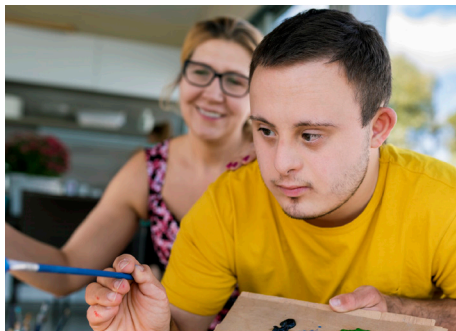

Summary of findings from our national thematic reviews

2020/2021

This report is also available in Welsh.



The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales. Estyn is responsible for inspecting:

- ▲ nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
- ▲ primary schools
- ▲ secondary schools
- ▲ special schools
- ▲ pupil referral units
- ▲ all-age schools
- ▲ independent schools
- ▲ further education
- ▲ independent specialist colleges
- ▲ adult community learning
- ▲ local authority education services for children and young people
- ▲ teacher education and training
- ▲ Welsh for adults
- ▲ work-based learning
- ▲ learning in the justice sector

Estyn also:

- ▲ reports to Senedd Cymru and provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the Welsh Government and others
- ▲ makes public good practice based on inspection evidence

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

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Foreword

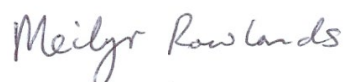
I hope that you will find this compendium, and the reports on which it is based, informative and relevant. Estyn's thematic reports published in 2020 and in the spring term of 2021 cover a range of important aspects of education and training in Wales. They report on standards and provision across a range of education and training sectors and themes, and refer to evidence gathered through our thematic reviews before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. These reports include a focus on learner resilience and celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion. Our reports present key findings and recommendations on youth work training and post-16 partnerships between schools and with colleges. We have reported on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and training in schools and other providers, focusing on what providers have been doing to support learners. Our reports on independent schools and specialist colleges, and the local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs provide insights into the work of these providers in responding to the pandemic. In the post-16 sectors, we have focused on the work of further education, work based learning and adult learning in the community providers in reports on developments in remote and blended learning practice and support for learner mental health and wellbeing.

Estyn's thematic reports address matters that are of central concern to policy-makers. The annual remit letter to HMCI from the Minister for Education takes into account the key priorities of the Welsh Government and includes a request for a report on how secondary, all-age and special schools are preparing for the Curriculum for Wales, a report on community schools, two reports on language acquisition, and two subject reports on A level Welsh language and Business and social studies subjects.

Our reports are intended to encourage wider thinking and to contribute to current debates in policy areas, as well as sharing cameos and case studies of interesting practice across all sectors. The forthcoming programme of thematic reports during 2021 and 2022 promises to be equally relevant, with reviews underway on a wide range of areas such as Welsh history and culture, the establishment of all-age schools, professional learning support for Curriculum for Wales by regional consortia and local authorities, assessment, Welsh immersion approaches, 16-18 curriculum, impartial advice and guidance provided by Careers Wales, and rapid reviews of post-16 professional qualifications and the use of RRRS and catch up grants for post-16 learners in schools and colleges.

We hope that these thematic reports are being used widely by providers to improve their practice and enhance outcomes for learners in Wales. This compendium of all the thematic reports published in 2020 and early 2021 brings together the main findings and recommendations from each report for easy reference. The full reports, including case studies, are available on our website:

<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-reports>.



Meilyr Rowlands

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

A Level Welsh First Language

Main findings

- 1 In key stage 5, in nearly all of the schools that were visited as part of this review, A Level Welsh learners' pride in cherishing the fact that they are Welsh is an exceptional feature. These learners, who have chosen to study Welsh as an A Level subject, see Welsh as more than a subject. Often, they play a leading part in the life of their school and their community. They also value the relevant transferable skills that they gain from studying the subject in preparing them for the world of work.
- 2 Many A Level Welsh learners make strong progress in their skills, knowledge and understanding of the subject. They speak confidently and fluently, and their language, on the whole, is accurate and natural. A few learners make limited progress in the subject, based on a lack of mastery of the content and style of the set texts, in addition to shortcomings in written expression. They discuss more superficially and generally, and express their ideas less confidently in less polished language.
- 3 Many learners have the necessary confidence and a sound grasp of the Welsh language to use it in formal and informal situations. However, a few learners are not given adequate opportunities to develop their oral skills in informal contexts outside school. Overall, this is because of the areas' socio-linguistic context, or learners' lack of interest and desire to attend Welsh-medium activities in the community as they are not relevant or do not appeal to them.
- 4 Over the last ten years, the percentage of candidates who gain A*/A grades in the subject has remained fairly consistent. The percentage that gain A*-C grades has also remained fairly consistent. Although the number of pupils that study A Level Welsh has fallen over the last ten years, the percentage decrease is similar to the decrease in other subjects. In 2018/2019, the percentage of Year 13 pupils that study A Level Welsh First Language is similar to the percentage in 2008/2009.
- 5 Learners choose to continue to study Welsh as an A Level subject for a number of reasons, including that they enjoyed the GCSE course, the influence of the department's teachers, their confidence in the subject due to the home background, and the influence of parents and family members who have studied the subject. The main reasons for key stage 4 learners not studying the A Level course are career aspirations and a lack of enjoyment of the GCSE Literature course, in particular the literature texts.
- 6 Most key stage 4 and key stage 5 learners' attitudes towards the Welsh language in Welsh-medium schools and naturally bilingual schools are positive, on the whole. However, the desire and confidence of a minority of learners in using the Welsh language socially, and in a range of situations outside their lessons at school, tends to fade during their secondary education.
- 7 Most learners are aware of the valuable skills that are gained from being bilingual

learners, in terms of employability and appeal to employers. However, many learners in bilingual school choose to study their courses through the medium of English in key stage 5.

- 8 In most of the schools that were visited as part of this review, the quality of provision for teaching A Level Welsh First Language is at least good, and excellent in a minority. In the schools in which teaching is most successful, teachers have exceptional subject knowledge and succeed in delivering the course in a creative and original way that sparks learners' imaginations. These teachers set high expectations for their learners, and plan lessons that structure the methods of introducing the texts and subject skills skilfully.
- 9 In a few schools, there is not enough focus on challenging learners to attain the highest grades. In these cases, teaching does not develop learners' independence sufficiently to deal with synoptic texts or deepen their understanding of the most complex concepts in those texts. Overall, in these schools, not enough attention is given to recommendations from professional learning experiences to refine and develop pedagogy in order to raise standards. As a result, more able learners are not stretched as they should be.
- 10 Most Welsh language teachers in the secondary schools that were visited provide rich and highly valuable experiences for A Level learners, in order to ignite and nurture their pride in the Welsh language and Welsh culture. In a majority of departments, a consistent effort is made to organise stimulating activities to deepen learners' understanding and nurture their pleasure in the set texts.
- 11 Most headteachers in the secondary schools and colleges that were visited have a clear vision for the Welsh language. This vision is based on providing rich provision and effective learning experiences, so that all pupils make the best possible progress in developing their Welsh language skills. The best leaders have clear strategic plans that change annually based on a detailed evaluation, in order to promote the Welsh language and Welshness within their contexts. However, in the last ten years, these factors have not succeeded in increasing the proportion of learners who choose to study A Level Welsh.
- 12 Most leaders of Welsh departments have a robust vision to increase the numbers that study the subject at A Level, based on their passion and enthusiasm towards the subject. Many subject leaders provide opportunities for students to learn informally and formally about the A Level course, by organising valuable enrichment activities to deepen and broaden students' experiences of the subject. However, they face frequent challenges in promoting the subject as an A Level option as a result of national marketing campaigns that promote other subjects, such as STEM subjects.
- 13 Many middle leaders organise annual marketing events in order to promote the subjects as an A Level study course. These include guest speakers, presentations by Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, addresses from former pupils, and colourful and attractive option evening pamphlets. However, there are no standardised national resources to promote the subject and the employability skills that are gained from studying it.

- 14 The methods for monitoring the targets that are set in Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPs) to improve Welsh-medium education in their area vary greatly across local authorities. Most school leaders are not aware of Outcome 5 'More pupils and students with higher level skills in Welsh'.
- 15 Leaders in a minority of bilingual schools face increasing challenges in strengthening the medium of teaching Welsh in key stage 4 and 5. In order to overcome these challenges, there are successful examples of leaders adapting and tailoring their provision in order to empower and strengthen Welsh-medium linguistic progression. There are also quantitative targets in these schools' strategic plans to increase the number of learners that study their subjects through the medium of Welsh in key stage 4 and 5.

Recommendations

Schools and further education colleges should:

- R1 Plan strategically and market A Level Welsh First Language in order to increase the number of learners that choose the subject
- R2 Develop effective methods of introducing the set and synoptic texts to learners in contemporary and original ways
- R3 Plan purposefully to increase the desire, resilience and confidence of secondary school learners to use the Welsh language, and work with external partners to promote this

Local authorities and regional consortia should:

- R4 Provide networks in order to offer professional learning opportunities and share best practice in terms of teaching A Level Welsh First Language
- R5 Track by school the proportions of learners in key stage 4 and 5 that pursue courses through the medium of Welsh, and set targets to increase this in line with the objectives of the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan

Welsh Government should:

- R6 Provide a national marketing resource to promote A Level Welsh First Language and the subject's employability skills
- R7 Work with Qualifications Wales to ensure that the new Welsh GCSE qualifications to support the proposed curriculum offer texts that are more contemporary and more relevant to learners

Learner resilience

Main findings

- 1 Resilience is the capacity to cope, learn and thrive in the face of change, challenge or adversity (Cahill *et al.*, 2014). It is closely related to wellbeing and mental health, and we cannot easily develop resilience when we are unhappy or emotionally unwell. It also requires a degree of self-esteem and confidence, of emotional understanding, and the ability to establish trusting relationships and benefit from support.
- 2 Schools that are good at building the resilience of their learners are those that promote the emotional wellbeing and support the mental health of all their learners. As well as having a whole-school approach to wellbeing¹, these schools also provide specific interventions for learners who are particularly in need of support. In many instances, new whole-school approaches are adopted following the successful implementation of a particular strategy on a smaller scale.
- 3 Inspection outcomes for providers inspected under the new common inspection framework (2017-2019) suggest that there is strong practice in schools in supporting pupils' wellbeing. The standard of care, support and guidance for pupils is good or better in most primary schools and a majority of secondary schools.
- 4 Schools that are successful in building pupils' resilience have leaders that have developed a strong vision, supported by core values around promoting the wellbeing of all pupils. The vision is shared by all of the schools' stakeholders. They provide interventions for those pupils that need them the most as well as implementing successful strategies for whole-class situations when appropriate. These schools also place a strong emphasis on the wellbeing of their staff.
- 5 School leaders rarely talk of building resilience as a main aim or objective. Resilience is often strengthened as a consequence of implementing strategies to target pupils' other needs. Schools recognise that there is no easy way to building resilience in pupils. They understand that it is a process that takes considerable investment in time, energy and resources.
- 6 A common feature of nearly all schools that are successful in building resilience in pupils is that there are very few, if any, fixed term exclusions over a long period. They have a strong inclusive ethos. They strive to understand and get to the root cause of particular challenges facing pupils and are willing to try different approaches to address the issues.
- 7 Good schools share information between the relevant professionals and adults involved with particular pupils effectively and in a timely manner. They know that the

¹ Estyn (2019) [Healthy and happy-school impact on pupils' health and wellbeing](#). Cardiff: Estyn; Estyn (2020) [Knowing your children – supporting pupils with adverse childhood experiences \(ACES\)](#). Cardiff: Estyn; Estyn (2020) [Effective school support for disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils – case studies of good practice](#). Cardiff: Estyn.

earlier they can identify and support pupils who are struggling with their self-esteem and resilience, the more effective the intervention will be. They have processes for ensuring that all the relevant adults within the school are made aware of any concerns quickly and accurately.

