Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION

A report on the challenges and successes of establishing all-age schools: government response

Our response to Estyn’s report and recommendations on 'A report on the challenges and successes of establishing all-age schools'.

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Publication details

Report title

All-age schools in Wales. A report on the challenges and successes of establishing all-age schools.

Report details

The advice was commissioned by the Education Directorate due to the growing number of proposals to establish all-age schools in Wales. The study considers how successful all-age schools are and whether standards are better in an all-age school compared with separate secondary and primary schools.

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Summary of main findings

The report groups the main findings under three headings, and these are summarised below:

The rationale for establishing an all-age school

1. Despite support for the establishment of all-age schools, there is no national guidance available for local authorities and school leaders. As a result, the all-age schools sector is not currently recognised as a discrete sector well enough.
2. Due to a lack of national guidance, the national network of all-age schools has provided support for each other, brokered grants from external sources and worked to highlight the pitfalls and best practice.
3. Most local authorities anticipate that the benefits of an all-age school will outweigh the disadvantages.
4. Over time, local authorities have learnt from each other's experiences, as well as making use of the research into successful all-age models. As a result, the most recent consultations are much sharper in terms of the benefits of establishing an all-age school and avoid many of the pitfalls experienced by early adopters of the all-age model.

Setting up all-age schools

5. Most all-age schools are formed as a result of closing pre-existing schools and reopening on one of their sites as a new school.
6. Where new, all-age schools have been most successful, leaders and the local authority have engaged well with the local community.
7. Local authorities generally have provided appropriate support for governing bodies during the process of establishing an all-age school. However, support for headteachers has varied across Wales.
8. Planning and preparation time for headteachers prior to opening a new all-age school varies. Where headteachers have had time to consult and

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develop policies and procedures, this has had benefits for the school.

9. School leaders regarded the first year of opening as the most challenging. Improved communication would have avoided many misconceptions and resulted in fewer objections and a less fractious process.

The impact of an all-age school model

10. In nearly all all-age schools, a significant proportion of pupils transition from partner primary schools into Year 7. On transfer from Year 6 to Year 7, schools report that pupils from within an all-age school settle well in Year 7 and make better progress in their first year than those who transition from separate primary schools.
11. Pastoral care and support for pupil wellbeing are a strength in most all-age schools, having been a priority since schools opened. As a result, pupils generally feel safe in school, are well looked after, supported, and valued.
12. Improving teaching is a key priority for all-age schools. Most teachers work together to plan and implement a curriculum that considers progression across all phases. Professional learning arrangements in all-age schools are particularly useful, including the sharing of good practice in teaching internally or between schools. However, external professional learning is often not specific enough for the all-age sector.
13. Overall, successful all-age leadership teams normally comprise of a mix of leaders with different sector backgrounds.
14. The quality of self-evaluation and planning for improvement across the sector is variable. However, in the best examples, schools evaluate provision and standards across and between phases.

Recommendation 1

The Welsh Government should consider introducing national all-age schools guidance to support all-age schools, their leaders, governors and local authorities.

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Welsh Government response

When opening, closing or making significant changes to schools (including opening all-age schools) local authorities must comply with the statutory School Organisation Code and take into account a range of factors. The Code imposes statutory requirements and provides guidance on the process. Local authorities are responsible for planning school places and must ensure that there are sufficient schools providing primary and secondary education in their area. It is for local authorities to determine the pattern of provision.

The Welsh Government will work with partners to consider how best to support local authorities and leaders and governors of all age schools with further guidance. Working with local authorities, regional consortia and the National Academy for Educational Leadership we will also consider how the current leadership programmes can be developed to take into account the specific needs of all age schools.

The Welsh Government notes the comments on the reporting of information on all-age schools and is aware of their strong desire to be treated as a single school, rather than as two parts. Whilst they are consistently referred to as middle schools, including on the My Local School website, it is recognised that the way data is reported could be clearer. Free School Meal eligibility is calculated on a whole-school basis for middle schools. The same approach would be more difficult to achieve for attendance rates, as the data collections are separate and based on different time periods, for the primary and secondary phases. We will seek to improve and clarify the reporting of middle school data.

Recommendations for local authorities / regional consortia

Recommendation 2

Local authorities / regional consortia should: Ensure that consultation on

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establishing an all-age school is meaningful, transparent and helpful in engaging the local community to support change to improve the provision for their children.

Recommendation 3

Local authorities / regional consortia should: Appoint leaders for new all-age schools early to provide enough planning and preparation time.

Recommendation 4

Local authorities / regional consortia should: Provide better focused, sector-specific training and support, for example to improve classroom practice across all phases of the school.

Welsh Government response to recommendations 2 to 4

When proposing significant changes to schools, including closing schools, opening new schools and making regulated alterations to schools local authorities and other proposers must comply with the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 and the School Organisation Code.

Section 48 of the 2013 Act requires that before school organisation proposals are published they must first be subject to consultation. Case law has established that the consultation process should be undertaken when proposals are still at a formative stage and include sufficient reasons and information for particular proposals to enable intelligent consideration and response. It is essential that proposers seek and achieve high standards both in the information that underpins school consultation and in the consultation documents that are published. The Code recognises that failure to provide accurate, high quality consultation documents can result in consultations being abandoned, taking much longer than expected and to increased conflict with communities. The Code sets out the information that must be contained in consultation documents.

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Although there is no requirement to hold consultation meetings most proposers do. Meetings and drop in sessions can assist greatly in the dissemination of information and provide a suitable platform for consultees to make their views known, seek clarification and provide comments.

School governing bodies are responsible for staffing arrangements in accordance with the Staffing of Maintained Schools (Wales) Arrangements 2006.

Where a proposal has been approved to establish a new maintained school, there will be a requirement to establish a temporary governing body in advance of incorporation of the school and a permanent governing body with effect from the date of establishment of the school

Information on the process of achieving these is included in chapter 20 of the **School Governors Guide to the Law**.

Welsh Government provides funding annually to the National All Age Schools Forum to develop and share practice. In partnership with the Forum, we will discuss with regional consortia and local authorities how best to provide better focussed support for the all-age sector.

Recommendations for schools

Recommendation 5

Schools should: Continue to plan and provide a rich curriculum that naturally progresses across the full age range.

Recommendation 6

Schools should: Collaborate further with other schools to develop all-age school policies and procedures, and share good practice.

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Welsh Government response to recommendations 5 to 6

The Curriculum for Wales Framework, supported by the Journey to Curriculum Rollout guidance provides guidance on designing a curriculum and this places particular importance on progression. The mandatory principles of progression, as well as the descriptions of learning in statutory guidance in particular are designed to support practitioners embed progression within their curricula

The National Network also supports schools to share practice around a range of issues relating to curriculum. Progression forms one of the key themes of the National Network conversations.

As outlined above, Welsh Government provides financial support for the All Age Schools Forum to enable schools to develop and share practice. We hope to see the good work of the Forum continue.

Publication details

Publication date 13 January 2022

The report will be published on or after 13 January 2022 and may be accessed on the Estyn website.

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