Delivering a Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing: examples of practice schools reported as helpful

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Glossary

Additional Learning Needs (ALN)
According to the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALN Act), "[a] person has additional learning needs if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability (whether the learning difficulty or disability arises from a medical condition or otherwise) which calls for additional learning provision."

Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinator (ALNCo)
Designated member of staff with strategic responsibility to ensure the needs of all learners with ALN within a school are met.

Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE)
The Curriculum for Wales consists of 6 overarching topical themes, or Areas of Learning and Experience. This includes a Health and Wellbeing AoLE. The AoLEs link to the 4 purposes of the curriculum and national guidance is available to help schools design their curriculum in line with the AoLEs. These AoLEs are sometimes referred to as 'areas'.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
Specialist NHS mental health services that support children and young people's mental health through a mix of primary and secondary care.

Children Looked After (CLA)
A child who is in the care of a Local Authority or provided with accommodation, for a continuous period of more than 24 hours, by the authority in the exercise of certain social service functions.

Curriculum for Wales
An integrated and learner-centred national curriculum which requires schools to design their curriculum (sometimes working with other schools) in line with national statutory requirements and guidelines. The curriculum has 4 core purposes which outline a shared vision for every child and young person. There are also 6 overarching Areas of Learning and Experience.

Eligible for Free School Meals (eFSM)
Free school meals (FSM) are means-tested and available to children and young people attending maintained schools and who meet certain eligibility criteria. Commonly used as a measure of socio-economic disadvantage.

English as an Additional Language (EAL)
Pupils whose first language is not English.

Family Engagement Officers (FEOs)
Family Engagement Officers are employed by schools to build relationships between school and families through offering support, guidance and someone to talk to. Schools may use other names for these roles, such as Family Liaison Officers or Community Engagement Officers.

Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being document

Statutory Welsh Government guidance published in 2021. The framework places actions and requirements on schools to support development of a WSAEMWB. The framework supports a whole school approach to help address the emotional and mental wellbeing needs of children and young people while recognising that schools alone cannot meet all needs of a complex population. The framework is designed to build on the good work that many schools are already doing.

Individual Development Plan (IDP)
A statutory document prepared for learners identified as having additional learning needs (ALN). Among other things, the IDP includes a description of the additional learning needs and the additional learning provision to be put in place as well as who is responsible for delivering this. IDPs include a clear action plan that is reviewed at least annually.

More Able and Talented (MAT)
Learners who benefit from enriched and extended opportunities across the curriculum in order to develop their abilities in one or more areas.

Pupil Development Grant (PDG)
Funding given to schools with the aim of raising the attainment of children and young people from low-income households. PDG is given every financial year and is allocated to schools based on the number of children in the school who meet eligibility criteria. These criteria include eligible for free school meals (eFSM) and children and young people who are looked after (CLA).

Senior Leadership Team (SLT)
Group of staff with responsibility for strategic and operational management of a school.

School Health Research Network (SHRN)
A partnership between Welsh Government, Public Health Wales and Cardiff University which considers policy, practice and research. SHRN aims to improve the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales by working with primary and secondary schools to generate and use good quality evidence to support health improvement.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
Legally binding international agreement which outlines the fundamental rights of all children. In Wales, UNCRC is formally adopted as the basis of policy making in relation to children and young people.

Welsh Network of Health and Well-being Promoting Schools (WNHWPS)
Previously called the Welsh Network of Healthy School Schemes, WNHWPS has supported Welsh schools in embedding a whole school approach to health and wellbeing since 1999.

Whole school approaches
Whole school approaches recognise that it is not just the school curriculum that educates and influences learner health and wellbeing, but all aspects of the school environment (e.g. role modelling of positive behaviour by staff,

other adults and other learners; physical environment; school policies; school ethos; and the learning environment). Whole school approaches work across the whole school community and recognise that each setting is unique.

Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being Self-Evaluation Tool

A tool which helps schools evaluate school progress against the Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being document. The tool facilitates starting, developing and maintaining a WSAEMWB.

1. Introduction

Since 2021, Welsh Government has invested significant and increasing resources into supporting schools develop and maintain a 'whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing' (WSAEMWB). Welsh Government's publication of the Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being in 2021 required schools to consider a WSAEMWB as a key part of their planning (e.g. inclusion on the School Development Plan, or SDP). An accompanying self-evaluation tool and evaluation tool guidance developed by Public Health Wales support schools to deliver their WSAEMWB.

The focus on WSAEMWB has arguably been driven by 2 key factors: concern about the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales and evidence that schools can be important sites for health interventions.

The mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales has been a concern for many years. A key milestone in development of WSAEMWB was the publication of the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee Mind over matter report in 2018. Building on earlier work and stakeholder opinion, the report presented findings from an inquiry into the support available for children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing, including a focus on prevention and early intervention. The report identified the poor state of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing as a public health concern in Wales. Evidence collected by the inquiry included Time to Change Wales figures which suggested that about 10% of young people in Wales would experience a mental health problem with nearly 75% of those young people being worried about how their friends would react if they knew. These trends continue to be of concern. In Wales, as elsewhere, patterns of mental health and wellbeing among children and young people, which were already declining, have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (UNICEF, 2025, Welsh Government, 2022).These have been deepened by the cost-of-living crisis (e.g. Adegboye et al, 2021).There has been an increased focus on school-based mental health support in Wales over recent years (Brown et al, 2023), arguably in response to concerns. This has included WSAEMWB and continued development of school and community-based counselling services.

For a long time schools have been recognised as important contexts for the promotion of mental health and wellbeing of children and young people at a critical time which can influence their future health (e.g. Higgins and Booker, 2023; Wyn et al, 2000). This focus on schools draws on a strong body of research which shows that the characteristics of places can influence health (e.g. Macintyre et al, 2002; Palacios et al, 2020; White et al, 2020).

'Whole school approaches' recognise that it is not just the school curriculum that educates and influences learner health and wellbeing, but all aspects of the school environment (e.g. role modelling of positive behaviour by staff, other adults and other learners; physical environment; school policies; school ethos; and the learning environment). Whole school approaches work across the whole school community. In this research, the whole school community includes everyone that a school engages with to support learners. This

included working with families but might also include professional and specialist services (e.g. CAMHS) or members of the local community (e.g. charities, businesses, local community members).

Whole school approaches are school-based heath interventions that are holistic, working across all aspects of the school environment to produce consistent health messaging and activity which promotes and supports better health and wellbeing. In this report, while 'WSAEMWB' has been used to refer to the specific Welsh Government statutory approach, the term 'whole school approach' refers to the theory and practice of the approach more generally.

Whole school approaches are often recommended as beneficial to improving mental and physical health for children and young people, as well as social, emotional and educational outcomes in schools. Having identified concerns over the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales, the Mind over matter report's key recommendation was that the Welsh Government make the emotional and mental wellbeing and resilience of children and young people a national priority. The report recommended that this included development of a whole-school approach in Wales. While curriculum reform presented an opportunity to embed health and wellbeing into curriculum, the report also said that substantial work was needed to develop successful whole school approaches, including supporting staff confidence and capacity as well as providing guidance and funding for schools to deliver the whole school approach. The report called on the Welsh Government to publish a quick response to the report including a route map to success. In response to the report's recommendation, a programme of work (e.g. Senedd, 2019; Mind over matter: two years on, 2020) including establishment of a new Joint Ministerial Task and Finish Group on a Whole School Approach to Mental Health and Well-being, led to the subsequent development of the Welsh Government's WSAEMWB.

Given the importance placed on the WSAEMWB, as well as the need to support staff in delivery of the approach, this research was purposefully designed to identify examples of practice which schools may find helpful to support delivery of their WSAEMWB and present this practice thematically. Practice was grouped into four areas identified as important for supporting development and delivery of a WSAEMWB:

- area 1: Building a positive school culture that supports delivery of a WSAEMWB
- area 2: Building relationships across the whole school community
- area 3: Aligning the WSAEMWB with Curriculum for Wales
- area 4: Supporting staff wellbeing

Within each area, practice which had similar aims was grouped together. The report presents a mixture of commentary and practice examples from specific schools. Due to the holistic nature of WSAEMWB, there was overlap between areas.

The research was not an evaluation and practices reported as helpful were not independently tested or linked to outcome data. The research highlighted that schools wanted concrete examples to learn from but because each

school is at a different stage of implementing WSAEMWB and their contexts are unique – what works in one school may not necessarily work in another. For example, effective practice in a small, rural school may be impractical for a large urban school. Therefore, examples cannot include a prescriptive set of actions for all schools to undertake to successfully deliver a WSAEMWB. Practice was likely to need to be adapted between schools. Schools are also likely to want to innovate and adapt ideas that are not included in this report. These examples should not be seen as a list of things schools must do, rather they are a resource to help schools consider how they might develop their WSAEMWB. In response to guidance from research participants, this report presents a range of examples of practice as a resource from which schools can select and adapt those which best meet their school's needs and progress on the WSAEMWB journey.

