particularly impacted. However, at Canolfan Addysg Nant-y-Bryniau PRU, the development and use of Welsh skills across the curriculum was a strength.

Where practice was strong, pupils developed beneficial social skills through a range of purposeful activities. Overall, around half of pupils made progress in their social and communication skills in line with their needs and initial starting points.

In all PRUs, working relationships between staff and pupils were strong. Staff had a valuable understanding of pupil needs, particularly in relation to their vulnerability and social, emotional, behavioural, and well-being needs. Staff were positive role models and skilfully supported pupils to engage in activities. They deescalated incidents of behaviour effectively.

Planning learning experiences to engage, challenge and support pupils at Canolfan Addysg Nant-y-Bryniau

This PRU works in partnership with the North Wales Adolescent Service. Staff at the PRU plan creatively for a range of learning experiences, which are very closely aligned to the clearly identified needs and interests of pupils. These experiences build systematically on pupils' existing knowledge, understanding, needs and skills. Staff support and challenge pupils effectively and allow them to engage in their learning when they are well enough to attend the PRU to make the best possible progress.

The development of effective social skills at Flintshire Portfolio PRU

Many pupils develop effective social skills through a range of purposeful activities. In lessons they work well alongside each other. They take turns, play games, and celebrate in each other's successes. During break times, pupils play team sports successfully and manage winning and losing well. For many pupils, this represents strong progress from their starting points.

Support for pupils' social and emotional skills at Ty Dysgu, Merthyr Tydfil

Staff in the PRU provide appropriate support for the development of pupils' social and emotional skills across the curriculum. Staff use well-being assessments to provide detailed information to support priority areas of need for each individual pupil. Nearly all staff develop strong working relationships with pupils and understand their needs well. Nearly all support staff meet the needs of pupils in a sensitive and timely manner. Overall, staff provide positive role models for the pupils.

Care, support and well-being

Across all the PRUs inspected, the strong working relationships staff developed with the pupils helped them to feel safe, secure, and well cared for. The caring ethos of staff teams and use of person-centred approaches contributed effectively to pupils' well-being, engagement, and personal development.

In nearly all of the PRUs, arrangements to promote positive behaviour were clear and well understood by most staff. Staff consistently promoted valuable behaviour strategies. As a result, pupil behaviour across nearly all the PRUs was appropriate. In the most effective practice, many pupils made sound progress in managing their own behaviours through the skilful support and intervention of staff. However, where pupil attendance was inconsistent and the use of part-time access to education arrangements were in place for too long, this impacted progress.

Many of the pupils who attended the PRUs had poor attendance records from their previous schools. In three of the four PRUs inspected, a minority of pupils improved their attendance whilst at the PRU. Where pupils did not have access to full-time education over prolonged periods this limited the progress they made in their attendance and learning.

Across many of the PRUs, a very few pupils returned to their mainstream school. This was particularly the case for primary and younger secondary-aged pupils. This was partly due to a very few pupils having opportunities to maintain worthwhile links with their mainstream schools. Too many pupils remained in PRUs for too long with no clear planned opportunities for reintegration to their mainstream schools.

For older secondary-aged pupils there was an appropriate focus on access to a range of qualifications in readiness for their next destinations. The breadth and balance of these qualification pathways was variable. Generally, pupils' next destinations were well planned, and had appropriate support and guidance from the PRU and Careers Wales. As a result, the numbers of pupils leaving PRUs who did not engage in further education, employment, or training (NEET) were low.

In three PRUs, the processes to track and monitor pupil progress were inconsistent. Where practice was effective, processes were well established and bespoke to the needs of the pupils. These processes resulted in effective planning for progression in pupil skills, allowing pupils to achieve the best they could.

In two of the PRUs, processes to identify and set individual pupil targets for individual education or development plans (IEPs/IDPs) were under-developed. Where practice was effective, one-page profiles, individual programmes and targets to help staff to support pupils in their learning and behaviour were securely in place. In these PRUs, staff robustly reviewed pupils' progress towards meeting these targets.

A half of the PRUs inspected provided valuable and regular opportunities for pupils to take part in a range of pupil voice activities. As a result, pupils developed a sense of ownership of their learning and behaviour, reasoning and leadership skills appropriate to their abilities and ages.

Communication with parents and carers across all the PRUs was strong. Staff provided purposeful information through a range of methods and frequencies to best support and keep parents well informed about their child.

The effective use of a behaviour policy at Canolfan Addysg Nant-y-Bryniau

Canolfan Addysg Nant-y-Bryniau PRU is co-located with the North Wales Adolescent Service hospital provision. Staff at the PRU implement the behaviour policy consistently and they record incidents appropriately, in conjunction with health colleagues based at the hospital provision. Processes to monitor incidents and identify patterns and trends are robust and are used regularly as part of daily team meetings and to inform planning. The PRU demonstrates the progress pupils make in relation to their behaviours clearly when planning opportunities for them to return to their mainstream provision.

Communication with parents and carers by Glanynant Learning Centre, Caerphilly

Staff at the PRU liaise with parents and carers on a regular basis. The teacher in charge, alongside relevant professionals, establish beneficial relationships with parents and carers by maintaining effective lines of communication. The well-established parenting project supports parents well. The PRU staff and educational psychology team provide valuable strategies to support parents to understand and manage their child's behaviours at home. Parents report this strengthens the relationship between the PRU and home and supports staff and parents to work collaboratively to support learning.

In all the PRUs inspected, partnership working was robust. Each PRU worked with a range of agencies such as the local community police, health professionals, Careers Wales, the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS), and social services. These multi-agency working arrangements supported a joined-up approach to supporting pupils and their families well.

In three of the PRUs, there was a robust safeguarding culture. Staff understood their roles and responsibilities clearly and followed their safeguarding procedures appropriately. As a result, in these PRUs arrangements to keep pupils safe met requirements.

Leading and improving

In two of the PRUs inspected, leaders had a clear vision and ethos for their PRU. This was clearly communicated with all staff. As a result, staff understood their roles and responsibilities well. Leaders collaborated beneficially with the local authority to ensure ongoing improvement.

Self-evaluation processes were robust in one of the four PRUs inspected. A strong system of quality assurance processes was well-established. As a result, leaders had a precise understanding of the PRU's strengths and areas for development. In one of the PRUs, although the headteacher was new in post, senior leaders had identified priorities for improvement in a timely manner with staff contributing to the process. Self-evaluation processes were under-developed in three of the PRUs. Overall, outcomes of self-evaluation activities were not used well enough to accurately identify shortcomings by leaders.

Overall, the range and quality of professional learning opportunities for staff were too variable. Where practice was strong in one of the PRUs, a robust emphasis on staff skill improvement was evident. Leaders at the PRU had a precise understanding of staff strengths and provided relevant and regular opportunities for staff to develop their skills in line with self-evaluation processes.

In three of the PRUs inspected, the role of the management committee required further strengthening to effectively quality assure the work of the PRU. The working relationship with regional school improvement services was variable. In the most effective practice, school improvement partners knew the PRU well. They understood the range of pupil need, provided beneficial curriculum support and guidance, and collaborated with leaders and staff well.

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Welsh Government (2021) *Curriculum for Wales EOTAS Guidance*. Cardiff: Welsh Government. [Online]. Available from: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2021-01/guidance-for-education-other-than-at-school-consultation-doc.pdf> [Accessed 16 November 2023]

Effective quality assurance processes at Canolfan Addysg Nant-y-Bryniau

The teacher-in-charge has established a robust system of quality assurance processes. These include learning walks, book scrutiny and weekly forensic monitoring of the mental health functioning in education (MHFE) tracking tool for each pupil. As a result, leaders have a precise understanding of the PRU's strengths and areas for improvement.

Leaders promote a strong culture of reflection and collaboration, which supports staff to evaluate their practice and identify how they can make improvements.

Staff roles and responsibilities are distributed highly effectively to make best use of individual skills across the PRU. Teachers and support staff take responsibility for different aspects of the work of the PRU, for example, areas of learning and experience, trauma-informed approaches, therapeutic work with health colleagues, and developing pupils' Welsh language skills. This means that all staff have a clear sense of working together to drive improvement.

Sector report

Independent specialist colleges

2022-2023



Providers

7

Number of providers 2023

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **5**

Welsh-medium: **0**

English-medium: **5**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **2**

During 2022-2023, independent specialist colleges continued to provide education and well-being support for learners with a wide range of additional learning needs (ALN). Overall, we found that these providers had a strong understanding of their learners' needs and supported them to develop important skills, such as social skills and independence, during their time at college. However, the quality of teaching was too variable across this sector and was too often constrained by accreditation requirements or an over-reliance on worksheets.

This was a period of change across the sector. At all five of the colleges inspected during the academic year, there had been notable changes in leadership since their most recent inspection or monitoring visit. More widely, there had been changes in leadership at nearly all independent specialist colleges since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to these internal changes, independent specialist colleges were aware of significant external changes. For example, the responsibility for the allocation of funding for placements at these colleges is moving from the Welsh Government to local authorities in line with ALN reform.

Colleges generally reported that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had continued to lessen during the year. However, related challenges remained, for example, in rebuilding relationships with work experience placement providers. In addition, independent specialist colleges reported that, on the whole, the profiles of learners referred to them were becoming more complex, in part due to the impact of the pandemic on the development of individual learners.

Teaching and learning

Overall, many learners at the five independent specialist colleges inspected during 2022-2023 made steady progress in their learning. Inspectors found that many learners made generally strong progress in developing communication, social and independent living skills. Many learners made sound progress in developing creative, physical and independent living skills. Across the colleges inspected, where appropriate, many learners achieved a range of units of accreditation, for example in literacy or independent living skills. However, at three of the five colleges, learner progress was hindered by poor attendance.

Inspectors found that each of the five colleges inspected provided a broad curriculum for their learners. Three of these colleges used their accommodation and grounds well to provide learners with purposeful and practical activities. For example, learners tended to the college goats, served customers in the college café and counted the takings of the college shop. Three of the five colleges supplemented their curriculum offer with a range of engaging and beneficial community-based activities. For example, learners accessed the local authority wellbeing hub to use the sensory room or take up crochet lessons. At three of the five settings, partly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a limited range of community-based or work-related activities available.

At four of the colleges, staff developed strong and caring relationships with learners based on trust and mutual respect. At three colleges, staff embedded helpful routines within the college day to support learners to transition between activities and develop their independence. These staff members provided learners with encouraging praise and useful verbal feedback to move their learning forward. At three of the colleges, inspectors found that staff provided clear instructions to learners and used questioning effectively to develop learners' ability to recall prior learning.

However, at four of the five colleges the quality of teaching was too variable. Where teaching was less successful, it was not matched well enough to the needs of learners. At three colleges, inspectors found that the curriculum and teaching were overly constrained by the requirements of accreditation, or by an over-reliance on set worksheets. Overall, provision to improve learners' skills was underdeveloped at each of the five colleges.

Each of the colleges used an appropriate range of strategies to assess learner progress, these processes were newly revised at two of the colleges. Three colleges did not consistently use such information about learners' progress to inform their planning.

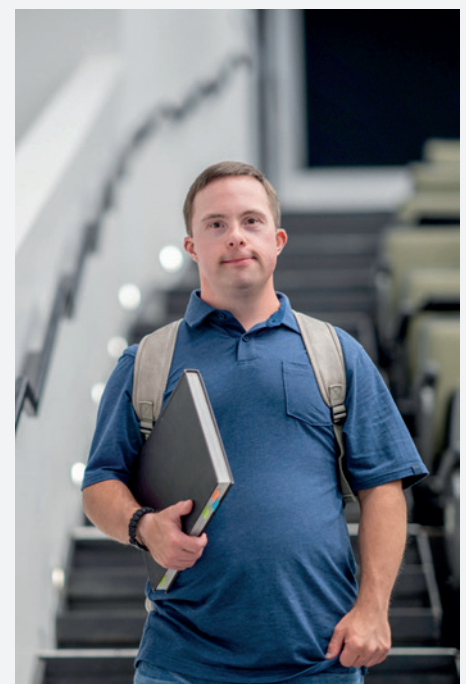
Care, support and well-being

All five colleges inspected this year had successfully developed nurturing communities with a strong focus on learners. In each of the colleges, staff had a comprehensive understanding of learners' needs that was underpinned by the college's adoption of a therapeutic offer. For example, the colleges each benefited from the support of a speech and language therapist to provide guidance on meeting the communication needs of learners.

Each college had used a range of important information about learners' needs to develop comprehensive care and support plans. Where these were used effectively, staff had a clear understanding of how to meet the wide range of their learners' needs. However, at two of the five colleges, these plans were not implemented consistently. Four colleges had appropriate transition processes in place to support learners who were due to join the college as well as those preparing to leave.