- 8 The most successful schools understand that building resilience is a continual process that begins with developing good relationships between adults and pupils and between pupils themselves. They understand that pupils' emotional wellbeing is the responsibility of all staff and that every interaction and engagement with pupils has an impact on their sense of worth. Staff know that all their words, actions and attitudes affect pupils' wellbeing. Where pupils feel a sense of belonging and connection, they are more likely to be feel secure, safe and emotionally resilient.
- 9 It is important that pupils have regular opportunities to express their emotions and share their feelings at school. Good schools have clear approaches for listening to and addressing pupils' concerns in a timely manner. They are alert to how pupils are feeling during the day, and work with pupils to identify particular staff members to whom they can to turn if needed.
- 10 Working closely with the home by providing enrichment activities and additional information can help to consolidate the school's work in helping to build the resilience of vulnerable pupils. Effective schools often work closely to support families of vulnerable pupils. Where the culture of the school is open and engaging, the families themselves may approach the school for support.
- 11 Good schools use the expertise of relevant external agencies to supplement their work. External agencies can bring skills and expert knowledge that are not always available within schools and, when the relationship between all parties is strong, they work together in the pupils' best interest, strengthening their resilience and improving their lives.
- 12 Nurturing approaches can be very successful in helping to build resilience in pupils who are struggling to cope with their current circumstances. Trained staff can help pupils develop their personal and social skills and lay the foundations for building positive relationships with adults and peers. They equip pupils with the tools to help them become more resilient in the face of different challenges.
- 13 Transitions, such as moving school, are periods where children can suffer emotional distress, or a decline in progress and commitment to learning, all of which can also undermine resilience. All schools aim to ease the transition process for pupils, particularly at key transition points. Good schools also have clear strategies for supporting pupils moving mid-term, especially when receiving pupils who may have struggled at their previous settings. They get to know the new pupils quickly, ensuring that support is available from the outset.

Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life

Main findings

- 1 Leaders of successful community schools communicate a strong vision and sense of purpose, unpinned by a deep understanding of and regard for the communities served by the school. These leaders have strong values, based on a belief in inclusivity and the need to address inequity, and a determination to overcome challenges. The leadership in these schools is bold and tenacious, working in close partnership with families and communities to improve the life chances of children and young people. Leaders understand the specific social and economic challenges faced by their community, and the impact these have on their pupils and their families.
- 2 School improvement in effective community schools places family and community engagement at the heart of the planning processes. Parental and community engagement is recognised as one of the most important school improvement strategies, and is seen as integral to improving the wellbeing and achievement of pupils. There is a clear focus on engagement with families and with the community, on partnership working, and on the use of school facilities for the benefit of the wider community.
- 3 Successful community schools regularly evaluate the impact of their strategies to engage with families and the community. They keep abreast of changes in the community, such as trends in anti-social behaviour, and revise their approaches so they can mitigate the impact of these changes on their pupils.
- 4 Effective community schools provide targeted professional learning for all staff and governors. They recognise that the school's community approaches are the responsibility of all staff and partners, and understand their staff's and partners' development needs. These schools involve partners and the staff from other agencies in their professional learning, recognising that, in order to be a successful community school, all these professionals need to share common values, understanding and commitment to fulfil their joint vision.
- 5 Leaders and staff in community schools that have strong parental engagement build the skills, confidence and self-esteem of their parents. Well-designed family learning programmes help parents improve their ability to support their children. These programmes are often targeted to support parents to move onto employment or further learning.
- 6 Parent involvement is a key feature of effective community schools. These schools provide a range of support and advice and engage parents as partners in education. Parents are made to feel that, whatever their circumstances, they can turn to the school for support. Successful community schools treat all parents, irrespective of the challenges they face, with dignity and respect. In response, parents are proud of their school and want to work with staff to secure the best life chances for their

children and for others in the community. Parents see the school as a place where they can access advice and support to help them resolve issues relating to their children or to wider concerns around housing, money, skills or family wellbeing.

- 7 Staff with specific responsibility for family and community engagement are key to the success of a community school. Leaders of effective community schools recognise the importance of appointing an individual or team to lead family and community engagement. These staff possess particular skills, aptitudes, knowledge and commitment, which ensure that they carry out their role with drive and sensitivity.
- 8 Effective community schools value their partnerships with a range of agencies including statutory and third-sector organisations. They know that without these partnerships they will not be able to provide integrated care, support or a wide range of experiences for pupils, families and the wider community. The relationship between these schools and their partners is characterised by mutual respect. School leaders and staff working in effective community schools understand the contribution that local and national organisations can make to their school and community.
- 9 Schools that establish strong relationships with families make it easy and safe for parents to access the school building. They create a specific area in the school for parents and families to use, sometimes without the need for an invitation or appointment. These spaces are accessible, but in a location away from areas occupied by pupils, and are used in a variety of ways. For example, parents may use a family room to meet informally, engage in family learning, meet privately with family engagement staff, or attend parent group meetings.
- 10 Effective community schools make thoughtful use of school assets to improve the lives of children and families in the local community. They work in partnership with local groups and organisations in enterprising and creative ways. They seek to address gaps in local sport, cultural or care provision, including during the school holidays. Although the use of school facilities and resources by community groups brings income to the school, this is not its main purpose. In the best examples of asset use, leaders open up the school because they believe in the role of the school as a force that can help improve the community.
- 11 Schools with co-located services such as health, welfare and adult learning are committed to working with these partners to improve the lives of children and their families. These schools develop a tailored approach to co-locating services that meets the needs of the school, families and community. For instance, not all schools with co-located services have purpose-built facilities to house the services. In these cases, schools provide 'hot-desk' space for partners or access to parts of the school building on a regular basis.
- 12 The co-location of services enables community schools and their partners to share information and work collaboratively to address common challenges. This enables schools to provide swift support for vulnerable families and prevent the escalation of their difficulties. This is particularly evident when schools work closely with co-located Flying Start provision or other local authority services. Families who receive this support value the difference it makes to their quality of life.

- 13 Despite the evidence for the potential of community schools in the research literature and in government policy, the vision for community schools in Wales has not been realised in a comprehensive or sustained way. Over time, the concept of community schools has been interpreted in a variety of ways and this has left a legacy of different forms of provision. This provision was described in a report by the Public Policy Institute for Wales (2016, p.14) as 'largely un-coordinated at a local or national level'. Most developments are at school level, usually driven by individual leaders who have a strong moral purpose and an understanding of the value of working with families and communities.

Recommendations

To realise the vision for effective community schools in Wales in a strategic and sustainable way:

Schools should:

- R1 Build strong partnerships with families as an integral part of improving the wellbeing and achievement of all pupils
- R2 Refer clearly in strategic plans to how they will work with families, the community and partners to improve the wellbeing and achievement of all pupils
- R3 Employ family and community engagement staff to work with families, the community and wider partners
- R4 Work with the local authority and with statutory and third-sector partners to provide services that address the needs of families and the community, including co-locating services and utilising school assets
- R5 Evaluate the impact of community school strategies

Local authorities should:

- R6 Include in strategic planning actions on how they will develop authority-wide initiatives to support schools to be effective community schools
- R7 Strengthen cross-directorate working to plan ways of locating a range of services in schools
- R8 Ensure that 21st Century Schools planning considers the need for spaces / base rooms for family and community access
- R9 Support schools to appoint family and community engagement staff, including developing a role description for these staff
- R10 Provide professional learning opportunities for support school staff, governing bodies and strategic partners to develop community schools

The Welsh Government should:

- R11 Develop a set of agreed, defining characteristics for community schools, and consider how schools are classified as 'community schools' and how this term is used to identify specific schools

- R12 Promote the benefits of community schools, particularly in areas of disadvantage, with schools, local authorities and regional consortia
- R13 Strengthen the expectation for including actions on family and community engagement in school strategic plans
- R14 Refresh national guidance on community schools, using the Family and Community Engagement Toolkit (FaCE), and provide guidance on how schools can evaluate and improve their community school strategies
- R15 Ensure that 21st Century Schools and Colleges Programme planning, guidance and building standards take into consideration the need for spaces for family and community access

Insights into how independent schools and specialist colleges have responded during the COVID–19 pandemic

Main findings

Wellbeing

- 1 Nearly all schools and colleges have maintained regular contact with their learners. In special schools that educate day pupils, most schools have put in place a wide range of measures to support the wellbeing of their pupils. These schools keep in touch regularly with pupils and their families, either through regular phone calls, social media and online platforms or visits to the family home.
- 2 Nearly all mainstream schools maintain regular contact with their pupils. Leaders talk of 'ensuring all pupils are visible' in these unique circumstances.
- 3 Nearly all schools and colleges have made significant adaptations to their working practices on site to prioritise learners' safety and wellbeing.
- 4 Pupils and staff have received advice and guidance particularly to reinforce online safety. Leaders share established clear protocols with both staff and pupils.
- 5 In nearly all schools and colleges, there is an increasing consideration of the impact of the current systems and teaching practices on staff and learner wellbeing.

Communication

- 6 Nearly all schools and colleges have implemented arrangements for keeping in touch with learners and their families or carers on a regular basis.
- 7 Nearly all schools understand the need for clear communication with staff. This is through either email or online meetings. The frequency of meetings and the number of documents produced have varied between providers and over time.
- 8 Many mainstream schools have maintained a community spirit through whole school and house assemblies, fun challenges for pupils and the continuation of 'weekly awards'.
- 9 A few schools that are either part of a larger organisation or who have personal contacts have gained valuable advice and guidance from school leaders around the world. These overseas schools who were already addressing issues relating to educating pupils during the pandemic offered valuable advice.

On-site and distance learning

- 10 Nearly all schools and colleges have made arrangements to ensure the continuity of learning since the general closure of schools in Wales.

- 11 Mainstream schools have adopted a variety of approaches depending upon the size and age profile of the school. Leaders express the view that they need to be flexible to meet the needs of both staff and pupils.
- 12 Both mainstream and special schools which educate day pupils, or a mix of day and residential pupils, have responded flexibly to implement strategies that meet the different circumstances of these groups of learners. While this may include the delivery of lessons or the sharing of resources via online platforms, this is not always practical because of the challenges these pupils face to their learning or their family circumstances. In these cases, schools facilitate distance learning for these pupils by delivering hard copies of work or activity packs to the family home that either replace or supplement planned online activities.
- 13 A minority of mainstream schools remained open to provide education for the children of key workers who were on roll at the school. This decision was based upon demand for this service in each setting.

Transition

- 14 Many providers of special education are facing challenges in facilitating transition processes for learners joining the school or college, as well as for those preparing to leave.
- 15 Where schools are attached to residential homes, induction procedures into the school have occurred as usual, after the learner has first settled into the home.
- 16 In mainstream schools, leaders are aware that Year 6 pupils in particular will not have experienced the usual transition arrangements.