By presenting practice thematically rather than as case studies based around the work being done in just one school, it is intended to help ensure that learning from one context can be applied to other schools to help their delivery of a WSAEMWB. The reasons for this are:

- Case studies that focus on a single high-performing school can set an unrealistically high benchmark, which may discourage schools that are facing challenges. This approach can be counterproductive. Offering multiple examples of practice instead increases the likelihood that schools will identify approaches suited to their own context
- Offering both quick-to-implement practices and approaches that require more time provides schools with ideas that suit different levels of capacity
- In order that learning from specific case studies can be generalisable and transferable to other schools, it was agreed that information about school context will be included alongside descriptions of practice to allow other schools to assess and reflect on their own needs and context and identify what elements may, or may not, work in their own school. School context information is provided in Annex A. Lessons learned are included where possible

Schools drew on a range of funding streams to support activity that enabled a whole school approach, making use of resources that aligned with their priorities. For example, some used Pupil Development Grant funding to address issues linked to poverty as part of their wider WSAEMWB work.

Finally, some individual schools referred to specific programmes they had purchased. Any mention of these programmes should not be interpreted as an endorsement, recommendation, or indication that they form part of the WSAEMWB. They are included solely as examples of how particular schools have approached implementation. As the research did not assess the effectiveness or quality of any programme, references reflect only the experiences of the schools involved.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research stages

The research consisted of 5 stages. Each stage influenced the stages that followed, both through the development of understanding about WSAEMWB and identification of research participants.

- Stage 1: Scoping phase
- Stage 2: Coordinator interviews
- Stage 3: School workshops
- Stage 4: Case studies
- Stage 5: Feedback workshop

2.2. Stage 1: scoping phase

The scoping phase consisted of both interviews and desk research which ran in parallel and allowed finalisation of the research method. This included identification of the four key areas of practice which it would be helpful to explore.

Desk research reviewed a range of evidence on whole school approaches. Sources were identified with input from WSAEMWB stakeholders. This was not a systematic literature review, however incorporating some existing systematic reviews helped strengthen confidence in the findings. Sources largely converged around similar ideas which aligned with insights from the primary data collection, reinforcing the robustness of these early findings. Review of emerging materials continued throughout the project.

Six scoping interviews were conducted with 8 key stakeholders with strategic and national perspectives on the delivery of the WSAEMWB framework, including policy, practice and research insights. Participants received copies of the questions in advance. Interviews were conducted online and lasted up to one hour. Interviews were recorded, written up and analysed in line with the research questions.

2.3. Stage 2: group interviews with coordinators

Online group interviews were conducted with 36 people who supported delivery of WSAEMWB. This included WSAEMWB implementation coordinators and Welsh Network of Health and Well-being Promoting Schools coordinators. In this report, these participants are all referred to as ‘co-ordinators’. Seven group interviews were conducted, one per health board. Group interviews were conducted online and lasted 90 minutes. Participants received a copy of the topics in advance. Discussion was structured around the 4 areas of practice and explored coordinator views on the delivery of WSAEMWB in schools including successes, challenges and practice that they felt was, or that the school had reported to be, effective. Interviews were recorded, written up and analysed in line with the four areas of practice. Coordinators were also asked to help identify settings for stage 3.

2.4. Stage 3: school workshops

Three group workshops were held with staff from 23 schools across all 7 health boards. Participating schools were identified by coordinators as demonstrating delivery of a WSAEMWB that was perceived as effective and

well developed. In schools that took part, staff who attended the workshops were selected because they had good knowledge of their school's delivery of a WSAEMWB; many of them were members of SLT (Senior Leadership Team) including head teachers.

A summary of the workshop agenda as well as the areas of practice (including examples of activity these might include) were provided to participants in advance. Each workshop lasted 3 hours and was held online to reduce the resource cost of attendance to schools. Welsh Government provided funding to cover half-day supply costs to support participation. Discussion explored practice that schools perceived as effective in helping delivery of their WSAEMWB across the four key areas. Workshops were recorded and all areas of practice mentioned were listed and described across the four areas of practice.

2.5. Stage 4: case study visits

Case study visits were conducted in 9 schools that had participated in school workshops. Schools were selected from those that expressed an interest in taking part in case studies and were purposively selected to explore schools where there was a range of different practice across the 4 areas and which was seen as effective. Schools were also selected to represent a range of types of setting.

Each case study visit involved a 1-day visit to the school by 2 researchers to gain a deeper understanding of practice. Prior to each visit, the team reviewed practice described by the school in the workshop and made extensive notes under the separate areas of practice, as well as notes around anything else to follow up. A planning phone call was held with each school during which the practice to be explored was agreed. Methods used during case studies included: learning walks; observation; interviews and group discussions (e.g. with headteacher; SLT; wellbeing leads; teaching and support staff; learners; governors and parents); and reviewing documentation. Schools created a timetable of activity to achieve the aims in a way that fitted best with the school day. During visits, observational notes were made by researchers and written up across the four areas of practice

2.6. Final school sample

Overall, 23 schools participated in the research. Of these schools, 14 took part in the stage 3 workshops only, while a further 9 took part in both the workshops and the case studies.