Enrichment events at Coleg Plas Dwbl, Pembrokeshire

The college plans regular celebrations and events that enrich the core curriculum offer. They hold termly festivals, such as the Martinmas festival where all learners make and light their own lanterns. The college provides learners with an environment that acknowledges and celebrates its specific Welsh context and culture, for example, through preparations for a college performance of 'Y Mabinogi'.



Generally, many learners enjoyed attending college. They developed positive working relationships with staff members and demonstrated positive attitudes to their learning. Many learners enjoyed participating in a range of extracurricular activities, such as clubs and community-based activities. For example, learners attended an after-college woodwork club and went shopping in preparation for cookery sessions. Many learners made sound progress in important areas such as developing their independence and social skills. However, for three of the five colleges, learner attendance was an area for development.

In each of the five colleges, learners developed an understanding of how to keep themselves safe and healthy, for example through learning about healthy eating and relationships. However, this provision was inconsistent across the colleges. In some cases, it did not cover important topics such as radicalisation, whereas in others schemes of learning were not adapted well enough to meet the needs of all learners.

All five colleges had staff teams that demonstrated a strong understanding of their role in keeping learners safe. Three colleges had developed highly effective processes in this area. However, two of the colleges inspected received a well-being letter from Estyn because of specific concerns relating to health and safety or safeguarding.

Leading and improving

Despite the challenging context and instability of leadership across the sector, at three of the five colleges inspected, leaders had set a clear vision for the college that was well understood by staff members. All colleges inspected had a strong focus on safeguarding and were developing a positive safeguarding culture. Three of the colleges also provided caring support for their staff members, for example valuable well-being and financial support arrangements alongside their wider employee assistance programmes. At three colleges, new leaders worked diligently to bring about rapid improvements. However, overall, each of the five colleges inspected made slow or inconsistent progress against the recommendations from their most recent inspections and monitoring visits.

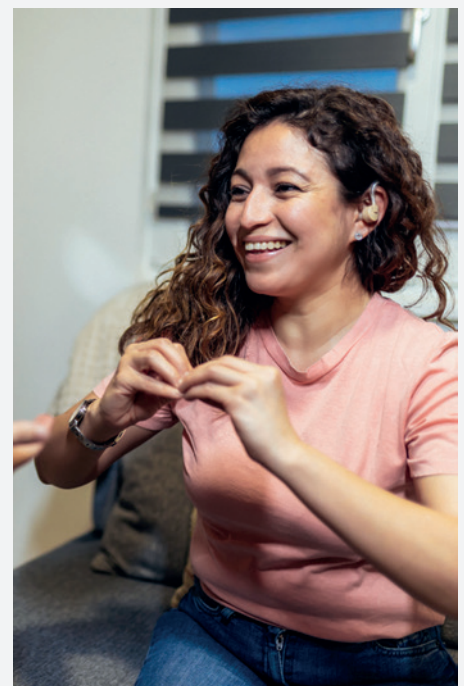
Many of the self-evaluation and college improvement planning processes were newly established at four of the colleges inspected. Senior leaders at two colleges used data effectively to evaluate the work of their colleges. However, at three colleges, senior leaders did not evaluate this at a whole-college level. Too often, work in this area focused on compliance and did not focus well-enough on the impact of teaching on learning.

Each of the five colleges inspected this academic year are part of wider organisations that provide education or care for learners across Wales and England. Each of the college leads benefited from a range of support and services from these wider organisations. For example, they received support with safer recruitment, quality assurance and governance as well as with operational aspects such as ICT. However, at four of the colleges, this support and guidance did not take good enough account of the specific Welsh context of the college or have sufficient regard to Welsh Government guidance.

Developing learners' independence at Aspris College North Wales, Wrexham

The college's provision for developing social skills, independence and independent living skills is a strength. For example, where appropriate, learners are well supported to develop relevant skills in using public transport independently and confidently.

The college provides a purposeful range of opportunities for learners to develop their independence and work skills by undertaking relevant external work-related experience. For example, learners benefit from work placements at dog kennels, nearby factories or at the local museum.



Each college inspected provided a range of professional learning opportunities for staff, notably in relation to the ALN of learners, such as the needs of learners with autistic spectrum condition or those who have experienced trauma. However, at four settings, these opportunities did not focus effectively enough on teaching and learning, and four settings had underdeveloped arrangements to learn from good practice elsewhere.

Since their last inspection or visit, two colleges had made improvements to their resources and learning environments. Despite these enhancements, three of the five settings inspected required improvements in these aspects.



Sector report

Local government education services

2022-2023



Providers

22

Number of providers 2023

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **4**

Welsh-medium: **2**

English-medium: **2**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **2**

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2022

ACSC: **3**

No. removed 2022-2023

ACSC: **2**

No. went into follow-up 2022-2023

ACSC: **0**

Total in follow-up in August 2023

ACSC: **1**

Local government education services include those provided or commissioned by a single local authority as well as those provided in partnership with other local authorities. School improvement services are provided largely in conjunction with regional consortia or through partnerships on behalf of local authorities, though the model for how this works varies across Wales. There are 22 local authorities across Wales.

Our local authority link inspectors carried out their regular work with local authorities. We adapted our approach to link inspector visit in regional consortia by focusing on a specific area of their work across the autumn and summer terms. This enabled us to consider their approaches to evaluation and improvement in more detail.

During 2022-2023, and especially in the autumn term, local government education services had to respond to many ongoing challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic. These included staff and pupil absences caused by localised outbreaks of the pandemic. In addition, local authority officers had to support schools with additional behaviour and attendance issues over and above what was the norm pre-pandemic. A few local authorities were slow to resume their previous oversight of attendance, whilst other local authorities promptly resumed their pre-pandemic practices and saw improvements in attendance levels. In general, pupil absences, particularly among those from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts, remained high ([Welsh Government 2023a](#); [Welsh Government 2023b](#)). Processes to monitor, evaluate and quality assure their work were a general weakness across local authorities. This aspect of work led to recommendations in all four inspections. Processes to quality assure, and support to improve, education in provision other than in school (EOTAS) were a shortcoming in a minority of local authorities. All local authorities recognised the challenge of maintaining their levels of service in light of future budget reductions.

Inspections

Between September 2022 and July 2023, we carried out four inspections of local government education services. Two local authorities were asked to produce case studies outlining effective practice in aspects of their work. Rhondda Cynon Taf was asked to produce a case study focusing on their strong use of data and information and Gwynedd was asked to produce a case study on supporting pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) through the medium of Welsh.

Outcomes and education services

In all inspections, we continued to evaluate how well local authorities supported schools to improve. In all local authorities inspected last year, we found that there were well-established working relationships with their regional school improvement services. Three of the four local authorities generally had a suitable overview of their schools and used the information provided to them by the regional school improvement service to support and challenge schools appropriately. This helped local authority officers to intervene and provide support following the identification of schools that caused them concern.

In Rhondda Cynon Taf, at the time of inspection there was one primary school requiring special measures and no secondary or all-age school requiring follow-up. We found that the local authority had clear and high expectations of the work of their regional school improvement service and challenged them well to improve many aspects of their work. Leaders provided robust and timely challenge about the effectiveness of improvement partners' work and required all improvement partners to gather a range of first-hand evidence to evaluate the quality of teaching and leadership in their schools. Despite this, the quality of support for schools had not improved rapidly enough.

In Blaenau Gwent there were no primary schools or non-maintained settings requiring follow-up activity following inspection. Overall, the local authority and their regional school improvement service had provided helpful support to enable targeted primary schools to improve. However, in one secondary school, one special school and one all-age school, officers did not recognise important shortcomings quickly enough. As a result, the pace of improvement in two of these schools has been too slow.

In Gwynedd, no schools inspected were judged to require any statutory follow-up from February 2022 up until the time of the local government inspection. We found that local authority and regional officers worked productively together and had a generally strong knowledge of their schools. Officers regularly discussed strengths and areas for improvement in schools and prioritised support suitably. However, in a very few cases, intervention and support had not been timely enough and did not lead to sufficient improvement in these schools.

Effective collaboration to tailor systems and processes to the needs of Rhondda Cynon Taf

Senior leaders in Rhondda Cynon Taf communicate explicitly its priorities for school improvement, as set out in its current education strategic plan. Senior leaders and officers work proactively with the regional consortium to tailor systems and processes to the needs of the local authority. For instance, they provide detailed feedback on the suitability of reporting processes for sharing information about the support and challenge the regional service provides to each school and PRU. As a result, there are now specific requirements for improvement partners to report on the effectiveness of a school's or PRU's self-evaluation and improvement planning processes, as well as the quality of teaching and leadership.

In Carmarthenshire, two primary schools and one secondary school were judged to require statutory follow-up since we resumed inspections in February 2022. We found that officers had a suitable overview of strengths and areas for improvement in their primary schools. They were working pro-actively with these schools and generally identifying suitable strengths and areas for improvement. In the best cases, officers were brokering effective and regular support that led to strong improvement. However, the support for secondary schools in this local authority was too variable. Education Support Advisers did not identify areas for improvement in secondary schools swiftly enough and did not always intervene successfully. In addition, quality assurance processes had not been sufficiently robust to ensure the effectiveness of all officers' work over time.

Where school improvement processes were less effective, it was generally because officers did not monitor progress closely enough or ensure that school improvement partners set sufficiently precise and focused success criteria against which progress could be measured. We also identified that support for pupil referral units (PRUs) was variable and three of the four PRUs we inspected during 2022-2023 were placed into a statutory follow-up category.

During the year, we considered how well local authorities aimed to provide equity of education experiences for children living in poverty. Overall, we found that all local authorities were committed to improving outcomes for all young people, and leaders were focused on how services could improve provision in order to mitigate the impact of poverty on attainment. Generally, local authorities had appropriate processes for identifying vulnerable pupils using a suitable range of information. This information helped services to prioritise support for pupils and young people across the authority.

In Blaenau Gwent, we found that officers were working well together, across directorates, on issues relating to tackling poverty and ensured that they were targeting their resources towards the greatest need. This included working well with outside agencies and schools. In addition, we found that officers worked positively to ensure that schools spend their pupil development grant suitably and help them to make well-informed decisions about targeting resources where they are likely to have the best impact. This local authority went beyond the Welsh Government's minimum requirements for universal free school meals by providing them for all pupils up to Year 2.

In Rhondda Cynon Taf, we considered how well the local authority worked with their communities to support vulnerable pupils. We found that they had a strong understanding of the needs of individual learners, and that they identified vulnerability well. Officers were able to access a wide range of data and information and were using this well to target support for pupils and young people. For example, they made effective use of attendance data when visiting schools.

Officers in Rhondda Cynon Taf focused well on supporting children and their families before they reach statutory school age. This included support for speech and language and introducing families to one-to-one community programmes that are available. Youth services in this local authority were working effectively with schools and communities. They were targeting their work to the areas of greatest needs and, in particular, providing strong support for those young people who are at risk of not being in education, employment or training.



In Carmarthenshire, we found that officers had a strong understanding of the needs of young people in their local authority. In addition, there was a clear policy for supporting young people to improve their attendance and behaviour, underpinned by the aim of ensuring equity for all young people to achieve their best. Overall, the local authority provided helpful support for schools and young people. However, this had not had a strong enough impact on improving attendance levels for all vulnerable pupils.

In Gwynedd, we focused on the way in which the local authority met the needs of learners with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. This local authority had invested notably in strengthening behaviour support services and processes had improved suitably over time. We found that the range of interventions available to support pupils to improve their behaviour were generally appropriate. Staff across the authority were working well to provide a broad range of curricular experiences that engaged targeted pupils well and helped them to gain positive experiences of school life. However, overall, the evaluation of the impact of support provided by specialist centres was not strong enough. As a result, the tailoring of provision for the broad range of needs was not always effective enough.

We published a thematic report in June 2023 that considered curriculum experience for pupils educated other than at school (EOTAS). In this report we found that in the best examples, local authorities worked with schools to have clear plans for pupils who attended EOTAS to return to mainstream schooling that were timely and helpful. However overall, pupils who attended EOTAS provision remained there for too long. Local authorities did not evaluate the quality of curriculum provision in EOTAS well enough. Too many local authorities did not clearly identify the expected duration of placements with EOTAS providers for pupils. In addition, review processes for pupil placements in EOTAS providers were underdeveloped in many local authorities.

Leading and improving

In all local authorities inspected between September 2022 and July 2023, leaders placed a high priority on improving outcomes for children and young people. This was often reflected in the respective local authorities' corporate and financial plans.