Professional learning

- 17 Many leaders report that all staff have improved considerably their ability to use ICT and online platforms to support learning.
- 18 Many providers have continued to provide professional development for staff during this period through access to online training. A few make beneficial use of the increased time available to develop and implement training programmes for staff that link to previously identified priorities for development such as the development of the curriculum or professional learning for learning support assistants (LSAs).

Planning for re-opening

- 19 Nearly all schools and colleges are considering carefully what they need to do to prepare for the return of all learners.
- 20 Communications with parents and ensuring parental confidence about returning to school is key.
- 21 In most cases, schools and colleges have continued to operate during the period of lockdown, albeit for a reduced number of pupils. This has given leaders a valuable perspective on what is working well under the current restrictions and what needs to be refined or adapted to accommodate a full return to school.

- 22 Where there have been positive consequences from their current practice, for example the use of ICT to support learning or the benefits of allowing staff to work from home, providers are considering carefully how these can be incorporated into their future practice to retain these benefits.

Business and social studies subjects at A level

Main findings

Standards

- 1 Many learners begin to study business and social studies subjects for the first time when they enter sixth form or college. Many make strong progress in their studies and a few make exceptional progress, compared with their starting points. A minority of learners do not progress from AS to complete A level studies or do not achieve as well as they could. A far greater proportion of girls than boys choose to study law, psychology or sociology while a much greater proportion of boys than girls choose to study business studies or economics. Girls outperform boys in business and social studies subjects across most high grade indicators at A and AS level (grades A*-C and A-C respectively).
- 2 Most learners enjoy A level study and many show a keen interest in current affairs, especially in subjects such as economics and government and politics. A minority have aspirations to study business or social studies subjects at higher education level. Most learners show positive attitudes to learning and a strong sense of pride in their work. Many manage their time efficiently and organise their work files effectively. A minority of learners are over-reliant on support and materials provided by their teachers and do not undertake enough independent research. Most learners have a clear understanding of their own strengths and what they need to do to improve. In a few cases, learners do not build on teacher feedback to improve their work.
- 3 Many learners make strong progress in developing their writing skills, especially through essay and research work, although a few produce work that is insufficiently evaluative. Many learners demonstrate strong numeracy skills in business, economics and psychology, but a few are not confident in handling and analysing data. Many learners do not develop and use their information and communication technology skills well enough to enhance their work, such as by using statistical packages to analyse and present data in research projects. Many learners develop strong problem-solving skills and apply these confidently in new contexts.
- 4 Many learners develop specific skills in business and social studies courses. These include applying theoretical models and concepts to the real-world, and interpreting and evaluating information from complex sources, including the media and academic journals. They develop the ability to present an argument and discuss the merits of different perspectives. Learners recognise that, in business and social studies, there is often no single correct answer, and that they need to choose from a range of valid interpretations and justify their choice by putting forward a reasoned line of argument.

Provision

- 5 A few schools and colleges offer the full range of business and social studies subjects, while many offer some but not all of these subjects. In general, the breadth

of curriculum offer tends to relate directly to the number of learners. A few providers offer one or more subjects in partnership with other centres. Nearly all centres ensure that subjects continue from AS to A level, although class sizes can vary widely.

- 6 Most schools and colleges enable learners to gain only a limited insight into the nature of social science subjects before they make their A level choices. A few learners also do not receive enough guidance on choosing subject combinations that are appropriate to their career and progression aspirations.
- 7 Most teachers establish good working relationships with learners and set clear expectations of them. Most teachers have strong subject knowledge and up-to-date understanding of external assessment requirements. They plan their teaching well to ensure that learners are prepared effectively for external examinations.
- 8 The most effective teachers convey a genuine passion for their subject and inspire their learners using well-thought-out teaching strategies. Many discuss topical issues to encourage learners to apply theories and concepts to real-world situations. They also emphasise the value and importance of wider reading in their subjects.

Leadership

- 9 The arrangements for the leadership of business and social studies A levels vary greatly between individual schools and colleges. Management structures based around academic subject disciplines are most common in schools, while many colleges are organised around broad vocational areas. A few colleges with large numbers of A level learners have established dedicated sixth-form centres, usually with leadership arrangements more akin to those in secondary schools.
- 10 Many schools and colleges undertake course or subject cluster reviews. However, in a minority of providers, these processes are not robust enough at identifying key strengths and areas for improvement in specific subjects.
- 11 Many schools and colleges tend to focus primarily on A level pass rates or successful completion data and give insufficient consideration to grade attainment or distance travelled. A minority also do not take enough account of AS level performance when evaluating subject performance. Many centres stipulate minimum entry grades in GCSE English or mathematics for learners to study some subjects, such as economics or psychology. This practice can skew the attainment data and so it is important to consider value-added data when comparing results across providers.
- 12 A few schools and colleges work in partnership with other providers to extend the range of subject choices. But in many of these partnerships, arrangements for quality assurance are not robust enough to identify accurately areas for improvement.
- 13 Most teachers identify support available through the WJEC examination board, as the main source of professional learning for these teaching subjects, either through subject networks or linked to roles as A level examiners. Regional consortia provide little subject-based support relating to these subjects. The majority of teachers in business and social studies subjects are the only A level teacher of the subject in

their school or college. As well as restricting opportunities for collaborative working this can lead to difficulties in covering classes when a member of staff is absent, especially if this is for an extended period of time.

- 14 The recent reform of A and AS levels has led to a change in awarding organisation for business and social studies subjects. Delays in the availability of materials and resources for some subjects have added to the challenges faced by learners and teachers. The availability of Welsh-medium learning resources including textbooks remains a particular challenge.

Recommendations

Schools and colleges should:

- R1 Strengthen the opportunities for learners to find out more about new subject options such as A level business and social studies subjects before they finalise their subject choices
- R2 Work collaboratively with other schools and colleges to share learning resources, particularly Welsh-medium resources, and to increase professional learning opportunities for teachers of A level business and social studies subjects
- R3 Strengthen monitoring and evaluation processes for A level business and social studies subjects to ensure that teachers and leaders are able to identify strengths and areas for improvement in relation to teaching, learning and assessment

Local authorities and regional consortia should:

- R4 Facilitate increased professional learning opportunities for teachers of A level business and social studies subjects
- R5 Support schools to evaluate the effectiveness of their A level provision and develop targeted improvement plans

The Welsh Government should:

- R6 Address the limited availability of A level Welsh-medium learning resources, including textbooks, in these subjects

Celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion

Main findings

Where provision is most effective

- 1 In schools and colleges with a strong culture of inclusion, LGBT learners thrive. In these cases, they feel as confident as their peers to express their feelings and beliefs. They enjoy a strong sense of wellbeing and play a full part in the life of the school or college.
- 2 In these schools or colleges, nearly all learners view same-sex relationships as another form of diversity to be celebrated along with other protected characteristics, such as race, religion and disability.
- 3 These schools and colleges review their curriculum to incorporate LGBT issues in a development-appropriate way to good effect. As a result, learners regularly see positive LGBT role models depicted through their learning experiences and in their school or college environment.
- 4 The school or college engages actively with parents and the wider community, including faith groups, to ensure that they understand the organisation's approach to celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion. They recognise that some stakeholders may challenge this and listen and take account of differing views, but ultimately act in the best interests of learners.
- 5 Leaders ensure that the curriculum and learning environment challenge gender stereotypes and tackle related issues as they arise. Learners begin to understand the negative effect of gender stereotyping from a young age.
- 6 Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying is infrequent and dealt with robustly when it arises. Leaders work with staff and learners to develop their anti-bullying policy and procedures to ensure they recognise, record and address homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. They create an environment where staff and learners feel confident to challenge homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying and the use of homophobic language.
- 7 Leaders put in place effective systems to ensure that learners know how to approach speaking to a member of staff about personal issues, including those related to LGBT issues and 'coming out'. They ensure that specific pastoral staff have the skills and knowledge to support learners to make safe decisions, but also that all staff have the confidence to respond to the questions and concerns around LGBT matters raised by learners.
- 8 Pupil and learner voice groups provide a valuable support network for LGBT young people. In the best cases, they provide valuable feedback to schools and colleges on the experience of LGBT learners. Leaders consider this information carefully to adjust their policies and curriculum to improve the educational experience of LGBT learners and promote inclusion for all.

- 9 Schools and colleges liaise well with parents and carers to address the challenges faced by transgender learners, those who are questioning their gender identity and those who are transitioning. They recognise that there is no standard or simple solution to these challenges, and there is a need for flexibility and dialogue with all involved.
- 10 Where provision is strongest, in around a third of schools and in most colleges, leaders demonstrate a clear moral purpose towards promoting inclusion and celebrating diversity. They establish an ethos that champions individuality, tolerance and respect. This impacts on the wellbeing of all learners positively. In the most inclusive schools and colleges, LGBT staff feel able to discuss their personal lives and relationships with pupils and colleagues within guidelines that apply equally to LGBT and heterosexual staff.
- 11 Leaders prioritise consideration of learners' wellbeing and mental health in their self-evaluation arrangements. They use the information they gather to consider provision for LGBT learners and how well their curriculum and learning environment encourages the celebration of diversity and promotes inclusion. The gathering of the views of all learners, particularly those who are LGBT, plays an important part in this.
- 12 Leaders ensure professional learning for all staff that develops their skills, knowledge and confidence to support LGBT learners and assists in creating an inclusive ethos. Frequently, this involves input from specialist external partners, including providing training for specific staff that allows them to deliver professional learning to colleagues within their own organisation.

Where provision is less strong

- 13 In these cases, LGBT learners encounter varying levels of bullying and discrimination that impact negatively on their school and college experience leading to poorer attendance and slower academic progress than their peers.
- 14 Learners in general do not see positive LGBT role models as part of their curriculum or around their school or college. This increases the likelihood that they will develop negative views of LGBT people and that LGBT learners will not appreciate that they can be equally successful as others.
- 15 Addressing LGBT issues is a bolt-on part of the school or college's provision, for example with teachers addressing them only as part of personal and social education (PSE) sessions. This may reinforce the sense that LGBT people are a special issue that needs discussing rather than part of everyday life.
- 16 Leaders do not ensure that instances of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying are recorded or that trends are identified and acted upon or ensure that staff engage in high quality professional learning that provides them with the confidence to support LGBT learners.