The sampling strategy was designed to capture a broad and diverse range of perspectives from schools across Wales. This also allowed the research to capture different challenges and models of practice in delivering a WSAEMWB. Schools included 14 primary schools, 6 secondary schools, 2 all-through schools and 1 special school. Of these, 17 were English-medium, 5 Welsh-medium and 1 bilingual (dual stream). While 16 schools were in urban areas, 5 were in rural towns and 2 were in rural villages. Schools included a range of socio-economic profiles as indicated by their Free School Meal Band. Characteristics of the final sample included schools from different health boards across Wales with 3 schools from north Wales, 8 schools from central

south Wales, 7 schools from south-east Wales and 5 schools from south-west and mid Wales.

2.7. Stage 5: feedback workshops

After preliminary analysis of all data, 2 feedback workshops were held to sense-check, validate and refine the findings. These lasted 2 hours and were conducted online to reduce the time commitment on schools. Everyone who had participated in stages 2 to 4 were invited to take part, with 17 people, including coordinators and school staff, attending.

During the session, the research team presented the emerging findings. Attendees were invited to provide feedback, clarify points, and discuss the practicality and usefulness of effective practice examples. The session was recorded and written up. Feedback was helpful in deepening understanding of some of the findings and shaping the final report.

2.8. Steering group

The project has been guided by a steering Group arranged by Welsh Government. The group consisted of Welsh Government officials, academic and public health researchers, and representatives from schools, local authorities, and regional consortia. The group met 3 times during the project: during stage 1 (input on existing knowledge and project design); between stages 2 and 3 (research update) and between stages 4 and 5 (feedback on emerging findings). The scoping group helped inform the objectives and design of the research as well as contextualise some of the findings.

2.9. Bilingual delivery

Delivering the research bilingually was a key and important commitment of the project. All stages of the research were conducted or offered in both Welsh and English, ensuring that Welsh-medium schools and Welsh-speaking participants could fully engage.

2.10. Informed consent

Participants were fully informed of the research before taking part, including information sheets being made available for school case study participants. Written or verbal consent was obtained for all participants. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time.

2.11. Terminology

In this report we adopt the following

- Families to refer to people who are adult figures in a learner's home environment
- Schools to refer to all educational settings who took part in the research
- Learners to refer to pupils (except where pupils are used in quotes, practice examples or for recognised terms such as pupil voice)

Family Engagement Officers (FEOs) are used to refer to roles which wholly or partly focus on engaging with families and community (note: schools used

different terms for these roles, such as Community Engagement Officers and Family Liaison Officers)

3. Area of practice 1: Building a positive school culture that supports delivery of a WSAEMWB

3.1. Introduction

Building a positive school culture which supports the holistic approach of the WSAEMWB is crucial but can be challenging, taking time to achieve and gain buy-in from the school community. The examples in this section include practice which schools reported being helpful for developing and sustaining a positive school culture. Table 2 summarises the practice covered in this section.

Summary of practice, by theme, covered in area 1:

3.1.1. Strong leadership is essential

- Leadership from the top: senior leadership buy-in is essential and head teacher must champion the WSAEMWB
- Have a clear and strong statement of your WSAEMWB ethos
- Integrate wellbeing and the WSAEMWB into school culture
- Take a reflective and evidence-based approach to delivering a WSAEMWB suitable to the school
- WSAEMWB leaders must have strong understanding of, and buy-in to, the WSAEMWB
- Create a WSAEMWB leadership team to help drive change where appropriate
- Need for consistency and role-modelling by WSAEMWB leaders
- Have clear, strong and consistent messaging and communication around the WSAEMWB – consult on what best communication channels are
- Support staff through the introduction and maintenance of a WSAEMWB
- Adopt a growth mindset: accept that some failure is likely and learn from it – communicate successes and failures and how the school moves forward from both
- Support staff when things do not go according to plan
- WSAEMWB can involve different levels of change requiring awareness and consideration of staff feelings or concerns; staff wellbeing needs must be understood and integrated into the whole school approach
- Involve the whole school community, including learners, in development of the WSAEMWB

3.1.2. Understanding the wellbeing needs of the community is vital

- SLT need to be prepared to investigate wellbeing need of the community

- Where available, external organisations which support schools (e.g. coordinators) can support SLT in investigating wellbeing needs of the whole school community
- Combing quantitative and qualitative data to assess and monitor wellbeing need is important
- Staff training, including research design and quantitative skills may be beneficial
- Staff understanding their communities is important, the 'feel' of a school is reported as important in assessing wellbeing and success of WSAEMWB – it is hard to define but can be observed