In Rhondda Cynon Taf, leadership at all levels was generally effective. In this local authority, senior leaders and elected members had a strong understanding of the vision and work of the education directorate and officers and members worked purposefully together to identify and address important aspects of their work. Leaders and officers were making strong use of data to inform their work. Read how they used this [data to help them gain a strong understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement in their services and to target support effectively](#).

In Blaenau Gwent, we identified that leaders had a clear focus on regeneration and improving outcomes for young people, but this vision was not well enough understood by elected members, officers or staff in schools. We identified that corporate leadership was not effective enough in evaluating or improving important aspects of this work. Despite these shortcomings, senior leaders in Blaenau Gwent had strong working relationships with officers that, through their operational leadership, has enabled services to strengthen over time.

In Gwynedd, we found that leaders had a clear vision for education in their local authority. They demonstrated that they were committed to ensuring that all children and young people have equal access to high quality provision. Leaders and officers were working creatively to address challenges, such as recruitment, in schools. They also worked pro-actively to identify and reduce barriers to engagement for the most vulnerable young people in schools and other provisions. Despite this, leaders had not been strategic enough in addressing a few important areas of their work. For example, leaders and officers had not identified well enough the need to target and improve attendance or evaluated well enough the impact of the overall provision for those pupils with behavioural and emotional needs.

In Carmarthenshire, we found that leaders across the authority had a clear vision and communicated effectively across the organisation. This helped to develop engaged and effective teams that were working positively together to identify challenges and how they would overcome them. Leaders were committed to ensuring they provided a strong service to support young people and evaluated many of the aspects of their work suitably.

In all local authorities, officers and members were working positively together to consider their work. Where scrutiny processes were most effective, members were provided with timely and effective information about the impact of the work. As a result, scrutiny members challenged robustly the work of the local authority and ensured that they held members to account. However generally, evaluation and improvement processes were not effective enough and this often meant that scrutiny members did not always have sufficient information to support and challenge the local authority effectively.

Local authorities were in the early stages of implementing their Welsh in Education Strategic Plans. We asked Gwynedd local authority to provide a case study about [developing Welsh medium resources for pupils with ALN and their families](#).

We provided a recommendation for all local authorities relating to self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. This had been an area of weakness over a long period of time. This was generally because the quality of evaluation and improvement planning was too variable within education directorates. Plans often did not set out clear success criteria and too often officers monitored whether actions had been completed rather than the impact they had had on improving provision and outcomes for children and young people. This made it difficult for local authorities to identify strengths and areas for improvement precisely enough to secure more effective improvements.



Ongoing work with local authorities and school improvement services

Each local authority and school improvement service has an allocated link inspector. Link inspectors visit local authorities and school improvement services regularly to maintain an overview of their work. We consider a range of services and areas throughout the year and have drawn together some common findings from a few of those areas below. During 2022-2023 we considered how a sample of local authorities were supporting parents and young people who had elected for home education.

Local authorities reported an increase in the number of parents who opted to home educate their children since the pandemic. The figures for elective home education (EHE) learners across Wales rose from 2,626 in 2018-2019 to 5,330 in 2022-2023 ([Welsh Government, 2023c](#)). This increase in EHE learners made it more challenging for local authorities to meet their statutory requirement to ensure that the education parents provide is 'efficient full-time education suitable to the child's age, ability and aptitude, and to any special educational need' ([Education Act 1996](#)). In addition, local authorities must also carry out additional learning needs (ALN) assessments, where requested, and provide appropriate support for electively home educated learners with ALN where necessary. The Welsh Government provided £1.7 million of funding in 2022-2023 to help local authorities fulfil these duties, consisting of £50,000 for each authority and a further £160 per EHE learner ([Senedd Cymru, 2022](#)). The Welsh Government is consulting on plans to introduce a broad 'core offer' of support, which local authorities will have to provide for EHE learners.

All local authorities we visited as part of this targeted work were providing the minimum level of assistance for EHE learners and a minority were providing a wide range of support that included comprehensive information and beneficial opportunities to enhance learning. For example, a minority of local authorities provided EHE learners with free educational resources, book vouchers and passes to leisure facilities and various local activities, such as outdoor pursuits, and sessions in art, Welsh and horticulture. A few local authorities gave EHE learners enhanced access to public libraries, sport and music services, or worked with local colleges to provide vocational training opportunities. However, only a minority of EHE families took up these opportunities and local authorities did not monitor and evaluate the impact of the support they provided for EHE learners. A very few local authorities surveyed EHE families about the support they would like. These authorities tried to tailor their provision to meet those needs or provided opportunities for EHE families to meet to help each other.

Many local authorities have raised awareness among elected members about the local EHE context but only a minority report on it annually to the education scrutiny committee. There is a key national and local dilemma in that the more funding the Welsh Government provides and, the better the support for EHE learners locally, the more attractive EHE becomes as an option for parents, yet this choice makes it more challenging for local authorities to ensure the learners access suitable education.

Collaboration with other inspectorates on safeguarding and child protection issues

During 2022-2023 we continued to work alongside Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in joint inspections of child protection arrangements (JICPA) in two local authorities. We conducted a JICPA in Denbighshire County Council in February and Bridgend County Borough Council in June. CIW lead all JICPA, and all other inspectorates, including Estyn have an equal role in the inspection process. Our role is to evaluate the local authority's safeguarding and child protection arrangements from an education perspective. A multi-agency report is presented to the local authority, regional health board and police constabulary at the end of the inspection process, outlining strengths and areas for development and includes recommendations for improvement. In both inspections, we noted that local authority education services provided regular, purposeful training to designated safeguarding leads in education providers and supported them well in their roles. Overall, schools and non-maintained settings promoted children's and young people's well-being strongly and often delivered successful intervention programmes to support their emotional and mental health. Senior officers worked suitably with their counterparts in other services to plan and review child protection arrangements at a strategic level. However, information sharing between health, police and children's services at an operational level, particularly when important decisions were made, was variable.

The Welsh Government also invited us to take part in a multi-agency rapid review of decision-making around child protection in response to a number of tragic child deaths across England and Wales. This work also involved CIW and HIW and took place in April 2023. The purpose of this review was to determine the extent to which the current structures and processes in Wales ensure that children's names are appropriately placed on, and removed from, the Child Protection Register when sufficient evidence indicates that it is safe to do so. The review consisted of targeted activity in seven local authorities and four health boards and found that the understanding and implementation of thresholds as to whether a child is experiencing, or is at risk of experiencing significant harm, were mostly good. However, partner agencies and local authorities in Wales did not always consistently understand this. Overall, information sharing processes were effective and in line with the Wales Safeguarding Procedures. However, this was variable across Wales. Multi-agency arrangements generally worked well in many areas, but some areas required further strengthening.

School Organisation Proposals – September 2022 to July 2023

This year, 11 local authorities consulted on a total of 15 proposals for school re-organisation. The number of proposals submitted during the year was notably fewer than in previous years, including during the COVID pandemic. However, this does give an accurate picture of the proposed changes to education across Wales, as a few local authorities put forward single consultations that proposed changes in multiple providers. Where this happens, these multiple consultations do not always provide consultees with as much helpful information about proposed changes.

Around 40% of proposals aim to establish new ALN provision or extend existing provision. This included the proposal to establish a new 3 to 19 Special School in Rhondda Cynon Taf. One third of proposals this year focused on increasing Welsh-medium education provision. These proposals continued to consult on a range of strategies to improve access to Welsh-medium education across Wales.

Regional school improvement services

During this year, we piloted a new approach to our link inspector work with the regional school improvement services. This involved two visits that focused on a specific aspect of their work, bespoke support for schools. At the end of these visits, we provided individual feedback based on our findings. Overall, we found that the regional consortia were beginning to respond to the recommendations of our 2022 report [The Curriculum for Wales: How are regional consortia and local authorities supporting schools?](#)

Regional school improvement services had worked with local authorities to develop approaches to providing more tailored support for schools. In two of the four local authorities inspected, schools were beginning to get helpful support. However, this bespoke support and its impact were still too variable across Wales.

Generally, regional school improvement services were beginning to develop approaches to evaluate the impact of their work, but these were in the early stages of roll out and it was too early to fully measure what difference these approaches had made. We found in a few areas that officers were still relying too heavily on feedback from participants and not using enough first-hand evidence to evaluate the impact of professional learning. In addition, success criteria were not always precise enough to support evaluation and improvement processes.

Annual Risk and Assurance Workshops

As part of our ongoing link inspector work with local government education services, we contributed to annual risk and assurance workshops along with Audit Wales and CIW. Based on this work with local authorities, we provided a letter outlining the assurances and risks that we identified in each local authority.

Key assurances

In many local authorities, we identified that inspection outcomes were generally positive in primary schools and non-maintained settings. In a majority of local authorities, we highlighted assurances related to leadership in the local authority. We talked about strong senior leadership within these authorities including that of senior officers and elected members. In a majority of authorities, we identified that they had suitable planning in place to develop Welsh language provision within their local authority. For example, we noted that one local authority had an ambitious Welsh language in education strategic plan, which included establishing committees to respond to all seven outcomes of the plan.

Key risks

In a majority of local authorities, we highlighted risks related to provider inspection outcomes, particularly the number of secondary schools that had been placed into statutory categories and those that had been in these categories for some time. In around half local authorities we identified risks around finance and budgets. Local authorities expressed concern over future budgets. In a minority of local authorities, provision for Welsh-medium education was identified as being a risk. The risk included ensuring recruitment of suitable staff including teachers who teach through the medium of Welsh. We also identified attendance as a risk in a minority of local authorities.



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Sector report

Further education

2022-2023



Providers

12

Number of providers 2023

Learners

99,925

No. of further education learners at further education institutions 2021-22

90,395

No. of further education learners at further education institutions 2020-21

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **1**
Welsh-medium: **0**
English-medium: **1**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **1**

Further education colleges responded flexibly to the pandemic in order to maintain continuity of learning and support for learners, especially in terms of facilitating remote and online delivery. When inspections resumed, we found that most learning activities had returned gradually to face-to-face delivery. This was welcomed by most learners and staff members across all colleges. However, as a result of the least able learners having fallen further behind, skills gaps in literacy and particularly numeracy, remained substantially wider than for similar cohorts of learners prior to the pandemic.

Teaching and learning

During our link inspector engagement visits and calls to further education (FE) colleges we focused on [online and digital learning](#). Following the period of restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges had either returned fully to in-person delivery or retained a very small amount of online delivery. Most teachers and learners welcomed the return to in-person delivery. Remote learning remained available for a few commercial and professional programmes, where learners and employers valued this flexible approach. A very few colleges offered part-time mathematics and English GCSE courses online.

Colleges and their learners continued to benefit from the Welsh Government funded sizeable investments they had made in equipment and resources during the pandemic. These digital resources were being used to support and enhance classroom delivery and to offer extension activities and homework. They also enabled a flipped approach to learning whereby learners could access resources prior to lessons to prepare them for class-based activities and discussions. A few lessons were also recorded, enabling learners to revisit them or access them at a later date if they were absent.

Where an embedded approach to digital learning was well established, many learners particularly valued the opportunities this offered. Helpful examples included the use of teacher voice notes to supplement written feedback, web-based tools for collaborative activities, and the use of virtual reality headsets as a learning tool.

Our engagement visits and calls also focused on [colleges' arrangements for educational visits](#). Colleges recognised the value and positive impact of educational visits for all learners, in terms of enhancing their learning as well as their personal and social development. Opportunities to take part in trips and visits varied between different curriculum areas. In most cases, the number of educational visits, including overseas trips, had broadly returned to pre-pandemic norms. This was usually phased, prioritising specific curriculum areas and groups of learners. For example, colleges had prioritised learners who needed to attend events or undertake activities outside of college to complete their qualifications. They also prioritised learners who would particularly benefit from accessing off-site activities, such as independent living skills (ILS) learners. Colleges particularly welcomed the opportunity for learners and staff to spend time abroad as part of the Welsh Government funded Taith international learning exchange programme.



During the core inspection of [Coleg Cambria](#), we found many vocational learners undertook a wide range of practical activities that developed their skills to match industry needs. Academic and vocational learners across a wide range of abilities consistently achieved good grades relative to their individual starting points. However, learners' numeracy skills were less well developed than similar cohorts prior to the pandemic.

Coleg Cambria's curriculum offered a wide range of courses ranging from school link provision for local pupils in Years 10 and 11, to higher education courses. Most teachers knew their learners well and planned activities that engaged them effectively. However, across the college, many teachers did not plan well enough to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills.

Care, support and well-being

During the core inspection at Coleg Cambria, inspectors found that most learners were enthusiastic about their courses and were motivated to achieve their qualifications, with many aiming to progress to the next level. Learners felt safe and well supported by their teachers and other staff members when attending the college. Most learners felt that the college was an inclusive and welcoming place where they were valued. Nearly all worked well together and with their teachers and other staff members.