Recommendations

Schools and colleges should:

- R1 Review their curriculum and individual course content to consider how well the teaching of diversity and inclusion, including LGBT issues, is integrated into learning experiences
- R2 Ensure that instances of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying are recorded and that trends are identified and acted upon
- R3 Ensure that all staff engage in regular training in addressing discrimination and promoting diversity, including issues around LGBT people

Local authorities and consortia should:

- R4 Work with external partners to deliver relevant professional learning opportunities for staff in schools across primary and secondary sectors
- R5 Work with primary and secondary schools to ensure progression in relationships and sexuality education between sectors

The Value of Youth Work Training

Main findings

- 1 Youth work qualifications equip students with a sound background in youth work practice and provide them with the skills they need to carry out their profession. The youth work sector has made valuable progress against nearly all of the recommendations in 'A survey of professional qualification training for youth workers in Wales (Estyn, 2010). See Appendix 1.
- 2 Youth work students generally achieve well even though many have entered higher education from non-traditional education and social backgrounds, and may have faced significant challenges in their lives. Their own experiences often mean that they can understand and empathise with the issues affecting young people. Many progress from Level 3 to degree level and a few move onto achieving higher degrees.
- 3 Youth work training programmes align well with the five key aims outlined in the Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2019. Course content at all levels has a suitable balance between academic and practical training and gives students the skills they need to carry out jobs in a wide variety of youth and community work settings.
- 4 Addysg Oedolion Cymru|Adult Learning Wales and higher education institutions (HEIs) work well together to offer appropriate qualifications and worthwhile opportunities for students to progress to courses at a higher level, up to and including post-graduate courses at Level 7. A few employers offer apprenticeship routes for youth work training.
- 5 Many learners complete their courses successfully and attain their qualifications. Nearly all students provide sound explanations about why they are following their programmes of study and are highly motivated. Many refer to the transformative effect that youth work had on their own lives and display a passionate and genuine desire to influence young peoples' lives for the better. They also develop a broad range of other skills such as literacy, numeracy and digital skills alongside the core course content.
- 6 The standard of teaching and instruction is effective across the various providers. Students praise the experience, the competence of staff, and the educational and pastoral support provided across all course providers. Youth and community work tutors are experienced and qualified youth workers, who use their practical experiences in the field to enhance their teaching and academic input. They bring commitment and passion to their role, as well as a sound understanding of partnership working, sector developments and international youth work.
- 7 Work placements are a vital element of youth work training programmes. They provide the practical setting in which students can use the theoretical aspects of their course and reflect on their own practice under the supervision of others. All HEIs have taken effective steps to improve the availability, suitability and supervision of

work placements, but work placements remain a challenge due to fluctuations in location and demand. Most students feel that work placements are relevant and beneficial to their professional and academic development. Many students organise their own placements and this can lead to a few experiencing issues regarding sourcing placements, the availability of qualified supervision staff, and the support offered to them.

- 8 Leadership and management in institutions offering youth work courses are effective. All providers have robust quality management processes in place for the management of youth and community work courses. These processes often set a good example to other courses within the university. Faculty and course managers use a variety of information and scrutinise data to manage the quality and effectiveness of courses. They have quality systems and plans in place to document the management processes. Student outcomes are subject to robust external moderation for academic performance and scrutiny by Education Training Standards Wales (ETS). Most providers have effective measures in place to assure the quality of work placements and student progression during the placement. All are aware of the challenges work placements present and work hard to improve them.
- 9 Institutions providing youth work training have increased their use of Welsh, although inconsistencies and common issues remain throughout Wales. Institutions have more Welsh documentation than previously and enable students to submit assignments in Welsh. Welsh-speaking students have appropriate opportunities to use their Welsh in work placement settings, but opportunities to study in Welsh remain limited, and bilingual learning remains underdeveloped in the youth work sector.
- 10 All HEIs now integrate elements of teaching with other faculties within their institution. This sharing of theory and practice across specialisms develops understanding of the contexts in which other professionals work with young people, and support them to become confident, informed citizens.
- 11 There are similarities between youth work skills and methodology and the new ways of working set out in the Curriculum for Wales 2022 (Welsh Government, 2020a). HEIs are preparing youth work students for the contribution that they can make to formal and informal education by exploring relevant practice and policy documents such as Successful Futures (Donaldson, 2015) in course modules at undergraduate and post-graduate levels.
- 12 The close involvement of ETS with the sector and adherence to UK Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) standards ensures that youth workers are qualified and trained to the highest professional levels. Youth work training gives practitioners a very wide range of skills for working with young people. These skills reflect the five pillars of youth work: educative, expressive, participative, inclusive and empowering (Youth Work in Wales Review Group, 2018) and equip workers to carry out youth work in a wide variety of statutory and non-statutory settings. Professional training also equips youth workers with the skills to work in managerial positions. However, currently there is no regular audit of the skills youth workers have or are required by the wide variety of employers.

- 13 Many secondary schools are now beginning to see the value of having a youth worker on the staff, but in many cases they work only with challenging young people and are seen as aids to behaviour management, or support for young people with 'problems', and are often undervalued as educators in their own right.
- 14 The number of formally registered youth workers and youth support workers underestimates the number of these workers delivering youth work across the full variety of settings. Only 429 youth workers and 692 youth support workers are registered with the EWC at 1 March 2020 (EWC, 2020). Some of the reasons for this underestimate include: the list of qualifying qualifications is inaccurate and out of date, youth workers who have not completed their degree cannot register, and youth workers in certain organisations are not required to register. The EWC is working with the Welsh Government, ETS, the Interim Youth Work Board and the Workforce Development Strategy Participation Group to resolve these issues.
- 15 After training, youth workers are not required, as teachers are, to complete a probationary year, nor are they entitled to professional learning opportunities as a right. The lack of a qualified youth worker status (QYWS) equivalent to qualified teacher status (QTS) for teachers means that youth workers do not benefit in the same way as teachers from ongoing training for and recognition of their professional skills. There is also a lack of funding to support ongoing training opportunities. Senior youth workers are not included in national or regional educational leadership programmes and this hampers the development of leadership within the profession.
- 16 Local authorities play an important role in supporting and developing youth work training. However, they do not always have the resources to support the development of courses or to contribute to the training of youth workers (both statutory and voluntary) including those in non-education settings in the local authority.

Recommendations

The Welsh Government should:

- R1 Continue to work with all partners in the youth work sector to support the development of youth work and youth work training, including leadership capacity
- R2 Continue to work with the EWC and ETS to update and improve the registration arrangements for youth workers to ensure that youth work is treated in the same way as other education professions
- R3 Commission a full skills audit for the sector, to include skills needed by employers and the existing skills of both youth workers and youth support workers registered with the EWC and those who carry out youth work and are not registered
- R4 Investigate the provision of formal apprenticeship routes for the training of youth workers and youth support workers
- R5 Work with the providers of youth work training and other relevant organisations

to increase the use of the Welsh language in youth work training.

Providers of youth work training should:

R6 Make sure that youth workers and students from other professions working with young people have opportunities to train together

R7 Improve the availability, variety and quality of work placements

Local authorities should:

R8 Encourage schools to recognise the specialist skills and professional knowledge youth workers bring to supporting the development of the new curriculum

R9 Support and contribute to the development of courses for the training of statutory and voluntary youth workers, including those in non-education settings

Regional consortia should:

R10 Explore ways to include youth workers alongside teachers in professional learning and educational leadership training opportunities

Preparing for the Curriculum for Wales – case studies and cameos from secondary, all-age and special schools

Main findings

What is working well

- 1 The schools visited for this report represent a range of contexts across Wales. In these schools, headteachers and their staff are enthusiastic about the opportunities the Curriculum for Wales presents to provide pupils with relevant and engaging learning experiences. They see it as an opportunity to re-think what is important for their pupils and community in the 21st century.
- 2 Understandably, many of the schools that have been involved directly in curriculum reform as pioneer schools, quality improvement schools or innovation schools are generally further ahead in their thinking about curriculum design than other schools. Being part of the curriculum reform process has developed their confidence to innovate and manage change. These schools have been able to trial and refine their approaches over a period of around two to three years. In a very few cases, leaders collected the views of pupils and staff after each trial to evaluate whether pupils' experiences improved.
- 3 In the special schools visited, leaders and teachers feel positive about the way the Curriculum for Wales promotes a more personalised approach to the curriculum. They feel the curriculum encourages an approach that customises learning to each pupil's strengths, needs, skills and interests. This approach and the values promoted by the four purposes underpin strategies already adopted by many special schools. They welcome the focus on pupils' wellbeing and their personalised learning experiences.
- 4 Where leaders, but particularly the headteacher, have a positive attitude towards curriculum innovation, strong communication and a culture of sharing are the key aspects of their work. Headteachers' clear commitment to and understanding of the new curriculum form the basis of the positive ethos that permeates the schools that are working effectively. These leaders encourage a bespoke approach to curriculum design, always considering the best approach for their school. Staff confidence and trust in leaders are key ingredients in the successful development of a new curriculum.
- 5 In most schools visited, senior leaders recognise that curriculum development is a strong priority, and they allocate enough time, resources and responsibilities to it. A focus on developing staff is at the heart of all of these schools' work. Strategic thinking that has considered pedagogy, curriculum, skills and professional learning underpins this work. There are high expectations of staff in all of these areas.
- 6 In most schools visited, leaders have worked effectively with all stakeholders and spent considerable time developing and reviewing a vision for their school and its pupils. A majority have started to construct a vision for their schools within the

context of the four purposes and their own values. These schools are developing a strong understanding of how their vision will inform the curriculum, the approach to teaching and the outcomes for their pupils.

- 7 A majority of the schools visited have reviewed their approach to teaching. They have reviewed their teaching and learning policies and used current research to inform pedagogical approaches. By focusing on teaching and learning, teachers in these schools develop a common understanding and sense of purpose, not through the 'what', but through the 'how' of teaching.
- 8 Where leaders manage the pace of change sensitively with a calm, measured approach, teachers engage positively with the process of innovation and change. Effective leaders understand that a good school curriculum needs to be broad and balanced, and that curriculum innovation does not mean that all previous practice has to change. These leaders stay true to the established principles and values of their school, remain focused on high-quality teaching and learning, and make changes when needed to improve the quality of education for their pupils. The amount of change needed will vary from school to school. Effective leaders review honestly how their current school curriculum is aligned with the four purposes. In addition, these leaders are aware of the strengths and areas for development relating to teaching and learning in their schools.
- 9 Where leaders think through and introduce new systems and processes sensitively, curriculum reform is progressing well. The reform process is comprehensive, staff understand it and it matches the priorities identified by the school closely. This ensures that staff understand the reasons behind any changes and therefore 'buy into' them.
- 10 Where senior leaders trust staff and encourage them to take considered risks to improve curriculum design, planning and outcomes, leaders have described this as a 'game changer'. Staff enjoy the opportunities to be creative and to experiment. Where this works particularly well, there is flexibility and a realisation that the approach to the curriculum does not have to be the same across all disciplines or areas of learning and experience, but should be adapted to suit the subject matter, the learning environment, the teacher and the pupils.
- 11 In the majority of schools visited, leaders have taken this opportunity to review their staffing structure. This has sometimes led to opportunities for staff to be seconded to the leadership team to lead on a specific aspect of curriculum development. Leaders are aware of the importance of leadership at all levels to ensure that key messages are disseminated to the whole school community. The strategic use of enthusiastic, skilful staff who can motivate others supports the work to win 'hearts and minds'. The time spent by leaders on developing their staff understanding of the Curriculum for Wales is key to developing mind-sets that are open to change and willing to try new approaches.
- 12 In a minority of schools visited, leaders are thinking about how they can increase time for staff to work collaboratively, for example through reducing all teachers' teaching load by one lesson per fortnight. In one school, the school day now starts an hour later, while not reducing overall teaching time for pupils. A later start time

means that staff can use the first hour of the day flexibly, for example to work in teams on curriculum planning. In a few schools, leaders have allocated time to hold meetings during the school day. This ensures that meetings after school provide ring-fenced time to develop the new curriculum. In another school, since September 2019, disciplines use one departmental meeting every half term to discuss their approach to working in areas of learning and experience and to plan and evaluate the existing provision. The school has also used two evening sessions and one INSET day to undertake this work. Where this time is used most effectively, it helps to break down barriers between subject areas and facilitates joint planning, while maintaining subject specialisms. Groups of teachers not only plan together, but also evaluate the impact of changes promptly and take swift action where trialled approaches do not work.