3.1.3. Work to get buy-in to the WSAEMWB across the school community

- Staff buy-in is important to success of a WSAEMWB and should be part of WSAEMWB planning
- Development of a WSAEMWB should be sensitive to staff concerns and ensure that it does not negatively impact staff wellbeing, including workload
- Supporting staff through development and implementation of the WSAEMWB is important
- It is important to engage all staff from early on: invested staff can advocate to others
- Good relationships and clear communication are the basis for learner and family understanding of, and buy-in to the WSAEMWB

3.1.4. Support learners and families in managing anxiety

- Support from local authority and medical professionals to provide strategies to help learners with anxiety attend school
- Create spaces which support learners who need to take time out of class when they are feeling anxious
- Undertake activity which supports learners struggling with anxiety around public exams

3.1.5. Help learners to express and manage their feelings

- Use of animals which may support well-being. These may be traditional school "pets" or animals brought to schools by teachers or external organisations
- Strategies which allow all learners to express and control their emotions (e.g. worry monsters, emotion picture cards, fidget toys)

3.1.6. The use of wellbeing groups

- Wellbeing groups bring learners together to undertake activity related to wellbeing and support delivery of the WSAEMWB in different ways (e.g. learners help guide wellbeing activity in the school; a group supports learners' own wellbeing)
- Schools should consider the purpose of wellbeing groups

- Schools should ensure that processes for learners to become members of wellbeing groups are appropriate to the group's purposes

3.1.7. Create time in the school day for learners to talk, listen and share their thoughts and feelings

- Most examples in the research were described as 'circle time'
- Commercial circle time models were being used but the PHW WSAEMWB What Works Toolkit points out that circle time approaches are already used in many schools across Wales without extra cost
- Approaches were successfully transferred and adapted between primary and secondary contexts

3.1.8. Design physical space to support learner wellbeing

- Create calm, safe spaces where children can decompress and regulate their emotions
- Create calm, safe spaces where children can be taught outside of the mainstream classroom when needed
- Use lighting, music, natural materials, objects on walls to create a calm environment
- Fans to cool classrooms down
- Reduce screentime

3.2. Strong leadership is essential

Participants often reinforced the importance of senior leadership buy-in to the success of a WSAEMWB. When the head teacher is confident in the approach, and a key champion and leader of the WSAEMWB, this can help secure whole school engagement and sustained commitment. Strong leadership helps integrate wellbeing and the WSAEMWB into a school's culture rather than treating it as 'additional work'. It also helps gain staff, learner and family buy-in.

Putting a leadership team in place to oversee delivery of the WSAEMWB can be of help; the size of school, in terms of numbers of learners and staff, may influence the size of the leadership team and roles of its members. Involvement of other staff in leading delivery can be effective as it brings together different ideas and builds capacity and robustness. For example, in schools where there is only one leader of a WSAEMWB, the approach can stall if that person leaves the school.

Clear, strong and consistent messaging helps embed a WSAEMWB and get buy-in from the whole school community. This includes clear communication about the importance and ethos of the WSAEMWB, using appropriate communication channels. Consultation with members of the school community about preferred methods of communication can help ensure the use of channels of communication appropriate to specific audiences. Regular meetings of staff (e.g. general staff meetings; wellbeing teams) can be an important part of achieving communication, feedback and buy-in. Strong community buy-in to a WSAEMWB can be facilitated by involving the whole

school community, including learners, in the development of the WSAEMWB as demonstrated in the practice examples at the end of this section.

It is important that WSA leaders have a clear understanding of, and confidence in their whole school approach so they can communicate its purpose effectively. When leaders model consistent, positive behaviours, they help embed the approach as part of the school's ethos. Introducing a WSA is an opportunity to strengthen wellbeing across the school community, supporting both staff and learners. As with any change, staff may experience a range of feelings, so being attentive to their perspectives, and working with their questions, concerns and enthusiasm, helps create a supportive environment where everyone can engage with the approach and benefit from it.

Leaders play an important role in supporting staff through the introduction and maintenance of a WSAEMWB, including providing appropriate training to support delivery of WSAEMWB; giving staff confidence to deliver the WSAEMWB and support staff workload to mitigate impacts on staff where WSAEMWB requires more work of them.

An evidence-based and reflective approach to introducing and maintaining a WSAEMWB may help develop a stronger approach suited to the school. Leaders can draw on a range of data sources to help inform and guide their WSAEMWB including: research findings from Wales and beyond; SHRN school reports; talking with other schools in the cluster and elsewhere in Wales; local authority data; PHW What Works Toolkit; PHW WSAEMWB learning reports; school case studies; seeing practice in action in other schools. A successful evidence-based and reflective approach recognises that it is often important to customise practice to the school rather than rely on an off-the-shelf model.