Most learners were aware of, and benefited from, a wide range of support for their mental health and emotional well-being. Learners valued the culture that promoted their independence and supported their progression. Many showed a clear understanding of the dangers of extremism and radicalisation.

In a recently published case study, we outlined how Coleg Cambria identified a substantial increase in mental health and well-being disclosures and referrals, partially in response to the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the college noted a high number of disciplinary cases involving learners from low-income households. As a result, [the college introduced a comprehensive cross-college approach to traumainformed practice](#) that aligns with the Trauma-informed Wales framework ([ACE Hub Wales, 2022](#)). These approaches have been developed through a 'Trauma-informed methodology' and are supported by specialist staff and an 'Inclusive College Strategy'. The initiative equips staff to support both learners and colleagues.

As part of their trauma informed approach, Coleg Cambria developed and implemented an action plan including a programme of training and awareness-raising across the college. This resulted in staff being well trained to use positive and effective strategies that supported well-being and helped learners remain engaged with their learning. Having been reviewed through a trauma-informed lens, the college's processes, together with their approach teaching and learning, were resulting in early signs of improved well-being among learners and staff members.

Targeted work experience at Coleg Cambria

Coleg Cambria develops effective partnerships with local employers to provide real life work experience opportunities for learners to progress into employment or higher education. An example of this is the NHS nursing cadet programme, where the college has developed strong links with a local health board to enable level 3 health and social care learners to undertake work placements. These are within surgical and medical wards at hospitals and take place during the first year of study; learners then choose a specialist area to progress onto during their second year.

As part of our thematic review of [peer-on-peer sexual harassment](#), we visited all FE colleges in Wales to focus on this complex issue. We reviewed the processes that were in place to help protect and support 16 to 18-year-olds, the culture among college learners, and the provision colleges had in place to promote healthy relationships. We found that peer-on-peer sexual harassment was widely underreported. For a variety of reasons, many learners chose not, or were unsure how, to report incidents of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment incidents took place both in-person and online. Our discussions with learners and staff members suggested that learners identifying as female or LGBTQ+ and learners with additional learning needs, were more likely to experience sexual harassment in comparison to the learner cohort overall.

Colleges had well-established learner disciplinary policies and processes and most dealt effectively with the most serious cases of alleged peer-on-peer sexual harassment reported to them. We found that college systems for accurate recording and analysis of sexual harassment among learners were underdeveloped. Too often, incidents of sexual harassment were recorded and categorised using generic classifications of bullying.

Leading and improving

During the Coleg Cambria inspection, we found that the chief executive officer, supported by the senior leadership team, governors and staff, had established a strategic direction for the college based on a shared vision, mission and strategic goals. Many staff felt valued, included and positive about the strategic direction and they appreciated the strong focus on well-being and support.

Inspectors found that the college served the needs of its communities well. It had well-developed partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders including local authorities, schools, other further education colleges, public service boards, the regional skills partnership and employers. The college senior management team had a clear focus on improving learning experiences to make sure that all learners reached their full potential. The college used comprehensive quality improvement procedures and collected a wide range of information to inform their practices. At the time of the inspection, several key initiatives were new, and managers did not always measure the progress and impact of actions well enough.

Through our engagement visits and calls, we found that the quality assurance of online and digital learning was addressed through more than one route and varied between colleges. All colleges had an observation programme, which included online and digital learning. Most colleges had digital teams or individuals in place to support this aspect of the curriculum. This included specialist teams that created content as well as curriculum-focused digital mentors who were often teachers or support staff members who had been allocated time for this role. Informal peer support between teachers was also a valuable form of development.

Colleges were continuing to provide learning opportunities for staff members to update their skills in digital and online learning. Leaders acknowledged the appetite for digital development across the workforce and identified the positive impact this was having on teaching, learning and assessment, as well as wider services. Colleges shared their experiences and knowledge of digital learning through both formal and informal networks. For example, a sector digital leads network was set up to support collaboration.



Inspectors found that colleges had responded positively to the recommendations from our [thematic review of education visits policies in FE](#), which was published in 2015. Providers had used the findings of the report as a basis to review their visit policies and procedures and, where necessary, had put in place detailed step-by-step guidance for educational visits addressing each of the recommendations. For example, they had introduced formal codes of conduct that were shared and signed prior to visits taking place, and introduced specific references to visits within relevant guidance and policies.

Staff members responsible for learner visits were provided with regular updates and inexperienced staff members were required to undertake initial training including, in some cases, to shadow or assist more experienced staff before leading visits themselves. Most providers did not gather formal trip-related feedback from learners, although informally, learners shared that the experiences were valuable and positive.

During our visits to colleges as part of the thematic review of peer-on-peer sexual harassment, many staff members told us they lacked confidence and felt that there was a need for more professional development and updates in this regard. Overall, we found there was a lack of FE-specific resources to support college staff members in dealing with peer-on-peer sexual harassment. Collaborative work to address these concerns has begun recently but it is too early to evaluate its effectiveness or impact.

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Sector report

Work-based learning

2022-2023



Providers

10

Number of providers 2023

Pupils

39,370

No. of apprenticeship learners
2021-2022

46,040

No. of apprenticeship learners
2020-21

15,635

No. of foundation
apprenticeship learners 2021-
2022

7,340

Higher apprenticeship
learners 2021-22

16,395

Apprenticeship level 3 learners
2021-22

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **3**
Welsh-medium: **0**
English-medium: **3**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **3**

Apprenticeship providers have worked well to sustain learners' engagement with their programmes during the time since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, a few learners took too long to complete their programmes. Overall, providers took good care of learners' well-being and support their individual learning needs. However, providers were not supporting learners well enough to develop their literacy and numeracy skills, Welsh language ability and their understanding of radicalisation and extremism.

Teaching and learning

During 2022-2023, inspectors found that all three apprenticeship providers inspected had worked well to support learners to remain on-programme and to recruit new entrants to apprenticeship programmes following the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many learners made sound progress in developing their theory knowledge and practical skills. However, a few learners who had been on-programme since the height of the pandemic had not made as much progress as they could. These learners often remained on-programme well beyond their expected apprenticeship completion dates, especially those apprentices in the health and social care sectors. This was mainly a consequence of the disruptive effects of the pandemic leading to assessors being unable to physically access care settings for extended periods. Other factors included the significant workforce pressures in these sectors and the introduction of new qualifications for these sectors. Although learner outcomes were beginning to improve, each of the three inspections resulted in a recommendation to improve the success and timely completion rates of learners in underperforming learning areas.

At each of the three providers, inspectors found that most learners made strong progress in their job roles, developing a wide range of specific vocational skills. Learners also developed highly valuable broader work-skills including effective communication with senior colleagues, peers and customers. As a result, apprentices were able to make strong contributions to their employers' businesses and recognised the benefits of these improvements in their skills. In a few cases, employers were reluctant to release learners to attend off-the job or online sessions, especially Essential Skills Wales activities.

The majority of teachers, trainers and assessors had high expectations of their learners, encouraging and supporting them to complete written and practical assessments. In these cases, they thoughtfully planned activities that built well on previous learning and assessment. They supported learners in an individualised way, often visiting the learner's workplace to undertake assessment and give personal support tailored to learners' individual needs. Assessors monitored learners' progress regularly, updated learner progress tracking documentation, and, in the best cases, set agreed and challenging targets for the completion of written work or practical assessments. Most learners knew the progress they were making and what they needed to do next, although the majority did not know their literacy, numeracy and digital skills targets. Teachers, trainers and assessors provided learners with helpful written feedback, which in the best cases was constructive and detailed and helped learners to improve their performance. In the best cases, providers had developed and used a comprehensive range of teaching and learning resources well to support progress, for example, see the case study about Educ8's [development of an effective virtual learning environment](#).

In both on and off-the-job sessions, many learners demonstrated effective listening skills. They took part enthusiastically in activities, especially practical sessions. Teachers, trainers and assessors used beneficial questioning techniques in most sessions. However, in a few instances, questioning was not used well enough to check learners' knowledge or to probe higher level understanding. Tutors and assessors did not successfully engage learners in activities to develop their understanding of radicalisation and extremism well enough.

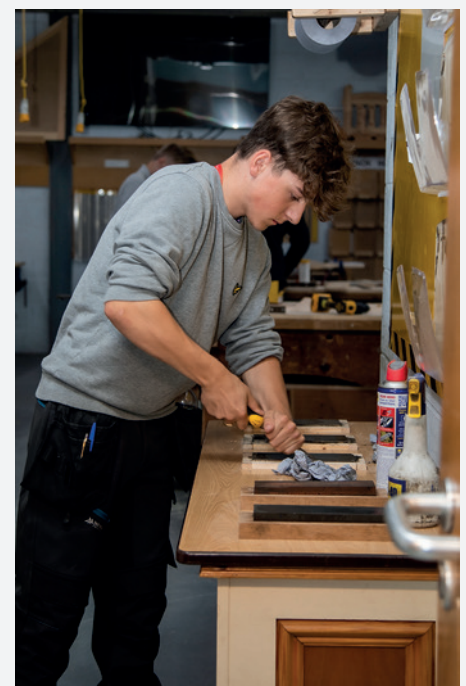
Many providers and subcontractors had begun to develop a range of bilingual teaching and learning resources and made progress in recognising and increasing the capacity of their staff members to deliver bilingually. However, the number of learners who chose to complete written aspects of their work in Welsh remained low. Learners with a high level of fluency did converse freely in Welsh with any Welsh speaking assessors or tutors to which they had access.

Care, support and well-being

The care, support and guidance made available to apprenticeship learners was significantly strengthened during and following the pandemic. All three providers inspected had robust arrangements for identifying learners who required additional support. This support was often focused on learners' well-being and most staff members had developed their skills to enable them give meaningful initial support. This personal support effectively helped learners who were at risk of leaving their apprenticeships. Although these learners remained in-training they were, overall, taking much longer than planned to complete their apprenticeship frameworks.

Each of the three providers either had their own in-house support services, or access to external support agencies, to give specialist support to individual learners when a need was identified. These services included help with personal, financial and wellbeing issues. A particular strength of the providers was the personal support that assessors, as the first point of contact, provided to learners. The mutual trust and respect that developed as part of productive relationships between learners and assessors meant that assessors could sensitively help learners with a wide range of well-being needs. This ultimately supported learners to make progress in their vocational studies and their job roles. Most learners were motivated and enthusiastic about their learning with the majority planning to progress to the next level. These learners excelled in their workplaces and quickly became productive and valued members of their employers' staff.

Inspectors found that the three providers inspected had strengthened their processes to identify learners' support needs in a timely way, as a result, most learners accessed the support they needed quickly. This resulted in an increase in the number of learners who stated that they had an additional learning need. In the wake of the pandemic, the providers had identified an increasing trend in the number of learners who needed support with confidence and anxiety issues. This need was particularly acute during periods of external examinations and other important assessments. It was also notable that the proportion of level 3 learners who proactively took responsibility for their learning was lower than the pre-pandemic norm. These learners were more likely than in the past to need reassurance and support when collecting assessment evidence, completing written work or preparing for external assessments.



Inspectors found that providers supported their staff members well, enabling them to develop their own skills and abilities in supporting learners. Specialist training was used to enhance the support available to learners. Increasingly, providers were expanding the range of support available to apprentices. As part of the Grŵp Llandrillo Menai inspection, the provider was asked to produce a case study about their [effective wrap around support and parity of access for learners](#) across the group. Apprentices could access support and facilities across different sites, such as learning resource centres, gyms and counselling facilities.

All three providers had suitable arrangements and training in place to safeguard their learners, and staff at all levels understood their relevant roles and responsibilities. Learners had an appropriate understanding of safeguarding and knew whom to report incidents to, both in the workplace and with the provider. However, teachers, trainers and assessors did not engage learners in activities to develop their understanding of radicalisation and extremism well enough.

Leading and improving

The leaders of the three providers inspected supported the development of effective working relationships with partners, sub-contractors and local employers. Their strategic planning was aligned well to local, regional and national targets. Strong and well-established partnership working was underpinned by clear and regular communication between managers and staff members at all levels. Partners shared a wide range of useful information relating to the delivery of their apprenticeship contracts. In the best cases, headline learner progress and outcomes data were openly shared with partners and sub-contractors. This facilitated the evaluation of performance across each provider within the partnership. In these cases, effective practice was recognised and shared. Each of the three providers inspected placed a high value on professional learning for their staff members. In the best cases, this was shared with partners and sub-contractors and had resulted in staff being supported well to improve their delivery and assessment methods. In the Grŵp Llandrillo Menai inspection, a case study was identified that explained how the provider had developed [inclusive professional learning opportunities](#) for its own and its sub-contractor staff members.