- 13 A minority of the schools visited make effective use of school-to-school collaboration, for example developing work between primary and secondary schools. They aim to make strong links in curriculum development and understand what the progression of pupils from 3 to 16 looks like. In addition, secondary schools are working with other secondary schools on joint planning, which involves a change of mind-set, with middle leaders moving from being leaders of qualifications to being leaders of the curriculum. Many special schools are also working more closely together when deciding on the best approach to developing a curriculum suited to their pupils' needs.
- 14 Once good quality teaching is in place and staff are confident in their understanding of the curriculum, a few schools are engaging with professional research. This research enables teachers to trial new approaches to curriculum planning and delivery. The impact is strongest when leaders complete regular evaluations of these trials by judging the impact on classroom practice and pupil outcomes.

Barriers to progress

- 15 Nearly all of the schools visited are broadly positive about the opportunities provided by the Curriculum for Wales. Despite this, there are perceived barriers that inhibit progress in many of the schools visited.
- 16 All schools welcome the additional INSET days planned to support curriculum development. Although it was never the intention that curriculum development would be achieved in INSET time alone, leaders feel that the time they have may not be enough to address the professional learning and curriculum planning required. Secondary schools are also responding to changes in qualifications. Special schools especially feel the pressure to prepare for the Curriculum for Wales while ensuring all staff complete the mandatory training required in these settings relating to the complex physical and medical needs of their pupils.
- 17 In most schools, staff have not yet had the professional learning opportunities necessary for them to understand whole-school curriculum design process. This may be because strategic partners have not shared information well enough or because leaders have not understood the importance of focusing on these underlying principles ([designing your curriculum](#)). As a result, these schools tend to plan changes and activities in a piecemeal way, without developing a clear purpose or

considering the impact on pupils' progression across the curriculum. Often, these schools do not have effective systems to evaluate the impact of planned change.

- 18 In a majority of schools visited, staff are concerned about the loss of subject expertise and do not want to dilute the use of specialist teachers. In these schools, leaders and teachers may have misinterpreted the intentions of the new curriculum. They may not understand that the model for curriculum delivery is the responsibility of individual schools and that while working across boundaries between subjects is encouraged, there is no suggestion that subject specialisms should be lost.
- 19 In a majority of schools visited, there is a reluctance to plan new whole-school curriculum and assessment arrangements while still delivering a curriculum that meets the needs of current public examinations. A minority of schools visited cited the lack of information about future qualifications and assessment arrangements as a reason to delay the development of a new curriculum. These schools use accountability as a reason not to develop an exciting curriculum or to make even minor adaptations. This suggests that the focus in these schools is more on 'teaching to the test' rather than on delivering a broad, balanced and relevant curriculum.
- 20 In a minority of schools visited, teachers feel that the restrictions of their current timetable inhibit the creativity with which they can approach the Curriculum for Wales. Many schools are reluctant to be bold with timetable design. They find it challenging to think differently about the possibilities that currently exist within the school day. A few schools start a three-year GCSE programme in Year 9. This means that pupils at the age of 12 are choosing options, which narrows the breadth of their educational experiences at too early a stage, and goes against the principle of a broad and balanced education.
- 21 In a minority of schools, one member of staff has the responsibility for leading curriculum initiatives. Without a curriculum team for sustainability and succession planning, momentum is often lost if this member of staff leaves the school.
- 22 In a few schools, senior leaders do not fully understand or embrace the underpinning aims of the new curriculum. These leaders do not think or plan strategically enough when developing their vision for the curriculum, learning and teaching in their schools. A few schools copy the approach, structures and content of the curriculum of other schools rather than developing their own arrangements. In addition, a few schools focus too much on developing thematic approaches to learning without first establishing their vision for the curriculum as a whole, or how they will improve the quality of learning and teaching. This reduces the benefits to a school of going through the change process of review and reflection and may result in a curriculum that does not serve the needs of their pupils, and limit buy-in and support from the school community.
- 23 Improving the quality of teaching and developing an understanding of the interdependency between the curriculum and pedagogy is a key stage in preparing for the new curriculum. A few schools have important weaknesses in the quality of teaching, and their curriculum journey is likely to take longer and be more limited until the quality of teaching is improved.

- 24 A few schools have used the Curriculum for Wales as an opportunity for staff restructuring, especially at middle management level. This has led to some concern and distrust among staff and an unwillingness to engage with curriculum change. This is particularly the case where schools have adopted systems and structures of other schools, rather than consulting with staff and developing their own.
- 25 In a very few schools, 'change fatigue' has reduced the speed with which the school has felt able to start planning for the Curriculum for Wales. In others, staff express a fear of failure and worry that their interpretation of the new curriculum may be wrong. These leaders and staff often lack the confidence and understanding to proceed with curriculum reform and are looking for more guidance or professional learning.
- 26 Weak curriculum links between primary and secondary schools limit planning for progression. Current curriculum links mainly focus on English/Welsh and mathematics, and in a few examples may include a transition activity across Year 6 and Year 7. Curriculum links beyond this small group of subjects are rare. Transition arrangements focus primarily on pupils' wellbeing and supporting pupils who require additional support rather than developing a clear understanding of what pupils can achieve in order to build a more effective Year 7 curriculum. Despite recognising the importance of transition, pupils often arrive at secondary schools that work with several partner primary schools with a wide variation in knowledge and skills. This makes it more difficult to plan for continuity in learning.
- 27 Partnership working between pioneer, quality improvement, innovation and their partner schools to develop the curriculum has been limited in some areas. Partner schools report that they have generally received information at regional consortia events rather than directly from pioneer schools. This may be due to a lack of formal communication systems between pioneer and partner schools. A few schools feel that the expectations placed on them by consortia are too demanding and that there is pressure for them to be further advanced with curriculum reform than is necessary at this stage. A few schools feel that they have received mixed messages from the different national area of learning and experience groups.

Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19

Main findings

- 1 Local authorities and regional consortia have worked closely together and with the Welsh Government to respond to the evolving context caused by the pandemic. Through the Association and Directors of Education Wales (ADEW), senior leaders have provided good support for each other and collaborated to create shared approaches and resources.
- 2 Local authorities provided valuable support to enable their schools and PRUs to reopen successfully to all pupils in September. Particular strengths were the practical support around health and safety and on communicating with parents and learners. For example, local authorities, working with health care partners where appropriate, supported risk assessments, including for vulnerable pupils and developed welcome packs providing information for parents, carers and pupils. School leaders welcomed the direction from local authorities and regional consortia to focus on pupil wellbeing and felt this was appropriate.
- 3 During the initial lockdown and the autumn term, local authority services had to respond rapidly to support the wellbeing of all pupils, and particularly those known to be vulnerable. Where local authorities already had effective joint working across services and external agencies, this was evident in the efficiency with which they responded to these needs. In other local authorities where collaboration is less well established, the pandemic has been a catalyst to strengthen joint working. The enhanced use of digital communication also contributed to more efficient multi-agency working within local authorities.
- 4 During the initial lockdown, teachers had to respond quickly to the need to provide distance learning materials for pupils. This provision improved though the summer term. As the need for a number of pupils to learn away from the classroom continued in the autumn term, it remained a priority to further improve and embed distance and blended learning provision. Regional consortia and local authorities have developed helpful guidance, playlists of videos featuring good practice and a range of professional learning. However, schools', local authorities' and regional consortia's oversight of the quality of provision is underdeveloped.
- 5 Pupils' learning experiences in the autumn term varied widely across and within schools. This is partly due to the varied impact of the pandemic in different areas and also as a result of the different policies and practices adopted by local authorities in relation to close contacts and the different ways that schools have organised groups and cohorts of pupils. These factors have resulted in considerably unequal learning experiences for pupils who have received most of their autumn term education in school and those who have been taught at a distance for extended periods.

- 6 In his recent Annual Report, the Chief Inspector's noted that 'despite considerable effort by schools, local authorities and central government to provide additional equipment and support, a minority of learners were disadvantaged by lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity.' The barriers to learning at home identified in the summer term, including access to digital technology, remained in the autumn term.
- 7 The pandemic has had a greater impact on certain groups of pupils and magnified challenges that already existed. For example, school leaders have told us that pupils eligible for free school meals made slower progress in their learning during the initial lockdown than their peers, with some pupils returning to school with weaker language and numeracy skills than before the initial lockdown started.
- 8 The pandemic has exacerbated some challenges that local authority and regional consortia had already been working with schools to address. Pupils across Wales have experienced the pandemic in very different ways as a result of their home circumstances. The necessity for pupils to work at home for periods of time in the autumn term has highlighted the need for pupils to be able to work independently successfully and for schools to focus on supporting pupils to improve learning resilience.
- 9 Local authorities and consortia have recognised the potential longer-term impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of children and young people. All have offered enhanced professional learning for staff from schools and PRUs on supporting wellbeing, including on bereavement and adverse childhood experiences. Children and young people already challenged because of adverse childhood experiences prior to the pandemic have faced further challenges. Children and young people in stable family environments with very few or no prior adverse childhood experiences may also have been affected by the pandemic. For example, time away from friends caused by lockdowns, isolation periods or having to remain in tight bubbles at school can have an adverse impact on pupils' social development and their mental health.
- 10 In most cases, local authorities have ensured that statutory processes for pupils in relation to special education needs (SEN), including assessments and annual reviews, have continued during the autumn term. Where there have been delays, this has most commonly been due to the capacity of educational psychology services and other specialist services, caused by staff absence or challenges in delivering services remotely.
- 11 Regional consortium and local authority officers continued to support teachers' and school leaders' digital competence during the autumn term. The increased effective use of digital communication has had positive consequences for facilitating more agile, efficient and frequent interactions between and within learning communities across Wales. School and PRU leaders have valued the flexibility of online professional learning opportunities provided by local authorities and regional consortia.
- 12 School leaders across Wales have mixed views about the effectiveness of support they have received from their local authority and their regional school improvement consortium during the pandemic. School leaders in south west Wales are most

satisfied with the support they have received from their local authority, while school leaders in north Wales are most satisfied with the support they have received from their regional consortium.