It can also be helpful for schools to adopt what is often described as a 'growth mindset'. This involves recognising that trying new approaches may not always go as planned and viewing these experiences as opportunities to learn and refine practice. Leadership teams can play a key role by encouraging staff when challenges arise, helping them maintain confidence to keep experimenting, adapting, or persevering even when outcomes are not immediate. Being open about both successes and setbacks as well as explaining how the school can move forward from each, helps create a culture where learning, reflection and continuous improvement are valued.

The following examples demonstrate strong leadership approaches to delivery of a WSAEMWB.

3.2.1. Practice example: reflective leadership

Schools L and T are federated primary schools. The schools are approximately 1 mile apart and work closely together. They had a mixed socio-economic catchment with rising poverty. Families had complex needs which were constantly changing. The schools had high levels of learners with Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

While each school had its own identity, the schools shared practice and a strong ethos. The SLT were vocal and committed champions of the WSAEMWB, clearly communicating its purpose and helping staff understand the importance of working to change the culture and develop and sustain the approach. With a strong drive from the SLT, they had developed and maintained a focus on adapting approaches to improve emotional and mental wellbeing, which started with 'seeing and listening'. Non-SLT staff (e.g. teaching staff, teaching assistants, Family Engagement Officers) were involved in leading on WSAEMWB activity as well as contributing to discussion about what was working and what could be improved.

Five years ago, the schools took a step back to look at where they were and where they wanted to be. Working with staff and governors they developed a vision. This starting point had 3 aims: (1) grow thriving, successful learners; (2) lead people to excellence and (3) change community and country for better. This vision continued to underlie all school activity.

The leadership team discussed the need for 'sitting in discomfort' for a while. By this, they meant that you cannot just take a scheme and put it in place, you have to wrestle with how it applies locally. The head said "often you will read a case study, you'll apply the principles because it's worked well in one place. However, it's the discomfort and the cognitive dissonance that comes with it that you need to go through as a team [that is important]." The SLT drew on a range of evidence (e.g. research, examples and theory) to support their approach. They embraced failure and were willing to change and learn. They were reflective and had what they called an 'enquiry lens' which explored where gaps existed. They said that it is important to always remember where they started and see how far they have come and what they did to get there.

Together, the schools took time to understand their local communities, including challenges, barriers and statistics (e.g. literacy levels, deprivation and parental school trauma) and explored effective practice in other schools to assess what would work for them. With a focus on listening, the SLT were drawn to adapting a specific approach based around circle time. Implementation of this approach is discussed below as an example of bringing staff on the WSAEMWB journey.

3.2.2. Practice example: shaping values into ethos

School A adopted 4 core key values: (1) work hard, (2) respect, (3) resilience, and (4) responsibility. Staff reported that these values were not just words on a page, but shaped how teaching, learning and relationships worked across the school.

The values were introduced at the start of each year in assemblies and communicated throughout the school, with staff modelling them and explicitly referring to them in classrooms. For example, in a music lesson teachers might explain that 'respect' means listening attentively during performances. Values were also used to frame conversations when expectations were not being met, providing a consistent language for behaviour and wellbeing.

Leaders emphasised that embedding values was not about token gestures but about shaping the school ethos. One senior leader noted, “part of my role is quality assurance, so I come into lessons and check learning, so it’s about our ethos and [asking], ‘can I see that in the classroom’.” Staff felt that this focus ensured that values were not confined to posters or policies but were visible in daily practice.

The school recognised that resilience is a particular area of concern, and deliberately integrated opportunities to develop it here possible. A good example of this was their use of structured assessment weeks where learners build confidence in exam settings and which is discussed in an example later in this section.

School A’s approach highlighted how a clear, consistent set of values can act as the foundation for a positive school culture.

3.2.3. Practice example: consulting with the school community to develop a vision

Involving the whole school community in development of a WSAEMWB can help create engagement and buy-in. School K bought people together to reflect on what they were trying to achieve as a school community. They undertook extensive consultation to redefine the school vision, including: inviting parents in; speaking to learners; and working with the community to find out what they thought needed addressing. They found that there was a need to focus on creating a positive culture for a school community that faces poverty, not just financially, but also in terms of opportunity, experience and aspirations – issues that had faced many generations of that community. As one member of staff said, "we've got generations of families that have never worked and learners coming in to us with very low aspirations of where they're going to go next."