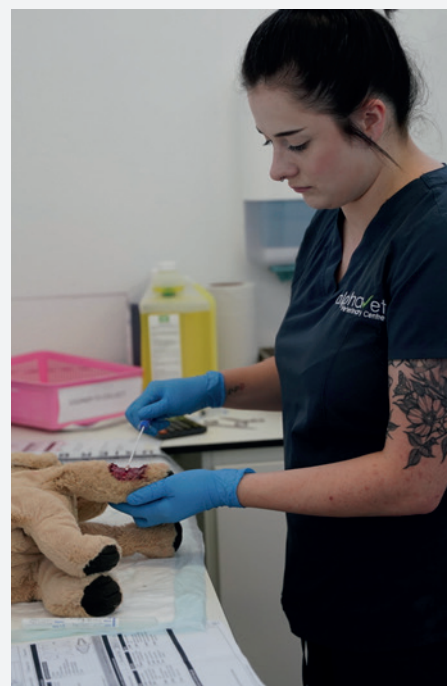
All providers had comprehensive arrangements in place to self-evaluate and report on the quality of their work. Most providers were returning to the full range of pre-pandemic self-evaluation activities including the observation of teaching, training and assessment across their provision. However, improvement plans and targets did not always focus sharply enough on key areas for improvement such as supporting learners who were beyond the expected completion date for their apprenticeship.



Partly due to the pandemic, recruiting qualified and experienced assessors had become more challenging for apprenticeship providers. To ease this pressure, providers made appropriate use of various strategies, including improving conditions of service and recruiting experienced vocational specialists before training and supporting them to become qualified assessors. UK-wide challenges in the health and social care sector continued to be the cause of a major pressure point for providers. Learner recruitment, retention, and completion of apprenticeship frameworks within the expected timeframe were key concerns for the sector. Surprisingly, across the network of apprenticeship delivery providers, the enrolment of construction, planning and the built environment learners remained below target. This was at a time when the sector was buoyant and the need for apprentices across all trades was high. Across the majority of other learning areas, providers were attracting sufficient numbers of learners to meet demand. Most providers had strong working relationships with employers that they had often worked with for many years. The Skills Academy Wales case study describes the provider's strong focus on [anticipating labour market developments and proactive early engagement to meet the workforce needs of regional projects](#).

However, across the regions there remained a substantial number of employers who were not taking advantage of opportunities to have apprentice employees. Overall, training providers needed to do more to raise awareness of the benefits of apprenticeships and engage these employers.

The changes in Wales to qualifications in the health and social care, childcare and construction and built environment sectors had put increased pressure on learner recruitment. The new qualifications generally require learners to remain enrolled on programme for a longer time than they would under the previous arrangements. In addition, practical and theory work must be completed at a higher level. Concerns about the cost-of-living crisis and the rates that apprentices are paid were also contributing factors to the recruitment challenges. Providers reported that potential apprentices chose to take jobs that initially offered higher rates of pay but lacked formal training or better long-term career prospects.



Sector report

Jobs Growth Wales+ (employability programme)

2022-2023



Providers

5

Work-based learning providers operating across 4 regional partnerships

Learners

5,330

No. of all learners

This recently introduced provision aimed at helping 16 to 19-year-olds gain employment or engage in training has been collaboratively established across Wales. Whilst the delivery of centre-based sessions was strong in 2022-2023, overall, learners did not benefit sufficiently from real work experience as part of their programmes and enrolment onto these programmes remain low.

Key findings and messages from our review of Jobs Growth Wales+

Providers delivered programmes well with tutors skilfully using a wide range of good quality teaching and learning materials. Most participants accessed strong personal support from their tutors and, in many cases, this helped them remain on-programme and make progress towards their goals. However, even when appropriate, too few participants were accessing meaningful work-experience.

Inspectors found that providers needed to consider how they might better engage and support employers across their regions with a view to increasing opportunities for participants. Going forward, providers should further develop their links with local communities to engage suitable groups of potential participants and employers who have limited or no engagement with the programme.

Across the Jobs Growth Wales+ provision, the number of participants was lower than expected. Recruitment via Working Wales had not resulted in the anticipated numbers and consequently providers had taken on responsibility for direct recruitment to ensure programme viability.

The Welsh Government and key stakeholders need to do more to collect and share timely information relating to young people not in education, employment or training. This data should include programme enrolment targets, actual enrolment figures and participant outcomes.

Sector report

Adult learning in the community

2022-2023



Providers

13

Regional partnerships plus Adult Learning Wales that operates nationally

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **3**
Welsh-medium: **0**
English-medium: **3**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **3**

Follow-up

No. in follow-up September 2022: **1**
No. removed 2022-2023: **1**
No. went into follow-up 2022-2023: **1**
Total in follow-up in August 2023: **1**

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the number of individuals engaging in adult learning remains apparent. Despite this, nearly all those undertaking adult learning engage enthusiastically with the provision, resulting in clear benefits to their well-being in addition to furthering their knowledge and skills. Adult learning partnerships generally serve their learners and their communities well. However, leaders' tracking of learner progress and destinations is too inconsistent and more needs to be done to expand the provision available through the medium of Welsh.

Teaching and learning

Adult learning in the community partnerships catered for an increased number of learners in 2021-2022. This followed a long-term declining trend in the number of adult learners on Welsh Government-funded programmes that preceded sharp falls in 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic ([Welsh Government, 2021](#); [Welsh Government, 2022](#)). The 2021-2022 increase was particularly pronounced in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programmes, partly due to the enrolment of learners coming to Wales from Ukraine and Syria ([Adult Learning Wales, 2022](#)). As well as developing their English language skills, ESOL provision helped these learners to adapt to their new surroundings and culture. Learners on ESOL+ programmes benefited from provision that combined English language learning with vocational training designed to support them into employment. While provision across programme areas was increasingly delivered in-person following the disruption due to the pandemic, learners also valued online learning options where available.

During the inspections of 2022-2023, tutors across the subject areas generally taught effectively. They possessed strong subject knowledge and knew their learners well. In addition to improving learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills, in the best examples, well-taught courses provided learners with creative and entrepreneurial skills to help them gain employment or establish their own businesses.

Inspectors found that adult learning partnerships offered provision that was appropriately aligned to Welsh Government priorities. Where partnerships offered personal interest courses, for example in craft, sign language and modern foreign languages, this helped to benefit learners' mental, emotional and physical well-being as well as enabling them to acquire new knowledge and skills. However, there were very few opportunities for Welsh-speaking learners to undertake literacy, numeracy, digital literacy or personal interest courses through the medium of Welsh.

Overall, partnerships did not track and monitor learners' progress well enough. The tracking of learners' progress during their courses, their progress onto different courses, and their next steps externally as they exited the provision, was inconsistent and generally inefficient.



Care, support and well-being

Inspectors found that partnership providers succeeded in creating safe and caring environments that supported the educational and personal development of learners. They catered well for the individual needs of their learners and offered useful additional support when required.

Partnerships promoted equality and diversity and successfully highlighted the importance of these concepts within Welsh society. Providers also focused on promoting healthy lifestyle choices. An effective practice case study from Cardiff and Vale adult learning in the community partnership provides an example of [partnership working to help develop ESOL learners' awareness of cancer symptoms and how to access healthcare](#). Partnerships assisted the higher than usual number of learners who were experiencing anxiety, an issue that had grown in prevalence following the outbreak of the pandemic.

Nearly all learners displayed high levels of motivation and commitment to their learning. They contributed enthusiastically to sessions and enjoyed their learning experiences. Overall, partnerships offered meaningful opportunities for learners' opinions to be heard and for them to influence provision and practice.



Leading and improving

The leadership and management structures of the different partnerships vary across the sector, reflecting the different needs and nature of the geographical areas that they serve. Two of the three partnerships communicated a clear vision and a shared ethos. In the best examples, partnerships aligned their work and resources effectively according to their vision and ethos. For examples of this, see the Cardiff and Vale Adult Learning in the Community Partnership's effective practice case studies about [transforming their partnership](#) and about their [priority sector skills academies](#).

Partnerships generally understood the needs of their diverse communities and learners well. They catered for these appropriately alongside their work to meet regional and national priorities. For example, providers worked together effectively to ensure that numeracy and English classes were held across a wide range of convenient and accessible venues within their local communities. However, in one partnership, processes to scrutinise and improve the quality of provision, as well as learner outcomes, were not strong enough.

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Sector report

Initial Teacher Education

2022-2023



Providers

7

Number of partnerships
2023

Learners

1,610

No. of learners enrolled
2021-22

1,680

No. of learners enrolled
2020-21

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **2**
Welsh-medium: **0**
English-medium: **2**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **0**

During 2022-2023, many students made good progress towards meeting the standards for qualified teacher status (QTS), although this was uneven across the partnerships and, in a few instances, this progress was more limited due to weaknesses in teaching and mentoring on the programme. The most effective aspects of the new partnership model are the school-based training days. Students benefited from these opportunities to work in groups in a lead school recognised for its effective practice. However, overall, the component parts of ITE programmes were not balanced well enough or did not link as successfully as they might. Overall, there was clear commitment from individual partners to support initial teacher education although the transition from university-led provision to partnership-led provision remained a developing area in all partnerships. Processes for quality assurance and self-evaluation require improvement. In some instances, leaders did not respond quickly enough to issues raised by students or to remedy flaws in provision. A particular shortcoming was the weakness in the quality assurance of teaching and mentoring, leading to too much variability in practice and effectiveness.

Learning and well-being

Most students showed a strong motivation to teach and were developing strong professional attitudes and behaviours. Overall, many made good progress towards meeting the standards for qualified teacher status (QTS), although this was uneven across the partnerships and in a few instances, this progress was more limited due to weaknesses in teaching and mentoring on the programme.

In their school experiences, most students planned diligently, and a minority explored creative learning experiences for their pupils. However, a common shortcoming in students' lesson planning was an inability to identify the intended learning specifically enough. Too often, students' learning objectives for their pupils were written in vague terms, or simply described what they wanted pupils to do. This hindered students' ability to choose the most effective teaching approaches and meant that they were not able to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching in terms of pupils' progress well enough. A few students struggled to maintain pupils' engagement in the classroom because they were not clear enough about their learning objectives. In addition, in too many instances, students planned too closely in line with the school's schemes of work. This meant that their understanding of planning in the mid- and long-term was inhibited. Generally, students' understanding of curriculum requirements was sound. However, their understanding of how Curriculum for Wales works in practice was too often limited to what they observed in their placement schools.

Many students were developing a wide range of useful skills that helped them in their practice. A majority employed a useful variety of classroom management approaches. Students demonstrated good communication skills and were learning to use a range of questioning techniques and approaches to support assessment appropriately. However, a minority of students did not develop their specific phase or subject pedagogies well enough.

Many students had suitable literacy, numeracy and digital skills. However, a majority did not plan well enough for the progressive development of pupils' skills. Many made sound progress in developing their Welsh language skills from their starting points, although students training to teach in English-medium contexts did not use their Welsh often enough in school. Read more about [how ITE partnerships support students to develop their Welsh language skills, including teaching through the medium of Welsh](#) in our thematic review.

Generally, students made good progress in their academic studies. Many understood the role that research plays in developing their practice. However, only a minority of student teachers made secure links between theory and practice and used what they had learned from reading and research to inform and shape their day-to-day classroom practice, or to reflect on the progress their pupils had made.

Although tutors and mentors generally encouraged students to maintain a healthy work-life balance, a minority of students found it difficult to balance the competing demands of planning and evaluating lessons, completing academic assignments and uploading evidence to their Professional Learning Passport (PLP). Students did not always see the value of the tasks they were required to undertake and found the large number of processes and tasks that the partnership required them to complete onerous and confusing.

Teaching and learning experiences

All programmes had been designed in accordance with the Criteria for Accreditation ([Welsh Government, 2018](#); [Welsh Government 2023](#)) and included a wide range of learning experiences.

Some of the most effective aspects of the new partnership model are the school-based training days. Students benefited from these opportunities to work in groups in a lead school recognised for its effective practice. The most successful learning experiences were designed so that students explored and debated theory in practice and included opportunities for students to observe and interact with school staff and pupils.

However, in too many instances, the component parts of ITE programmes were not balanced well enough or did not link as successfully as they might. The design of the programmes did not pay good enough attention to the way that beginning teachers develop their skills, knowledge and understanding over time. Programmes do not consistently enable students to develop their subject and phase pedagogies well enough. In addition, the timing and content of tasks and assignments were not considered carefully enough and this had a negative impact on students' well-being. For example, students were required to gather evidence of pupils' learning for an assignment when they had already completed their school experience, or assignments deadlines fell at a time when they were heavily engaged in planning and preparing lessons.