- 13 Local authorities made appropriate early adaptations to the governance arrangements but a few local authorities were too slow in resuming their scrutiny functions. By the middle of July 2020, most councils had begun to hold Cabinet meetings online, but only half of councils had held virtual meetings of their scrutiny committees. As a result, decisions about re-opening schools and providing support for learners in the summer were not scrutinised in half of councils. By the autumn, all council Cabinets were meeting online, and scrutiny committees in most councils were also meeting online.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Welsh Government to work with regional consortia, local authorities, and other partners and providers to:

- R1 Urgently address barriers to learning at home, particularly where this is due to a lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity
- R2 Improve the quality of the distance and blended learning experiences for pupils by supporting more effective teaching across and within schools and PRUs
- R3 Develop a coherent approach to improve progress in literacy, numeracy and personal and social skills of vulnerable pupils disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example pupils eligible for free school meals
- R4 Establish strategies to monitor and address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of pupils
- R5 Create opportunities to take stock and evaluate the impact of policies and practices developed since the start of the pandemic to inform future ways of working and curriculum design

Post-16 partnerships

Main findings

Strategic planning and leadership

- 1 The majority of colleges and local authorities communicate well with each other. They share their plans and work together appropriately to evaluate the impacts of these plans on schools and colleges in the area. In a minority of cases, local authorities and regional consortia on the one hand, and colleges on the other, do not engage with each other sufficiently well. In too many cases, school and college leaders' planning does not consider the wider community of local schools and colleges, and the broader cohort of learners, well enough.
- 2 A majority of senior leaders in schools with sixth forms report that the relationship with their local colleges is generally not as strong as with other schools. Senior leaders within colleges also acknowledge that this is an issue between colleges and a minority of schools across Wales. They report a sense of competition and lack of transparency and trust between the two sectors. In a few cases, similar tensions exist between schools.
- 3 In a few cases, differing planning, funding and oversight regimes impede productive partnerships between providers. Such administrative boundaries arise between schools in different local authorities, as well as between the school and college sectors. As a result, a few providers that are well placed to work together do not collaborate due to the differing regimes under which they operate.
- 4 Providers and local authorities do not use the Learning and Skills (Wales) Measure 2009 to guide their strategic planning at post-16 sufficiently well. A minority of school leaders are not confident that the offer available to their learners meets the requirements of the measure. Local and national government processes for ensuring that providers meet the requirements have become less effective over recent years. As a result, compliance with the measure is monitored inconsistently across Wales and, currently, it is unclear how many learners have access to a sufficiently broad curriculum offer at post-16.
- 5 Over recent years, several local authorities have carried out worthwhile reviews of local sixth form provision that result in useful strategic recommendations for improvements. In a few cases, schools, colleges and local authorities do not work together to respond to these recommendations well enough. This allows weak or inefficient aspects of post-16 provision to persist.
- 6 Many providers work effectively with each other to share post-16 provision where learners from different providers come together to form merged teaching groups. This helps to secure a greater choice of courses for sixth form learners and to reduce operational costs. In a few cases, senior leaders draw on subject specialists from partner providers to help improve the quality of teaching. For example, providers exchange responsibility for the delivery of specific courses in order to improve the learning experience. A few providers invite subject specialists from other schools or colleges to help support and improve their subject departments.

- 7 A majority of leaders have a sound understanding of the performance of courses delivered to their learners by other providers. They access each other's evaluations of lessons and records of learners' progress over time, and also gather learners' views about their lessons. The overall effectiveness of improvement processes for shared provision is inconsistent across Wales and, in a minority of cases, leaders do not have robust quality assurance arrangements in place.
- 8 The majority of designated Welsh-medium schools share post-16 provision through small partnerships that are led by the providers themselves. In many cases, neighbouring schools maintain strong working relationships. To overcome the long distances between them, a few providers share provision using video links between each other's lessons. Many subject teachers who deliver sixth form lessons through the medium of Welsh collaborate well to develop and share teaching and learning resources written in Welsh. However, colleges and Welsh-medium schools generally find it difficult to collaborate to help learners pursue elements of vocational courses through the medium of Welsh.

Partnership working

- 9 Across Wales, a third of secondary phase schools are part of consolidated arrangements, having no sixth form at the schools themselves. Eight per cent have their own sixth form and do not share any provision with other schools or colleges. The remaining 59% of schools have sixth forms and report that they are part of post-16 partnerships of some kind.² Two of the 12 further education colleges in Wales, Grŵp Llandrillo Menai and Bridgend College, play significant roles in post-16 partnership networks together with local schools. Bridgend College also works with neighbouring Pencoed Comprehensive School to jointly operate a sixth form centre.
- 10 As part of their annual post-16 data submissions, schools that make use of shared provision should submit information about the provider of each course that their learners undertake. Overall, schools across Wales under-report the extent of this shared provision. This limits the Welsh Government's ability to monitor the extent of such provision and the outcomes achieved by the groups of learners taking part.
- 11 Most school sixth forms that share provision, transport learners between them to attend lessons; a very few schools use remote learning arrangements instead.³ In both cases, shared provision arrangements are often informal and lack written agreements that set out roles and responsibilities clearly.
- 12 Many schools present learners with a broad choice of sixth form study options. However, in 2018-2019, 25% of schools had learners studying across a more limited range of 25 sixth form courses or fewer (Welsh Government, 2020e). Most learners attending school sixth forms report that they were able to choose the subjects that they wanted to study, but a few did not have access to less popular subjects that were of interest to them, for example politics or economics.
- 13 Senior leaders in schools, local authorities and regional consortia ensure that the majority of school sixth form teachers and middle leaders undertake professional learning activities alongside their peers from other schools. Between colleges, most

² Survey conducted via regional consortia in October 2020; see figure 4.

³ Since the time of writing, providers have increased their use of remote learning arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

networking activity involves senior leaders, who meet their peers from across Wales regularly. However, only a few providers work together to support professional learning between schools and colleges, even where they have staff undertaking similar roles. In a majority of cases, colleges, regional consortia and local authorities do not communicate, or work together well enough, to develop these opportunities.

Supporting learner transition to post-16 education

- 14 Many schools provide learners with suitable information about the options available to them once they complete Year 11. In a few schools, learners benefit from a comprehensive range of activities to help them learn about, and decide between, their post-16 options at all local providers. This includes opportunities to meet representatives from other local post-16 providers, including work-based learning providers as well as schools and colleges.
- 15 Many learners value the advice and guidance they receive whilst at school. A minority feel that advice from schools does not address alternative pathways to A level study sufficiently, and that staff members often focus on encouraging learners to progress to the school's own sixth form. Learners feel that post-16 providers, including schools and colleges, do not share enough information about the quality of their provision and the outcomes achieved by their learners.
- 16 Many school sixth forms and colleges see the number of learner enrolments as a high priority. Leaders of small sixth forms often feel under financial pressure to ensure that Year 11 learners progress to their sixth form. In a minority of cases, this leads senior and middle leaders to limit the promotion of alternatives. In a few cases, school leaders do not invite other providers to discuss their post-16 provision with Year 11 learners in a comprehensive way.
- 17 The majority of providers do not share information on individual learners to support their transition when they transfer to another school or college. Few providers follow the Welsh Government's guidance on '*Effective post-16 transitions and data sharing*' (Welsh Government, 2019) successfully.
- 18 Most schools that do not have their own sixth form, provide learners with impartial information about the full range of progression options available to them. Learners benefit from regular interaction with local post-16 providers, both schools and colleges, to learn about the courses on offer and to discuss their aspirations. In a minority of cases, these schools ensure that learners also interact with providers of work-based learning provision. Many have effective transition arrangements that are supported by helpful dialogue between school staff members who know individual learners well and representatives of the post-16 providers.

Recommendations

Schools and colleges should:

- R1 Ensure strong partnership working to develop collaborative provision with other providers where this helps to improve quality or expand choice
- R2 Ensure that post-16 provision delivered in partnership with other providers is

underpinned by written agreements of responsibilities, and is included fully within improvement planning processes

- R3 Ensure that advice and guidance to learners is impartial, focused on learners' needs, and informed by the provision, standards and support available at all local post-16 education and training providers
- R4 Share information to support the transition of learners to other providers in line with Welsh Government guidance
- R5 Submit accurate information about the programmes learners undertake, including the provider of each learning activity, as part of their annual data submissions to the Welsh Government

Local authorities and regional consortia should:

- R6 Ensure that strategic planning involves the wider community of local schools and colleges
- R7 Work together with colleges on joint professional learning activities where appropriate
- R8 Work with colleges to ensure that a suitable range of post-16 provision is available locally through the medium of Welsh

The Welsh Government should:

- R9 Review and consolidate legislation, policy and guidance for 16-19 provision to ensure consistency and clarity of expectations in a way that builds on the developments of Curriculum for Wales
- R10 Apply a consistent approach to the oversight and quality monitoring of post-16 provision, including planning and funding considerations
- R11 Provide prospective learners and their parents with clear information about learner progress and outcomes for school sixth forms and further education colleges in Wales
- R12 Ensure that any future Commission for Tertiary Education and Research addresses the findings and recommendations of this thematic review

English language and literacy in settings and primary schools

Main findings

Learning and attitudes to learning

- 1 In settings, most children make strong progress from their starting points and develop their language and literacy skills effectively.
- 2 Despite improvements in aspects of speaking, reading and writing, standards of language and literacy in primary schools are broadly similar to those we reported five years ago. In general, most learners with special educational needs make sound or better progress in their language development. In a minority of schools, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and learners who are more able do not make sufficient progress in developing their language and literacy skills. Generally, boys do not achieve as well as girls.
- 3 In schools where standards of listening, speaking and reading are strong, learners use these skills well to influence their writing across the curriculum. The standard of learners' writing in many primary schools remains the weakest of the four language skills.
- 4 In most settings and primary schools, learners have positive attitudes to developing language and literacy skills. However, learners' enjoyment in reading declines during their time in primary school. This is more prevalent among boys and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- 5 In most schools, learners do not have enough opportunities or control over how or what they learn in their language and literacy lessons. In around a half of primary schools, learners' independent learning skills, such as the ability to transfer prior learning to new contexts, and to use strategies to support their own reading and spelling development, remain areas for development.

Provision

- 6 In many settings and schools, practitioners support children's speech and communication well through effective modelling of language. They provide classrooms and communal areas that are language and literacy-rich learning environments that immerse learners in the spoken and written word.
- 7 The well-developed planning processes in many settings and schools combined with the judicious use of resources ensure language concepts and skills build incrementally to support the successful development of learners' English language and literacy. A minority of schools do not consider whether their planning and approaches to learning, for example for improving boys' language and literacy skills, are informed well enough by evidence and research into effective practice.

- 8 Most schools adopt an integrated, usually text or topic-based, approach to planning listening, speaking, reading and writing to help learners to acquire and develop language. In the best practice, careful planning ensures that the development of one skill complements that of another. In response to Curriculum for Wales developments, many primary schools use a wide range of engaging real-life and imaginative contexts to develop or extend learners' language and literacy skills. They design purposeful opportunities for learners to apply their skills across the curriculum.
- 9 In most schools, teachers ensure that learners have an appropriate understanding of what they will be learning in their language lessons. In many schools, staff use verbal and written feedback well to ensure learners understand their strengths and how to improve their language capabilities. In a few schools, teachers do not question learners carefully enough to scaffold and progress their language and literacy skills as well as they could.
- 10 Most settings and schools develop learners' listening and speaking skills successfully in the foundation phase, often from low starting points. They use relevant experiences to stimulate learners' role-play and encourage them to speak and engage in conversation. Often, where provision is excellent, practitioners make extensive use of the local community to broaden learners' experiences and support their language learning.
- 11 The most effective primary schools use rich and varied contexts to teach learners specifically how to listen and talk. In key stage 2, they plan relevant learning experiences that help learners to think carefully and deliberately about the types of language that they hear and use, including when speaking publicly or performing. In less effective schools, listening and speaking are considered skills that support reading and writing, rather than as skills to be developed in their own right. In these schools, teachers do not always provide enough appropriately challenging and worthwhile opportunities to build on and extend learners' listening and speaking skills, particularly in key stage 2.
- 12 Most non-maintained settings and nursery classes in schools focus strongly on developing children's pre-reading skills, for example through songs, rhyme and music. In a few schools, staff do not take sufficient account of learners' developmental stages and introduce phonics teaching too early. Consequently, learners with underdeveloped language and communication skills struggle to make the link between letters and sounds.
- 13 Most primary schools plan appropriately for progression in learners' reading development. Schools who develop reading effectively teach it daily. Many use suitable resources successfully to support their teaching, of phonics for example. Where learners do not improve their reading skills well enough, often this is because there is no whole-school strategy to improve learners' decoding skills, build their vocabulary knowledge, or develop their responses to what they read.
- 14 Fostering a love of reading and literature is a priority in schools that develop learners' language and literacy effectively. They develop successful whole-school strategies for promoting reading for pleasure: reading to learners, providing opportunities for

learners to read aloud, sharing complete novels with learners, and providing time for daily independent reading. Their teachers are advocates for reading.