Consultation led to the development of a new vision, summarised in the motto, ‘every pupil, every opportunity, every day’. The WSAEMWB framework mentions the right for children in Wales to be treated with equality under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Based on the RADY (Raising the Attainment of Disadvantaged Youngsters) approach, their focus on equity meant that working with learners from socio-economically disadvantaged contexts was the ‘golden thread’ that ran across all their work. The school aimed to put support in place where it was needed the most. For example, when looking at absenteeism, they felt that it was important to consider the absenteeism of eFSM (eligible for Free School Meals) learners and whether they needed particular provision or support. The Child Poverty Strategy for Wales: progress report 2025 identifies the role WSAEMWB can play in producing more inclusive education environments and help address the negative impacts that poverty can have on mental health and wellbeing.

Realising the importance of structures to support delivery of the vision, the school developed policies, systems and had staff in place to ensure this happened, including writing it into the SDP as a priority and building it into directed time through the creation of Joint Practice Development Groups, which are discussed in the section on aligning the WSAEMWB with

Curriculum for Wales, including the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE).

School K used the toolkit to look at barriers to learning and examined provisions they had at their disposal, supporting development of educational approaches to suit their learners. This helped make sure that staff had the tools to support both teaching and learning, along with the wellbeing needs of families.

Staff received training to develop a broader understanding of what poverty can look like in the school community. They reported that poverty is not limited to unemployment or eFSM status; it can also reflect reduced access to opportunities and experiences. The school used research and up-to-date information to raise awareness of the different ways poverty can affect children, such as impacts on health, vulnerability, or experiences of bullying.

Training also encouraged staff to recognise that family circumstances can shift quickly. A child who does not appear to need support one week may need it the next, so staying connected to families and being responsive to changes is important. This involves knowing the school community well, maintaining strong relationships with families and cluster schools, and being attuned to the evolving picture. While the school aimed to help families overcome challenges associated with poverty, they also recognised that families may move into or experience deeper levels of hardship over time. To support ongoing monitoring, the school developed a live ‘closing the gap’ dashboard that brings together information about each learner in one place. This is described in more detail later in the section.

Almost all staff were on board with the vision and the WSAEMWB, with high levels of staff engagement indicated by 80% of staff completing a recent staff wellbeing questionnaire. Of these, 88% had said that they found working in the school professionally rewarding which the school interpreted as a sign that staff wellbeing was good.

There appeared to be a strong pupil voice, and members of the School Council reported feeling heard. They had a strong sense of attachment towards the school. They felt that learner relationships were generally very good; while also recognising that not everyone will get on with everyone else. They appreciated the opportunities they had, including wellbeing days which are days every half term where learners can choose to take part in different sessions (e.g. darts, crocheting) for the first 3 lessons and in the last 2 lessons of the day, they all come together for an activity (e.g. quiz, film). They also liked the ‘colour run’, a sponsored event to raise awareness and money for a children’s heart charity, where learners and families run together and get covered in coloured powder which is thrown at them. The school found it was a good way to get families to engage with the school.

When asked what the school does well to help their wellbeing, learners from the school council reported liking: the rooms where they can go to calm down, breathe for an hour or so, before going back to classrooms refreshed; the wellbeing nurse who provides support; and the restorative approach the

school takes. They also valued the recent mobile phone policy which restricted phone use in school and which at least some learners felt had improved interactions in school and made them more likely to come off their screens outside of school. When asked what they would change to improve learner wellbeing they said they would encourage more learners to be expressive and “not held back by their own thoughts”. They would also encourage more people to do sport as they recognised that physical wellbeing is a big part of mental wellbeing. Although some clubs are oversubscribed, which can be a barrier to participation, they would also encourage more people to do after school clubs/lunch clubs as there are lots of options of things to do, with one learner saying, “I’d just encourage more people to find a place where they belong or find somewhere they think would enjoy”.

3.3. Understanding the wellbeing needs of the community is vital

The WSAEMWB framework and self-evaluation tool make it clear that schools need to understand the wellbeing needs of staff, learners and families. Doing so helps schools respond to local need and deliver approaches that benefit both individuals and the school community. Understanding wellbeing need of the community is an ongoing process.

Some coordinators suggested that the first step in understanding wellbeing need is for SLT to be prepared to ask questions about the wellbeing of their community, accept what they find and act on it. Coordinators reported that willingness to do this can vary. Some SLTs are happy to ask questions about wellbeing, even when they are aware that there are unmet wellbeing needs. Others are reluctant because they know there are unmet needs or feel think they already know what responses they would get. Some SLTs were unaware of wellbeing need until they tried to evaluate it. Coordinators have played an important role in supporting SLT to understand wellbeing need, both in terms of how to go about this but also helping those who may have doubts about starting the process. This demonstrates how external organisations can provide important support to SLTs in investigating wellbeing needs of the whole school community. Quantitative and qualitative data were both important for assessing and monitoring the wellbeing needs of the school community and effective practice often combines the use of both.