Many mentors, including senior mentors, were not sufficiently aware of the taught elements of the programme, which meant that they were not able to support students effectively in their development. Furthermore, although aspects of ITE programmes were helping to support students to link theory and practice, tutors and mentors did not routinely teach students how to think critically or help students to consider their developing practice in the light of their reading and research.

In general, partnerships tended to expect that students would learn about Curriculum for Wales in schools and did not recognise the role that they play in supporting the development of the curriculum, for example in addressing misconceptions or by contributing their expertise to the professional learning provided by the consortia.

In a few instances, teaching in university was outstanding. In these sessions, tutors were not only experts in their field, but had an excellent understanding of the pedagogies of ITE. They used imaginative resources and intuitive questioning to inspire students, and to skilfully nurture their critical and creative thinking. A minority of mentors were also proficient in understanding the developmental needs of their students. In the best examples, mentors were adept at guiding students to become competent teachers. They engaged students in 'learning conversations', helping them to reflect on their practice and improve their skills. They encouraged pertinent connections to educational theory and helped students find their own solutions to problems. However, overall, there was too much variability in both teaching and mentoring across partnerships. This had a negative impact on students' progress.

Leadership

Although there is laudable commitment from individual partners, the transition from university-led provision to partnership-led provision remained a developing area in all partnerships. School partners were beginning to develop their role in strategic leadership and were starting to take on more extensive responsibilities in the leadership of key aspects such as quality assurance and self-evaluation processes. However, despite strong joint working in the initial establishment of the partnerships, this had waned more recently. Overall, school partners tended to play a supportive role, rather than a strategic one.

In a minority of partnerships, leadership structures were not robust enough in practice. There was an insufficient flow of information between the leadership groups to ensure that the leadership of the partnership was focused on the development of key aspects that had the most impact on student outcomes and, in a few instances, lines of accountability were unclear.

Overall, processes for quality assurance and self-evaluation were not rigorous or robust enough. In some instances, leaders did not respond quickly enough to issues raised by students or to remedy flaws in provision. A particular shortcoming was the weakness in the quality assurance of teaching and mentoring, leading to too much variability in practice and effectiveness.



Although partnerships regularly gathered student feedback and provided numerous opportunities for staff to discuss the development of the partnership, self-evaluation and planning for improvement remained a longstanding area for improvement. Common shortcomings included weaknesses in leadership structures, a lack of processes for gathering of first-hand evidence, and perceived barriers to progress, such as difficulties in aligning self-evaluation to university procedures for quality assurance. Tracking student progress was undertaken to support individuals and overall processes to support students who were in danger of not meeting the standards were secure. However, student progress tended to be tracked using component aspects of the Standards for QTS. This did not enable partnerships to identify strengths and areas for improvement in provision and practice well enough. As a result of this approach to tracking and a lack of drawing together first-hand evidence about teaching, mentoring and programme design, planning for improvement was not sharp enough. It tended to be based on priorities that were too broad and included weak monitoring and evaluation processes.

During inspections undertaken in 2022-2023, the development of a research culture across partnerships was an emerging strength. This had particular impact where the benefits of the partnership were exploited. Positive examples included school partners making the most of the professional learning opportunities offered by the university and collaborative research based in partnership schools. However, research into ITE provision and practice was at an early stage of development. Generally, mentor development was a developing area and remained a challenge, even post-pandemic. Professional learning for university tutors was not based well enough on developing effective practice in ITE.



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Sector report

Welsh for adults

2022-2023



Providers

11

Number of providers

Learners

15,260

No. of individual learners
2021-22

14,965

No. of individual learners
2020-21

Core inspections

No. of core inspections: **2**
Welsh-medium: **2**
English-medium: **0**

Case studies

No. of case studies: **1**

The Welsh for adults sector moved swiftly to deliver online courses at the start of the COVID pandemic. It continued to offer a range of online learning, as well as in person courses, during 2022-2023. Overall, learners are highly motivated and take part in their learning with enthusiasm and the standard of care, support and guidance continues to be a strength in this sector.

Teaching and learning

Both providers inspected offered a full range of courses, from entry to proficiency level, in-person and online. This enabled learners to choose courses and modes of learning that met their individual needs and personal circumstances. One provider worked effectively with local and national bodies to provide valuable, bespoke workplace courses for staff at a range of employers that helped contribute positively to the national mission of achieving a million Welsh speakers by 2050. For example, courses were delivered for the Football Association of Wales and the Wales Millennium Centre.

Nearly all learners, in all types of provision, were highly motivated and contributed enthusiastically during their lessons. Learners made good or better progress in their speaking and listening skills when they were challenged effectively by tutors to extend their answers and take advantage of opportunities to use their Welsh language skills outside of formal lessons.

In one provider inspected, teaching was highly effective and consequently learners persevered to use Welsh with their tutors and each other throughout lessons, without turning to English. Many of the learners in this provider also benefited from additional provision outside their usual lessons. This supported them well to become increasingly independent and active Welsh speakers.

In the other provider, tutors' expectations of learners in a minority of lessons were not high enough. Tutors were too ready to turn to English when presenting activities and providing instructions and, in a few cases, tutors did not support learners' pronunciation well enough. In addition, despite encouragement to practise speaking Welsh regularly, a minority of learners did not take up the opportunities planned. As a result, a minority of these learners did not make as much progress as they could over time.

Care, support and well-being

The standard of care, support and guidance remained, as in previous years, an area of strength in both providers inspected. Providers succeeded in creating close-knit, inclusive learning communities that offered effective support to all learners, including those with additional needs. This had a positive effect on learners' attitudes to learning and their enjoyment of learning experiences.



Staff at both providers offered valuable extra support for learners to continue learning if they missed lessons or had fallen behind. Providers communicated effectively with learners and, as a result, most felt that their views were listened to and acted upon appropriately.

In one of the two providers inspected, there was no formal system in place to track learners' attendance and monitor it regularly to facilitate effective forward planning and ensure progress.

Leading and improving

Both providers inspected had a clear vision, in line with the National Centre's vision and the Welsh Government's policy, to increase the numbers of Welsh speakers. They fulfil an important role within their host organisations in promoting and increasing the use of the Welsh language. A notable example is the programme of taster courses for over 100 medical students from the School of Medicine, Cardiff University to learn basic phrases before they spend time with patients on hospital wards.

Leadership in one provider was highly effective. Leaders at all levels understood their roles and worked well together to provide high quality experiences for learners. There was an embedded culture of continuous self-evaluation and improvement in all aspects of work. The provision improved over time to the benefit of learners, supported by purposeful planning for improvement, the effective analysis of data and targeted continuous professional development. In the other provider inspected, processes to assure the quality of teaching and learning were not sufficiently evaluative to identify strengths and areas for improvement. As a result, the professional learning offer did not support tutors purposefully enough to improve specific teaching and learning practices. In addition, leaders did not use data effectively to plan provision and prioritise areas for improvement.



Sector report

Justice sector

2022-2023



Providers

5

Number of prisons

1

Number of young offender institutions

17

Number of youth offending services

1

Number of secure children's homes

During 2022-2023, Estyn joined His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons on one inspection, that of HMP Swansea, to evaluate the quality of education, training and work activities. The full inspection report for HMP Swansea was published in June 2023 ([His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2023a](#)). HMI Prisons lead inspections of prisons across England and Wales and their annual report covers the national issues in England and Wales for the secure estate ([His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2023b](#)).

These following findings are taken from the inspection of HMP Swansea and reflect national issues from the HMCI of Prisons annual report.

Teaching and learning

Inspectors found that the men at Swansea HMP had access to an appropriate curriculum offer, for example, they could learn relevant vocational and industry-specific skills or focus on developing their literacy and numeracy skills. There was an active Welsh-speaking group and Welsh language sessions were provided to prisoners. Tutors and workshop managers guided their learners to make progress. Overall, many learners attained appropriate qualifications during their time at Swansea HMP.

Despite the range of education, training and work opportunities available, the setup of provision designed to match the needs of the local labour market was delayed and this restricted access to these purposeful activities. The prison's reading strategy was in the early stages of development, and there was insufficient identification of, and provision for, emergent readers.

Care, support and well-being

Learners at HMP Swansea appreciated the opportunities to support their employment prospects and develop the social and emotional skills necessary to be successful inside and outside of prison. In particular, the men valued the support provided by prison mentors for their well-being as well as their learning. Prisoners who participated in education or training generally engaged well in their learning and were respectful to their peers and staff members. However, attendance at education sessions was too inconsistent.

In line with Welsh Government and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Services strategy for education and skills in Wales ([2019](#)), the prison assessed learners appropriately to establish their learning and skills training needs. However, the assessment of additional learning needs was limited to self-disclosure and information about the men's prior learning was not readily available. This affected the range and quality of support for men with more complex needs.

Swansea HMP's employment board and hub engaged well with agencies and employers to provide the men with additional training, practical support to find and apply for jobs, as well as opportunities to develop their interview skills. At the time of the inspection, around a quarter of men were in employment six weeks after being released; this compared well with the employment rates of recently released men from other secure estates in Wales.

Leading and improving

In its annual report for the year ending April 2023, HMI Prisons found that following the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, overall, the pace of recovery across the prison sector in England and Wales had been too slow, and too many prisoners were locked up for excessive periods of time ([His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2023b](#)). During the inspection of HMP Swansea, Estyn inspectors found that leaders and staff members had worked diligently throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to make activity packs, which supported learning and well-being, available to the men during the extended periods in cells. The staff had endeavoured to resume a full-time education, training and work offer for the men as quickly as possible after lockdown restrictions had been lifted.

Leaders at Swansea HMP had a clear vision to meet the needs of prisoners through the curriculum offer and to provide the support and guidance required to help them secure and sustain employment on release and thus reduce their risk of reoffending. They were beginning to use self-evaluation appropriately to inform education staff members' professional learning as well as shape the curriculum offer. However, they did not always precisely identify areas for improvement or prioritise their improvement activities effectively. As reported by HMI Prisons, engagement with purposeful activity remained a concern ([His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, 2023b](#)). We found that leaders were not identifying and addressing the causes of any non-attendance or lack of engagement well enough. In many prisons across England and Wales, staff shortages negatively impacted on prison managers' ability to secure continuity in the full range of provision, and this was no different at Swansea HMP.

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Thematic reviews



Thematic review

The new additional learning needs system: Progress of schools and local authorities in supporting pupils with additional learning needs

2022-2023

This thematic report was written in response to a request for advice from the Minister for Education and the Welsh Language in his remit letter to Estyn for 2022-2023. It is the first of at least two reports. The report provides an overview of how well the maintained primary and secondary schools that participated in the review are implementing key aspects of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET) and the accompanying ALN Code. It also considers how well participating local authorities have supported schools.

The report draws on evidence from discussions with 29 providers including local authorities, primary schools, all-age schools and secondary schools. Of these, 12 were conducted through the medium of Welsh. Six of the schools, including two Welsh-medium schools, host local authority specialist class provision for pupils with ALN. Schools were selected based on their size, type, geographical location, and socio-economic context. We also drew on evidence from discussions between our local authority link inspectors and local authority officers. In addition, we met with the Third Sector Additional Learning Needs Alliance (TSANA). TSANA represents different groups of people with additional learning needs and their families.

Our recommendations:

Schools should:

- R1** Improve the quality of information provided to, for example, parents, and clearly state what the school regards as additional learning provision
- R2** Ensure that ALNCOs have sufficient time and resource to carry out their duties
- R3** Ensure that the professional learning of school staff has a sufficient focus on high quality teaching for pupils with ALN

Local authorities should:

- R4** Ensure that all schools are aware of their duties under the ALNET Act
- R5** Provide clear, accurate and up-to-date information to stakeholders, in particular in relation to:
 - what constitutes additional learning provision in its schools
 - those individual development plans (IDPs) that are to be maintained by the local authority and those to be maintained by schools
- R6** Continue to quality assure and review practice and additional learning provision to ensure funding and professional learning supports roll out effectively for:
 - person centred practices
 - individual development plans
 - Welsh-medium services, resources and provision
- R7** Develop and publish their strategy for post-16 learners with ALN

The Welsh Government should:

- R8** Ensure that all settings have a clear understanding of the legal definitions contained in the ALNET Act and the ALN Code and provide practical examples to aid understanding
- R9** Fully evaluate the impact of additional funding allocated to local authorities
- R10** Ensure that future guidance and funding is provided in a timely fashion to allow both local authorities and schools to plan sufficiently

What our thematic review said:

Without doubt, implementing ALN reform and curriculum reform during a period of un-precedented and significant challenge has been a tough and ambitious undertaking for all concerned. An additional challenge for local authorities and schools has been working to both special education needs (SEN) and ALN legislative frameworks.