- 15 In a minority of schools, there is limited opportunity for learners to listen to adults role-modelling reading in key stage 2, or to engage with more challenging fiction and non-fiction books. In general, too few teachers read new children's literature themselves. A few schools do not explore a wide enough range of strategies to support disadvantaged learners and their families to access reading opportunities and to encourage enjoyment of reading.
- 16 Many primary schools have improved teaching aspects of writing through a greater focus on learners' understanding of purpose and audience, and consistent approaches to developing their skills. The most successful schools offer exciting, relevant opportunities to write, provide effective feedback to guide further development, and teach the core skills of spelling and sentence construction explicitly.
- 17 The best teaching enables learners to understand the conventions of form and genre and of writing as a process. In a few schools, teachers' expectations of learners' writing, particularly those who are more able, are too low. Teachers do not provide enough opportunities for learners to write freely using the range of writing skills that they already have and this slows their progress. In general, the quality of extended writing opportunities and the expectation for learners to check, correct and re-draft their work remain far too variable.
- 18 In a very few schools, where language teaching is highly successful, teachers plan explicitly for learners' vocabulary knowledge, as a distinct aspect of language learning. They consider how best to integrate the careful selection of appropriate words into teaching and learning in meaningful contexts across the curriculum. In a minority of schools, staff do not have a secure enough understanding of the importance of teaching vocabulary knowledge to learners and the impact it has on their progress, particularly in reading.
- 19 Most settings and schools use information from suitable assessments appropriately to plan additional or specialist support for individuals and groups of learners. Many schools use interventions well to support learners of all ages to make good progress. A few schools do not always plan and review support programmes carefully enough. As a result, learners with weak language skills or additional learning needs do not make as much progress as they could.
- 20 In most providers, sound partnership working helps many learners to make good progress in their language and literacy skills. Relationships with parents and carers are usually positive and most settings and schools work well with external agencies to access support or guidance to enhance vulnerable and disadvantaged learners' language skills.
- 21 In a very few settings and schools serving the most socially disadvantaged areas, the support and guidance for learners' language and literacy development is excellent. The positive engagement between schools, families and communities is often a key component of this excellence. Currently, only a minority of schools focus well

enough on addressing the broad range of factors that influence children's language development, such as parents, the home and the community environment. Despite the funding that has been available to address this, in a majority of schools, poverty and disadvantage remain barriers to learners' developing secure language and literacy skills.

Leadership

- 22 In settings and primary schools where standards of language and literacy are high for all learners, leaders establish a clear vision and strategic approach to developing learners' language and literacy. They make decisions that are right for their learners. While leaders are sensitive and mindful of learners' circumstances and situations, they do not use them to lower their expectations of what learners can achieve.
- 23 Most settings and schools have appropriate leadership structures in place to support the co-ordination and development of their provision for language and literacy. In settings and schools that are most successful in developing learners' skills, there is a clearly understood and co-ordinated strategy for doing so. Leaders ensure that staff provide exceptional teaching and learning that meet individual learners' needs. As a result, these schools address inequalities in learners' language and literacy effectively, and challenge and nurture the development of more able learners successfully.
- 24 In the most effective schools, leaders develop a strong collaborative culture where all staff have access to, and benefit from, the school's collective knowledge. Leaders often develop strong knowledge and expertise in language and literacy themselves. They invest in the skills and capabilities of their staff, through high-quality professional learning that develops successfully practitioners' understanding of how best to develop learners' English language and literacy skills.
- 25 In the best examples, leaders develop robust processes for reviewing the impact of teaching and learning experiences on learners' progress. In weaker schools, leaders monitor generic aspects of teaching and do not focus closely enough on subject-specific aspects of language teaching. This makes it difficult to identify precisely professional learning needs so that staff are more able to develop learners' English language and literacy skills. In weaker schools, leaders do not always ensure that staff are good language role models for learners.
- 26 In general, local authorities and regional consortia provide appropriate support to settings and schools to build their capacity and expertise in English language and literacy. Where there are shortcomings in provision, the training and support are often generic and not always personalised sufficiently or matched to individual schools' needs.

Recommendations

Non-maintained settings, nursery and primary schools should:

- R1 ensure that poverty and disadvantage are not barriers to learners developing secure language and literacy skills

R2 develop a culture of reading that encourages and enthuses all learners, including boys and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to read for pleasure and provide opportunities to listen to adults reading aloud

R3 develop explicitly learners' vocabulary knowledge so that it supports the development of their speaking, reading and writing skills

Primary schools should:

R4 develop a clear strategy to support the effective teaching of reading, including addressing learners' decoding skills, vocabulary development and advanced reading skills

R5 provide appropriately challenging and relevant opportunities to support the progressive development of learners' listening and speaking skills, particularly in key stage 2

R6 support the development of learners' writing skills through the explicit teaching of sentence construction, punctuation and spelling, relevant opportunities to write and precise feedback to guide further improvement

Local authorities and regional consortia should:

R7 provide high-quality professional learning that meets the individual needs of settings and schools, to ensure that all learners, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, improve their language and literacy skills

The Welsh Government should:

R8 evaluate settings and schools' use of targeted funding, such as the early years pupil development grant and the pupil development grant, to improve eligible learners' language and literacy skills

Welsh language acquisition

Main findings

Learning and provision for skills

- 1 In settings, most children make strong progress from their starting points and acquire the Welsh language effectively.
- 2 Many learners in most non-maintained settings and primary schools develop their listening skills effectively. They do so by listening attentively to practitioners who introduce vocabulary and syntactic patterns to them in purposeful oral activities. This contributes to the process of acquiring and enriching language as they imitate the language with increasing confidence across the age range.
- 3 Most learners from all linguistic backgrounds interact well with practitioners and their peers as they develop the confidence to communicate in Welsh. They use the language regularly by internalising, speaking and applying it with increasing confidence to communicate spontaneously in Welsh in a variety of formal and less formal contexts.
- 4 Many learners develop their phonological knowledge with increasing confidence in a range of engaging activities across the curriculum. Many practitioners guide learners to hear, recognise and pronounce the sounds of letters of the alphabet accurately. Through shared reading activities with adults and their peers, learners revisit and rehearse their skills in segmenting and combining increasingly complex words. As a result, most make sound progress in their reading skills over time.
- 5 In the foundation phase, most learners begin to understand and recognise the link between spoken language and phonological sounds, and they become familiar with high-frequency words. In key stage 2, many learners read unfamiliar words and form increasingly complex sentences. As learners gain confidence and make progress in their reading skills, they discuss a wider variety of topics.
- 6 Many learners develop their advanced reading skills successfully. They also read text and gather information in one language, and collate, discuss and record the information in another language, usually Welsh or English. This develops learners' translanguaging skills and supports the development of their Welsh reading skills.
- 7 Many settings and schools foster a culture of reading through a well-developed whole-school reading strategy. In the best practice, practitioners provide an engaging and stimulating range of texts for learners. In these providers, learners have access to a specific reading area in the classroom or a school library, where they develop their reading skills independently. In less effective schools, a minority of practitioners in key stage 2 do not provide frequent enough opportunities for learners to listen to others reading Welsh literature and poetry. As a result, a few learners have limited knowledge of Welsh texts and authors, and are not confident to discuss them.

- 8 In most schools, many learners develop their writing skills successfully. In the foundation phase, most practitioners promote learners' writing skills by creating a clear link between listening and speaking, and writing. In key stage 2, many learners develop their skills further by writing increasingly complex sentences. They enhance their work with rich vocabulary and use a wide range of punctuation accurately, when writing different types of texts. As most learners' oral skills develop, this has a positive effect on their writing ability. Currently, a minority of learners do not develop their writing skills to the same standard as their speaking and reading skills. A few practitioners do not provide enough opportunities for learners to write freely and independently, or plan purposefully enough for learners to use their existing knowledge to extend their writing skills further.
- 9 In many settings and schools, most learners apply their literacy skills consistently across the curriculum. When given an opportunity to do so, most develop their oral skills well in a variety of situations and use the Welsh language accurately. They develop their reading skills progressively by reading fiction and non-fiction texts on an interesting range of themes, for example when learning about Welsh heroes. Many learners across the school develop their writing skills in other areas of learning, for example by using imperative verbs when writing simple instructions to make fruit kebabs in the foundation phase.
- 10 Most learners have positive attitudes towards developing their Welsh language skills. They are proud to communicate in Welsh, and understand the value and benefit of developing their Welsh language skills. In the best practice, many providers take advantage of every opportunity for learners to use the language interactively and practically within the school and the local community. By doing so, learners from all linguistic backgrounds use and apply the language competently in a variety of purposeful activities, for example by helping elderly residents from a local residential home to develop their ability to communicate with their families and friends using digital devices.
- 11 In most settings and schools, learners who are identified as being disadvantaged or having special educational needs (SEN) make good progress from their starting points in acquiring the Welsh language. In most providers, they receive appropriate support, and most achieve their personal language targets. Practitioners plan detailed support programmes that meet nearly all learners' general learning needs successfully. However, there is no consistent support for groups of learners with specific language needs, such as global language delay and dyslexia, through the medium of Welsh, or suitable resources available for practitioners to use when supporting all groups of learners, particularly SEN learners.
- 12 Many practitioners plan rich linguistic activities that engage and hold learners' interest. In the best practice, a majority plan to develop learners' language skills progressively as they move through the setting and school. A few practitioners do not enable learners to advance the full range of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, in meaningful and interesting contexts across the curriculum.
- 13 In many providers, practitioners immerse learners in the Welsh language by modelling language well and providing a learning environment that is rich in Welsh vocabulary and syntax. These settings and schools take pride in being communities

with a Welsh-speaking ethos. Over time, a majority of practitioners broaden the range of vocabulary and syntactic patterns that learners use. In a minority of providers, practitioners do not immerse learners well enough in the Welsh language or ensure that developments in one skill, for example speaking, to support and complement the development in another, such as writing.

- 14 Providers that excel in developing learners' language acquisition offer helpful support for groups of learners. They organise language-rich activities to meet the linguistic needs of learners from all linguistic backgrounds. In general, few schools specifically target developing further the skills of learners from Welsh-speaking homes or those identified as more able.
- 15 In many settings and schools where teaching is effective, practitioners develop learners' vocabulary skilfully. This is a strength of the provision and a consistent means of ensuring that learners use and apply increasingly mature and extensive spoken and written language in Welsh lessons and across the curriculum as they move through the school.
- 16 Most practitioners' skills in teaching language and literacy are a strength. They introduce new vocabulary and syntactic patterns ably in rich activities that are planned well. A few practitioners' own communication skills are not secure enough to support learners to use the Welsh language correctly.
- 17 Generally, many practitioners question, monitor and track learners' progress effectively, and plan relevant activities that meet most learners' developmental needs. However, the tracking procedures in a minority of schools do not ensure that all groups of learners make enough progress in developing their Welsh skills over time.

Leadership

- 18 In a majority of settings and schools in which standards of language and literacy are high for all learners, leaders establish a clear vision and a strategic approach to developing learners' Welsh language and literacy skills in an inclusive learning environment. They have high expectations and plan a wide range of opportunities to deepen and support learners from all linguistic backgrounds to take pride in the Welsh language, and use it naturally and spontaneously as part of their education and everyday lives.
- 19 In the most effective schools, leaders develop a strong collaborative culture in which all members of staff have access to and benefit from the school's collective immersion methodology of acquiring a language. They invest in practitioners' skills and expertise through high quality professional learning, which develops their understanding of the best way to develop learners' language and literacy skills.
- 20 In the most effective schools, leaders develop robust procedures to evaluate the impact of teaching and learning experiences on learners' progress. In schools where professional development for language teaching is less well developed, although leaders monitor generic aspects of teaching, they do not focus closely enough on subject-specific aspects of language teaching. This makes it difficult for leaders to

identify precisely practitioners' professional learning needs so that these can be addressed to ensure that staff are more able to develop learners' language and literacy skills. In a few schools, leaders do not always ensure that practitioners are good language role models for learners.

Recommendations

Non-maintained settings, nursery and primary schools should:

- R1 plan carefully for continuity and progression in the skill development of learners from all linguistic backgrounds as they acquire the Welsh language
- R2 provide regular listening and speaking activities to develop learners' vocabulary and syntactic patterns, and encourage them to apply these new skills in formal and less formal activities
- R3 track rigorously the progress, vocabulary development and language acquisition of specific groups of learners, including the more able

Primary schools should:

- R4 provide opportunities for learners to listen to, read and appreciate Welsh literature and poetry by Welsh authors, particularly in key stage 2
- R5 ensure regular opportunities for learners to write freely and independently

Local authorities and regional consortia should:

- R6 provide training to deepen practitioners' understanding of how learners acquire the Welsh language, and in effective language immersion methodology

The Welsh Government should:

- R7 develop national guidelines on language immersion in order to support teaching and learning in Welsh language acquisition

Developments in remote and blended learning practice – The work of further education, work based learning and adult learning in the community providers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Main findings

- 1 The pandemic has caused a paradigm shift in teaching and learning in the post-16 sectors. Providers and their staff across all post-16 sectors have focused their priorities on learners and their wellbeing.
- 2 While there have been improvements in the quality of teaching and learning through remote and blended learning since the start of the pandemic, the quality of teaching and learning online remains variable overall.
- 3 Providers and their staff across all sectors have shown great commitment to developing their skills in remote and blended teaching and assessment.
- 4 Those providers who had begun to introduce an element of remote or blended teaching and learning into their curriculum offer prior to lockdown in March 2020 were in a stronger position to bring other provision online quickly.
- 5 The introduction of remote and blended learning has caused a shift in how providers and staff quality assure online courses and share practice. The greater use of technology enables opportunities for greater reflection on an individual basis and sharing of innovative practice to staff across the provider.
- 6 Adult learning in the community partnerships were disadvantaged in bringing adult learning online because in most cases they do not have centralised IT learning support teams, virtual learning environments and access to shared online resources to support planning and delivery to learners, particularly to those learners who are disadvantaged.
- 7 It has been more difficult to move some courses and programmes into remote learning than other courses or programmes. This has been particularly the case for learners in the further education and work-based learning sectors undertaking apprenticeships and technical courses, as they need to practise with specialist equipment and in specialist facilities, as well as take supervised assessments to demonstrate occupational or professional competence.
- 8 Where staff work in teams to develop remote and blended teaching and learning courses, they are able to share responsibilities, teaching methodology, ideas and resources. This leads in the main to online courses with greater coherence and a good balance of purposeful synchronous and asynchronous activities that promote learning.
- 9 Providers have noted unexpected benefits to taking courses online. For example, the greater flexibility attracts a wider range of learners, as they are able to access learning more easily.

- 10 In the further education and adult learning in the community sectors, providers have adjusted their curriculum offer quickly and appropriately to meet the needs of learners who have lost employment and need to reskill to access the job market.
- 11 Despite their efforts to develop remote and blended learning and assessment methods, providers consider that in too many cases awarding organisations were not agile enough in adapting their requirements. This has left too many learners waiting to complete their qualifications and receive their awards in the academic year 2020-2021. In many cases, this has demoralised learners, and left them unable to make progress in the jobs they are in or unable to apply for jobs related to their qualifications.

Recommendations

Further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships should:

- R1 Quality assure remote and blended learning provision to ensure that all courses or programmes meet a minimum quality standard so as to reduce the variability in provision
- R2 Ensure that leaders and teachers have access to professional learning that supports the development of how to design effective remote and blended teaching and learning, as well as further develop teachers' pedagogical and assessment skills
- R3 Share emerging and innovative remote and blended learning practice within and across post-16 sectors in Wales and beyond

The Welsh Government should:

- R4 Continue to support the sector with guidance to enable providers to develop quality remote and blended approaches, particularly in supporting the return to direct teaching and training and the assessment of practical vocational and technical skills
- R5 Commission professional learning for the post-16 sector, which is free to providers and helps them to develop specific expertise in remote and blended learning design, teaching, training and learning for their sector to reduce variability of quality in provision
- R6 Enable adult learning in the community partnerships and learners to access a national centralised digital platform to provide remote and blended learning more easily
- R7 Encourage and support providers to share emerging practice in remote and blended learning within and across post-16 sectors in Wales

Support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing – The work of further education, work based learning and adult learning in the community providers during the COVID-19 pandemic

Main findings

- 1 The impact of lockdowns and the pandemic on learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing is influenced by their personal circumstances. Key contributing factors identified in our discussions with providers include bereavement, social isolation, uncertainties over qualification assessment arrangements, worries about future prospects, pressures of working long hours in front-line occupations such as health and social care, and the impact of being furloughed or made redundant.
- 2 The switch to remote and blended learning has been easier for some learners than others. Learners who had readily available access to technology and reliable broadband internet connectivity generally found it easiest to adapt to new ways of working. Disadvantaged learners, such as young carers and many traineeship learners, have often faced considerable additional pressure in trying to keep up with their learning given their difficult personal circumstances.
- 3 Since the initial lockdown period starting in March 2020, all providers have made substantial changes to the ways in which they support learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing. Although there have been short periods when a minority of providers have made a limited return to some forms of in-person support due to relaxation of lockdown restrictions, most support has continued to be delivered remotely. Over the whole pandemic period, nearly all providers have made the wellbeing of learners and staff their overriding priority and have worked hard to maintain continuity of support as well as of teaching, learning and assessment.
- 4 What has evolved so far over the course of the pandemic could be described as a 'blended support' model in which support is provided in a variety of ways. These ways include remote telephone call or text messaging support, online video calls and, in a few cases, online chat facilities, as well as more traditional in-person support. During periods when restrictions were eased, nearly all providers continued to provide most of their support remotely rather than return fully to pre-pandemic approaches due to ongoing concerns about the transmissability of the virus.
- 5 The overall effectiveness of support for learners' mental health and emotional wellbeing varies substantially between and, in many cases, within further education colleges, work-based learning consortia and adult learning in the community partnerships. In the best cases, providers have maintained or introduced careful and well-thought-out triaging approaches to identify and prioritise learners who are either at risk or most in need of support. Where support is less effective, providers do not identify and maintain regular contact with those most at risk of disengaging from learning or experiencing difficulties with their mental health and emotional wellbeing, help is mainly provided on a 'first-come, first served' approach and learners often

face lengthy waiting lists for specialist support such as internal or external counselling provision.

- 6 Support is also provided more efficiently and effectively when providers work closely with internal and external partners and specialist agencies. Multi-agency support arrangements are most effective where learners are given a single point of contact. However, arrangements for those learners studying with partner providers and subcontractors to access specialist support for mental health and emotional wellbeing are not always made clear in information made available by lead providers.
- 7 As well as providing targeted direct support to learners identified as needing specific support with their mental health and emotional wellbeing, providers are also promoting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing, for example by holding wellbeing weeks and offering a range of wellbeing-related activities. All providers need to focus more on developing learners' resilience to overcome challenges and prepare them for the world of work following the pandemic.
- 8 As part of their efforts to encourage and help learners with the self-care and self-regulation in order to maintain and improve wellbeing, many providers have made a wide array of resources available to learners and staff. Many of these resources are provided online via learner and staff portals. In the best cases, resources are chosen carefully and reviewed rather than simply being added to online webpages. This avoids overloading users with too much information that is then difficult to navigate.
- 9 Most providers have raised staff awareness of mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. Providers report that this has resulted in staff being better placed to identify and support learners who are struggling, as well as helping the staff themselves in maintaining their own emotional wellbeing. Many providers, especially further education colleges and work-based learning providers, have also invested in additional front-line support roles such as wellbeing officers, resilience and learning coaches, active wellbeing staff and learner engagement officers as part of their learner support provision. There has also been a substantial growth in the training and use of mental health first aiders, especially in further education colleges and work-based learning providers.
- 10 Providers have reported a mixed picture in terms of the number of safeguarding reports and referrals since the outbreak of the pandemic. A majority of providers have experienced increases in the number of learners who have sought support for complex issues such as self-harm and suicidal thoughts and feelings. Most providers have also strengthened their approaches to promoting and ensuring online safety as far as they can, within the challenging context of nearly all learners spending more time online at home often via their own equipment and home Wi-Fi networks.
- 11 Most providers have reported a surge in demand for learner counselling services during the pandemic. Most of this support is now delivered remotely. Although a minority of counselling staff have undertaken specific training in how to provide remote counselling effectively, this is not always the case. Similarly while nearly all counselling staff receive regular clinical supervision to support their own development and emotional wellbeing, similar support is not made available to many staff in other

front line support roles who may also be dealing with complex and distressing cases as part of their work.

- 12 Most providers have accessed additional funds to assist learners with technology requirements for home study and remote support. A few providers do not make enough use of other categories of support funding which could help their learners access other types of support for additional learning needs.
- 13 Although many of the issues associated with the pandemic have presented learners and providers with additional challenges, many providers also recognise that adjustments to the support provision and methods necessitated by lockdown restrictions may present opportunities for improvement in the longer term. For example, providing learners with a greater choice of how they can access support in the future may improve the overall accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness of mental health and emotional wellbeing support.

Recommendations

Further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning in the community partnerships should:

- R1 Target resources to promote positive mental health and emotional wellbeing carefully in order to avoid overloading learners and staff with too much information
- R2 Identify carefully those learners most at risk from disengaging from learning or experiencing mental health and emotional wellbeing issues and monitor their wellbeing on a regular basis
- R3 Prioritise the provision of support according to need to ensure that all learners requiring urgent help with their mental health and emotional wellbeing receive support as quickly as possible
- R4 Work as closely as possible with external agencies to make overall support for mental health and emotional wellbeing as seamless as possible and minimise, or ideally avoid, the need for multiple points of contact
- R5 Make clear how support for mental health and emotional wellbeing can be accessed by all learners, including those studying with subcontractors or partner providers
- R6 Ensure that all counselling staff, and other staff in similar roles, receive appropriate supervision or mentoring and undertake specific professional learning in how to provide remote support effectively

The Welsh Government should:

- R7 Ensure that the outcomes of Welsh Government-funded mental health projects are evaluated fully and share the findings across all post-16 sectors