Overall, the number of pupils identified as having ALN or SEN has reduced. However, there has been an increase in the number of pupils whose ALP/SEP has been identified in a statutory plan, either through an IDP or a statement of SEN. The sensitive work between school ALNCoS and parents, particularly where pupils are considered not to have ALN where previously they would have had SEN, has generally resulted in parents being reassured that the provision made meets the needs of the pupil.

Participating schools had a generally secure understanding of the provision that they make for pupils and have normally adapted this well to meet the needs of pupils. However, the extent to which the provision is legally classed as additional learning provision (ALP) was unclear. It is likely therefore that schools are not applying the law consistently.

Additional learning needs co-ordinators (ALNCoS) that are members of the school senior leadership team used their positions well to champion ALN across all aspects of the school's work. The development of cluster working has supported school-to-school working. Cluster leads have assisted in the sharing of practices and specialist resources.

Both local authorities and schools were united in their enthusiasm for person-centred practices and planning. As a result, relationships between schools and families have been enhanced. Person-centred practices align well with the overall direction for Curriculum for Wales which aims to be inclusive. The success of both ALN reform and Curriculum for Wales lie in improving the quality of teaching so that mainstream classrooms can better support the appropriate progress of individual pupils, regardless of their ALN. Overall, there has not been enough joined up thinking at either policy or practice level to emphasise the connection between Curriculum for Wales and ALN reform.

There was a lack of clarity and transparency regarding which individual development plans (IDPs) (other than those stated by Welsh Government) will be maintained by local authorities.

Local authorities are gradually improving ALN provision for pupils through the medium of Welsh. However, there is a lack of resources, assessments, staffing and sufficiency of provision.

There has been a year-on-year increase in ALN funding for several years, with an additional £77m of Welsh Government funding post pandemic. Overall approaches to evaluate the impact of funding on pupils with ALN were weak. School leaders stated that they do not have a clear enough understanding of how funding decisions are made by their local authorities.

[Full report](#)

Thematic review

Developing pupils' English reading skills from 10-14 years of age

2022-2023

Improving pupils' reading skills is a ministerial priority and this report was written following a request from the Minister for Education in his 2022-2023 remit letter to Estyn. We visited 23 schools across Wales, including primary, secondary and all-age schools, as well as analysing evidence from 98 core inspections carried out between January 2021 and October 2022.

Our recommendations

School leaders should:

- R1** Provide staff with high-quality professional learning about evidence-based strategies to develop pupils' reading skills across the curriculum
- R2** Monitor and evaluate robustly the impact of reading strategies and interventions
- R3** Plan within their cluster for the progressive development of pupils' reading skills from Year 6 to Year 7, including making appropriate use of feedback and progress reports from personalised assessments

Teachers and classroom-based support staff should:

- R4** Plan meaningful and engaging opportunities for pupils to develop their reading skills progressively
- R5** Use high-quality, suitably challenging texts to develop pupils' reading skills alongside teaching the strategies pupils need to access and engage with these texts

School improvement partners should:

- R6** Work together closely to ensure greater consistency and synergy in professional learning opportunities around reading for school leaders, teachers and teaching assistants

The Welsh Government should:

- R7** Continue to promote and develop the whole-school approach to oracy and reading toolkit

What our thematic review said

Evidence from the schools in our sample suggested that the pandemic had a negative impact on pupils' reading skills, especially those disadvantaged by poverty, but standards of reading are improving again, particularly in schools which have identified specific skills deficits and are focusing their provision on filling these gaps.

Many 10 to 14-year-olds use basic reading skills well and around half are developing advanced reading skills confidently. However, a higher proportion are doing so in the upper primary phase than in the lower secondary phase. In general, primary teachers have a strong focus on developing pupils' reading skills and use appropriate strategies to achieve this. In secondary schools, most teachers focus on developing pupils' subject knowledge, understanding and skills. It is more challenging to plan and co-ordinate the development of pupils' reading skills well across the curriculum in the secondary phase.

Most primary schools and many secondary schools in the sample have identified evidence-based strategies to develop pupils' reading skills, such as pre-teaching unfamiliar vocabulary or questioning pupils carefully to check their understanding. However, only a minority of secondary schools are implementing these strategies consistently across the curriculum.

Where provision is strongest, there is a good balance of teaching approaches to develop pupils' reading skills, including guided reading, shared reading, reciprocal reading and independent reading. Most primary schools provide regular meaningful opportunities for pupils to develop reading skills, but only a minority of secondary schools do so.

In both phases, only a minority of leaders are monitoring and evaluating the impact of reading strategies rigorously enough. Very few school clusters plan effectively for the development of pupils' reading skills from Year 6 into Year 7.

The majority of primary schools and a few secondary schools in the sample are developing a reading culture in which reading for pleasure is a priority alongside learning to read and reading to learn. The support of senior leaders is an essential element in the effectiveness of these initiatives.

The key features of an effective programme to develop pupils' reading skills can be found in appendix 2 of the full report.

The key elements in developing a reading culture can be found in appendix 3 of the full report.

[Full report](#)

Support for Welsh in Initial Teacher Education

2022-2023

During the year we completed our thematic survey on how initial teacher education (ITE) partnerships support student teachers to improve their Welsh language skills, including teaching through the medium of Welsh. This report is particularly relevant when considering the Welsh Government's plans to realise one million Welsh speakers by 2050 and its programme to develop the workforce.

Our report draws on findings from ITE inspections, thematic visits to ITE partnerships and questionnaires for students and newly qualified teachers. Visits to partnerships included discussions with leaders, school visits and interviews with groups of students. In addition, we spoke to representatives from local authorities, school improvement services and other key partners.

Our recommendations

Initial teacher education partnerships should:

- R1** Plan purposeful opportunities to develop students' Welsh language skills and pedagogy in all aspects of ITE programmes to ensure consistent support throughout the programme, including when on school experience.
- R2** Ensure that provision to support the Welsh language focuses on the development of students' personal skills and teaching to develop pupils' Welsh skills. This should include language acquisition pedagogy in Welsh-medium, English-medium and bilingual schools.
- R3** Monitor and evaluate the impact of provision for Welsh language development taking into account how students use their Welsh language skills and language acquisition pedagogy to support pupils' progress in schools.
- R4** Create opportunities for collaboration between ITE partnerships to develop and expand support for teaching through the medium of Welsh.

Leaders in partnership schools should:

- R5** Prioritise and develop a strategy for the development of the Welsh language in response to the expectations set out by partnerships and Welsh Government policies.

The Welsh Government should:

- R6** Ensure clarity of expectation in the professional standards for teaching and leadership to focus on how teachers and leaders develop practice which impacts positively on pupils' Welsh skills.
- R7** Ensure that ITE partnerships collaborate with school improvement partners to develop a more consistent, coherent and specialised provision for the development of the education workforce's Welsh language skills and pedagogy as part of the professional learning continuum.

What our thematic review said

Overall, we found that the support for the development of students' Welsh language skills, including teaching through the medium of Welsh, is variable. Partnerships generally focus on providing specific sessions to improve students' Welsh language skills during the university-based programme. These sessions are viewed positively by many students and provide valuable opportunities for them to practise their personal linguistic skills under the guidance of a Welsh tutor. These taught sessions are often unrelated to the learning in subject or phase specific sessions. In addition, the availability of secondary subject sessions through the medium of Welsh varies.

Only a few partnerships provide opportunities for students to make clear links between what they have learnt about the methodology of Welsh language teaching in taught sessions and classroom practice when on school experience. As a result, although many students make suitable progress in their personal Welsh skills in Welsh skills sessions, they do not always apply their learning about the teaching of Welsh when on school experience.

In many partnerships, there isn't a shared vision or a clear and consistent understanding of the partnership's expectations for Welsh amongst partner schools. Partnerships often do not plan strategically enough the provision for the development of the Welsh language across programmes. This means that provision is fragmented, or that the Welsh language unit is seen as a separate aspect. In general, partnerships do not evaluate the provision for Welsh language development across programmes effectively enough. They do not consider the progress students make in using their Welsh language skills when teaching. In addition, they do not consider the impact of students' teaching on pupils' skills and experiences. As a result, they do not identify strengths and areas for development sharply enough to enable them to make improvements.

The professional learning offered by school improvement partners in local authorities and regional consortia to support education practitioners to develop their Welsh language skills and teach through the medium of Welsh varies across Wales. This means that teachers, particularly in the secondary sector, are not always confident in supporting pupils to acquire and develop their Welsh language skills within the curriculum subjects. In addition, this has an impact on their confidence and ability to effectively mentor ITE students to develop their teaching to support pupils with their Welsh skills.

[Full report](#)

Equity of curriculum experiences for pupils who are educated other than at school (EOTAS)

2022-2023

This report provides an overview of the curriculum experiences for pupils attending EOTAS providers across Wales. It evaluates the equity of the curriculum offer for pupils placed in EOTAS provisions, including their access to a full-time or part-time curriculum offer. It also considers how well local authorities evaluate and improve the quality and impact of provision and reports on transition between EOTAS and schools or post-16 provision. We highlight examples of good practice in local authorities where the quality of the curriculum offer supports the needs of pupils successfully and effectively supports their return to mainstream education, further education, training or employment.

The report draws on evidence from 17 responses we received from surveys sent to all local authorities. In addition, we met with lead officers for EOTAS from 19 local authorities. As a result, we gathered information from all but one local authority in Wales. We also met with representatives from school improvement services and visited eight PRUs. During these visits, we met with the lead of the PRU and leaders for the curriculum. In total, we engaged with over 40 pupils across the eight PRUs. Evidence from nine PRU inspections since January 2019 is also included.

Our recommendations

PRUs and mainstream schools should:

- R1** Share practice with each other and work with local authorities, pupils, and parents to strengthen opportunities for pupils to return to mainstream education
- R2** Monitor pupils' attendance closely to ensure they access their full provision and, in particular, to safeguard pupils where they access education part-time in a different provider

Local authorities and their school improvement services should:

- R3** Support more pupils to return to mainstream school where appropriate through:
 - strengthening short term intensive support in EOTAS provision
 - ensuring placement decisions are taken promptly and identify an agreed duration, clear roles and responsibilities and a review date

-
- R4** Secure curriculum provision in PRUs which meets the needs of all pupils working with the management committee and teacher in charge
 - R5** Secure curriculum provision in EOTAS providers other than PRUs
 - R6** Strengthen the quality assurance and monitoring processes to ensure effective delivery of the curriculum offer in all EOTAS providers
 - R7** Robustly challenge and monitor the attendance of pupils across EOTAS providers including the appropriate use of part-time timetables and pastoral support programmes

The Welsh Government should:

- R8** Update and ensure delivery of the EOTAS Framework for Action including all relevant accompanying EOTAS guidance to reflect the recommendations of this report

What our thematic review said

Sometimes, local authorities need to arrange for pupils to access education otherwise than at school (EOTAS). This may be because a pupil is ill, has been or is at risk of being excluded or struggles to access school due to their social and emotional or well-being needs.

Since the pandemic, local authorities report an increase in the referral rates for EOTAS provision. This is particularly evident for local authority arranged tuition services. There has also been an increase in referrals for younger primary-aged pupils. More pupils being referred have significant social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, rather than behavioural needs, which has historically been the case.

Generally, pupil referral units (PRUs) are making appropriate progress towards delivery of Curriculum for Wales, in many cases supported suitably by school improvement services. The breadth and balance of the curriculum offer across PRUs is appropriate and improving. This is particularly evident for older secondary-aged pupils with increasingly diverse qualification pathways that support pupils to access further education, training or employment. Nearly all PRUs have strengthened their whole provision approaches to emotional health and well-being in response to their pupils' needs. Leaders of PRUs have invested in professional learning to improve staff's understanding of specific approaches to support their pupils' emotional health and well-being. In most cases, these approaches underpin the curriculum offer strongly.

Whilst all local authorities expect EOTAS pupils to access a full-time curriculum offer where appropriate, too many pupils only have access to part-time education. Across Wales, the use and quality of pastoral support programmes (PSPs) to support part-time arrangements are inconsistent. Local authorities do not monitor these arrangements robustly enough and this impacts on children's and young people's right to full-time education.

Overwhelmingly, pupils prefer attending their PRU to mainstream school. Very few pupils interviewed missed or wanted to return to their mainstream school. They feel listened to and involved in decisions about the curriculum, particularly for older secondary-aged pupils. They articulate their concerns for return to mainstream education well and talk knowledgeably about what they perceive to be the barriers. They strongly believe their well-being is a priority in PRUs and as a result they feel supported, listened to and able to access learning through specialist support. This is often in contrast to what they experienced in their mainstream school. As a result, most pupils' behaviour improves during their time at their PRU.

There have been improvements in the use of decision-making panels across nearly all local authorities to determine the EOTAS provision required for individual pupils. These improvements include a wider range of panel members with appropriate expertise and an improved quality of information submitted by mainstream schools to inform the decision-making process more accurately.

Local authority processes for agreeing the length of EOTAS placements and review of placements arrangements remain inconsistent. Where practice is most effective, placement length and quality assurance arrangements, including review dates for pupil placements, are agreed as part of the initial local authority panel meeting. This provides clear expectations, roles and responsibilities for the EOTAS provider, mainstream school and local authority monitoring officers.

Too many primary and younger-aged secondary pupils remain long-term in EOTAS providers. As a result, only a very few of these pupils return successfully to mainstream school. Older secondary pupils remain in EOTAS providers with a focus on gaining qualifications, which equip them with the necessary skills for their next destinations. Overall, the local authority reported numbers of pupils leaving EOTAS providers who do not access further education, training or employment are low.

The main barriers to the successful reintegration of pupils to mainstream schools include the increasing levels and complexity of pupil needs, particularly for social emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, social emotional, behavioural difficulties (SEBD) as well as other underlying additional learning needs (ALN). Consequently, these levels of need can impact the duration of placement for pupils. In many local authorities, PRUs are operating more in line with special schools with pupil placements being long-term at the PRU.

A minority of local authorities' processes to quality assure and support improvement in EOTAS providers are underdeveloped. Quality assurance of the curriculum offer in pupil referral units (PRUs) is more robust than in external EOTAS providers commissioned by local authorities.

[Full report](#)

Thematic review

Peer-on-peer sexual harassment among 16-18-year-old learners in further education 2022-2023

In June 2023, we published our thematic on peer-on-peer sexual harassment among 16 to 18-year-old learners in further education colleges across Wales. Our report draws on findings from in person visits to all 12 further education colleges in Wales. We held workshops with learners, spoke to leaders, teachers and support staff in colleges and looked at a wide range of documents relating to existing processes involving potential incidents of sexual harassment.

Our recommendations

Further education colleges should:

- R1** Ensure that all learners benefit from opportunities to take part in learning activities and discussions about forming and maintaining healthy relationships
- R2** Develop strategies to prevent and tackle misogynistic attitudes and cultures developing among groups of learners
- R3** Ensure that all relevant staff members undertake professional learning that enables them to confidently recognise and respond to sexual harassment as well as help learners develop their understanding of healthy relationships
- R4** Ensure that all learners feel safe and comfortable in all areas of college buildings, grounds, virtual spaces, and transport
- R5** Record, categorise and analyse instances of sexual harassment, assault and abuse in a consistent way that enables leaders to identify trends and take appropriate measures in response

The Welsh Government should:

- R6** Make clear which aspects of Welsh Government education guidance relating to sexual harassment apply to further education colleges and clarify any differences between requirements in schools and further education colleges
- R7** Provide appropriate guidance to colleges to help them adopt a co-ordinated and consistent approach to recording and categorising instances of sexual harassment

What our thematic review said

We found that the issue of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among 16 to 18-year-old college learners is complex and widely underreported, with many learners choosing not to, or being unsure how to, report incidents of sexual harassment for a variety of reasons. Colleges have well-established learner disciplinary policies and processes and most deal effectively with the most serious reported cases of alleged peer-on-peer sexual harassment.

College systems for accurate recording and analysis of sexual harassment among learners are underdeveloped. Too often, incidents of sexual harassment are recorded and categorised within generic classifications of bullying. Many staff told us that they lack confidence and feel that there is a need for more professional development and updates in relation to sexual harassment.

Where colleges have held specific training sessions on addressing sexual harassment, these have helped staff to recognise incidents and address them appropriately. Overall, there is also a lack of further education specific resources to support college staff in dealing with the issue of peer-on-peer sexual harassment. Collaborative work to address these concerns has begun recently but it is too early to evaluate its effectiveness or impact.

Our discussions with learners and staff suggest that learners identifying as female, LGBTQ+ and learners with additional learning needs may be more likely to experience sexual harassment. Sexual harassment incidents involve a mix of face-to-face and online issues.

[Full report](#)

Delivery of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeship programmes

2022-2023

This report focuses on the delivery of Essential Skills Wales (ESW) qualifications in work-based learning apprenticeships. During May and June 2023, inspectors visited nine of the ten lead providers offering Welsh Government-funded apprenticeship programmes. We held meetings and spoke with learners, managers, delivery staff and employers. We observed group teaching sessions and one-to-one reviews. We carried out an anonymous online survey for learners, delivery staff and employers investigating respondents' attitudes to ESW qualifications and the development of literacy, numeracy and digital skills on apprenticeship programmes.

Our recommendations

The Welsh Government should:

- R1** Work with Qualifications Wales and the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research to review the use of Essential Skills Wales qualifications in apprenticeships
- R2** Refresh the Wales Essential Skills Toolkit (WEST) and resources
- R3** Working with partners, develop opportunities for professional learning to enhance practitioners' understanding of the pedagogy and capacity to deliver essential skills

Work-based learning apprenticeship providers should:

- R4** Develop partnership working approaches to ensure that:
 - learners have meaningful opportunities to study and take assessments bilingually or through the medium Welsh
 - learners' additional learning needs are promptly identified, evaluated and appropriately supported
- R5** Ensure that learners who have already attained the required ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy continue to develop their literacy, numeracy and digital skills
- R6** Offer professional learning that develops tutors' and assessors' pedagogy to deliver essential skills

Lead providers should:

- R7** Ensure that self-evaluation reflects on the effectiveness of the delivery models in use across the provider's partners and sub-contractors and takes action to reduce the potential disadvantages identified in this report

What our thematic review said

Providers have developed a range of delivery models that are effective in enabling learners to complete their ESW qualifications. We categorise the models providers are using into six broad categories and outline their advantages and disadvantages.

We identify the characteristic features of effective programmes, including:

- the role of initial assessment, communication and co-ordination within a provider
- learners have a meaningful programme of study – whatever the delivery model used by the provider – which allows them to develop and practice their essential skills and prepare for the external assessments
- flexible provision that adapts to learners' needs
- professional learning for delivery staff
- the support of an apprentice's employer

Although providers are effective in enabling learners to achieve their ESW qualifications, we found that the teaching and learning of literacy, numeracy and digital skills in apprenticeships are unhelpfully skewed towards preparation for external assessment. Three main factors contribute to this: the time that apprentices have to complete their ESW qualifications over the relatively short period of their apprenticeship, the significant learning challenge often faced by learners to develop the skills needed for their ESW assessments, and an assessment model for ESW qualifications, which is largely generic and requires learners to apply skills in contexts often unrelated to their vocational background.

There was a consistent message from learners, providers and employers that having good literacy, numeracy and digital skills is important for life and work. However, learners strongly prefer and value learning these skills through the context of their work and vocational study. This presents a dilemma for providers: how best to develop learners' literacy, numeracy and digital skills, drawing on learners' clear preference for learning through their vocational context, while at the same time preparing them for external assessment, which requires learners to apply skills in contexts often unrelated to their vocational background.

There were three areas, related to the narrow focus on assessment, where the quality of learning was a concern. The first is learners' ability to retain the skills that they have developed, summarised by one learner as, 'I learn it for the test and then instantly forget it.' The second is that learning is largely focused on preparing for external assessment tasks, reducing the skills being learnt to 'things needed to get through the test', rather than 'useful skills that will help me in my work or wider life'. The third is the extent to which learners are able to apply the skills they have learnt to help them in their job roles or wider lives.

Given the limitations to learning outlined above, in the sessions we observed, most learners had a sound understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in literacy, numeracy and digital skills and many were clear about their progress and what they needed to do to improve. The majority made steady progress in developing the skills that were being addressed in that session. Most learners in our visits and online questionnaire reported receiving helpful support and feedback from their tutors or assessors, which helped them understand what they needed to do to improve and actions they needed to complete to do so.

Providers reported that failure to attain the ESW qualifications is not now a significant cause of learners not completing their overall framework. However, learners with additional learning needs or other barriers to learning such as not being a Welsh or English first language speaker may struggle to attain their ESW qualifications, and this is a barrier to them achieving overall framework success.

Very few apprentices carry out assessments for ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh. Overall, providers are not working in partnership well enough to support learners who wish to study their ESW qualifications bilingually or in Welsh.

While providers are effective in enabling learners to attain the ESW qualifications they need for their framework, learners who have already attained the required ESW qualifications or are exempted by proxy do not continue to develop their literacy, numeracy or digital skills consistently.

[Full report](#)

School Governors – Acting as critical friends and the impact of governor training

2022-2023

This report was written following a request from the Minister for Education in his 2022 remit letter to Estyn. We interviewed headteachers and governors in 41 nursery, primary, secondary, all-age and special schools. We also sent an online survey to governing bodies in 250 schools and received 363 responses. We consulted with a range of stakeholders, including school improvement services and local authority officers and representatives from other organisations who work with and support governing bodies in Wales.

Our recommendations

Governing bodies and schools should:

- R1** Improve governors' ability to challenge senior leaders about all aspects of the school's work
- R2** Ensure that governors have regular and worthwhile opportunities to observe first-hand the progress that their school is making towards meeting its priorities
- R3** Undertake regular self-evaluation of the work of the governing body to identify strengths and areas to improve
- R4** Evaluate the impact of governor training on their role as effective strategic leaders and identify future training requirements

Local authorities and school improvement services should:

- R5** Evaluate the quality of their governor training more rigorously to make improvements where needed
- R6** Collaborate to ensure greater coherence and consistency in high-quality training opportunities between different parts of the country
- R7** Provide more effective support and advice to governing bodies to help them in their role as effective strategic leaders

Welsh Government should:

- R8** Update the guidance for local authorities on what to include in training for school governors on understanding the role of data in supporting self-evaluation and improvement in schools in line with national changes to assessment practices
- R9** Produce information on the important role of parent governors to help encourage parents, particularly those from different ethnic minority backgrounds, to apply to become a parent governor
- R10** Create a competency framework to assist governing bodies improve their effectiveness

What our thematic review said

From the evidence that we gathered, we found that most governors are enthusiastic and passionate about their responsibilities. They are highly committed to the role that they play in their school. Many governors talk knowledgeably about the communities that their schools serve, and they often understand the needs of those communities. However, the majority of governing bodies do not reflect the diverse make up of their local community well enough.

Getting the right balance of challenge and support for senior leaders is an important aspect of a governing body's role. This is often called being an effective critical friend. In most schools, governors work productively with the senior leaders and are supportive of their work. However, we found that, in a majority of schools, governors do not hold leaders to account for educational performance well enough. In addition, they do not have a wide enough understanding of their role in ensuring high expectations in all aspects of the school's work. This is because they do not challenge senior leaders sufficiently well.

In many schools, governors have an overview of their school's priorities for improvement and have a broad understanding of how they have been identified through self-evaluation. Governors keep up to date with the progress that the school is making towards meeting their priorities through regular information that leaders provide for them. In most schools, following the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, governors have resumed their visits. However, in too many cases, governors do not use their school visits purposefully to gather first-hand evidence to inform their evaluations of the work of the school.

Although whole-school self-evaluation is usually embedded in schools, only a minority of governing bodies have recently undertaken any self-evaluation of their own work. The majority of governing bodies recognise that this is an area that needs to improve. In addition, only a minority of governing bodies undertake a regular audit of their members' skills so that they have a current picture of their range of skills and experiences.

High quality training is important to ensure that governors are aware of the latest developments in education. Most governors receive training from school staff and from external providers, usually local authorities and school improvement services. There are mandatory training courses that governors have to attend as well as optional sessions. The availability and quality of training vary greatly between different parts of Wales. Some local authorities and school improvement services offer governors a rich variety of beneficial training sessions each term, whereas in other parts of the country there are far fewer sessions available. Importantly, the mandatory data training that all governors must attend is outdated and does not help governors understand current assessment practice. Only a minority of governors evaluate the training that they receive and its impact on improving their role as effective governors.

In most schools, governors feel that they have had sufficient information to ensure that they have a sound understanding of important educational matters such as Curriculum for Wales and the changes needed to address the Additional Learning Needs Education Tribunal Act (ALNET).

Governors have important statutory obligations. In most schools, governors understand their role in safeguarding pupils. However, they do not have sufficient understanding of all their obligations, for example with regard to healthy eating and drinking.

[Full report](#)