There are many sources of quantitative data which schools may find useful, including the School Health Research Network (SHRN) survey. SHRN provides robust data covering a number of topics which results from collaboration between Cardiff University, Welsh Government and Public Health Wales. While SHRN is the key Welsh learner wellbeing survey, other surveys may provide additional information. For example, the Swansea University Happen Survey can, in some cases, provide feedback on topics with less than 15 learner responses, whereas SHRN cannot.

Many schools also conducted their own surveys of staff, learners, governors, families and the wider community. For example, schools L and T conducted staff wellbeing surveys every term. When analysed, this data helped inform school strategies and to understand current issues or concerns of the community. For example, School K sent surveys to learners and parents

which helped shape the curriculum, and address issues that were important to the community.

It is important that any surveys created and run by schools collect robust and good quality data. However, it was apparent that it may be helpful to address skills gaps amongst school leadership and staff in the use of quantitative data. For example, eFSM is often used as proxy measure for socio-economic status, deprivation and vulnerability but staff may not be aware that there is evidence that FSM tends to underestimate these (e.g. Taylor, 2017; Bevan Foundation, 2024; Education Policy Institute, 2024). This suggests the importance of capacity building around quantitative skills as part of the WSAEMWB, as well as exploring the use of multiple data sources. For example, schools may consider the following:

- Train staff in research design and analysis (e.g. robust collection, analysis and interpretation of data including understanding the limitations of data)
- Involve members of the school community (e.g. staff, governors, families, local businesses) who have research design skills in the process
- Staff who are asked to collect quantitative data should be taught the importance of collecting data consistently and accurately
- Raise awareness of how to communicate data appropriately to different audiences
- Working as a cluster to improve insights and methods for data collection may be beneficial.

Qualitative data can also help understand wellbeing need. Staff build up professional and personal knowledge of their own school, including the needs of learners and families and how these needs change. This awareness is built up daily through experience, familiarity, observation and interactions. While this sort of knowledge often cannot be quantified and is often not written down, the insights it provides are very important to understanding both wellbeing need and how interactions with communities and individuals should be approached.

A common example of qualitative knowledge cited by coordinators and staff was the ‘feel’ of a school. This was viewed as important for assessing both wellbeing and the success of the WSAEMWB, yet it was difficult to define and even harder to measure. The feel of a school could include aspects of the social environment (such as mood, atmosphere, and how people spoke to one another) and the physical environment (such as lighting and tidiness).

Although ‘feel’ was hard to measure, schools involved in emotional and mental wellbeing work for the WSAEMWB reported that they could tell when change occurred and when culture shifted. Changes in a school can be because of a range of initiatives, policies and shifts in culture, including WSAEMWB. Staff described being able to feel that the school environment was evolving over time, both in the short and longer term.

Change may be observed systematically e.g. lesson observations, learning walks, talking to people formally and informally and general observations. Observing staff and learner behaviour may be valuable when monitoring and evaluating WSAEMWB. For example, staff talked about experiencing and observing better relationships with learners, families and governors. Examples of reported behaviour changes included improvements in:

- engagement from learners
- attention and eye contact
- conflict resolution
- learning outcomes
- general wellbeing

Through observation, SLT members of schools L and T observed positive the positive impacts of WSAEMWB through professional development with staff wanting to progress their careers. They used a qualitative method called ethnography to assess school culture. Ethnography is a method of being part of a group (e.g. classroom) or setting (e.g. school) and using techniques like observation, discussion and document review to understand, record and describe what is going on.

> "We use ethnography in class to 'assess' how the change in culture may be affecting children – and it seems positive. We have low attendance rates, but they are continually, if slowly, creeping up as they build resilience."
> (Member of SLT, schools L and T)

Schools should have confidence in using this type of data and building it into wellbeing assessment and monitoring. Building qualitative insight of the community takes time, effort and development of relationships, which is covered in area 2. The most effective practice is likely to involve mixing quantitative and qualitative data. But this needs to be done with understanding of the limitations and challenges of combining data. An example of the usefulness and challenges of combining data was found in school K.

3.3.1. Practice example: gathering and using data

Staff in school K felt that it was important to combine quantitative data with qualitative information which included their professional knowledge of the community. Their focus on equity meant supporting learners from socio-economically disadvantaged background. eFSM is often used as an indicator of socio-economic circumstances that may affect learners' experiences and opportunities. However, staff in school K felt that the official eFSM figures (42%) underestimated disadvantage in their school, which they felt was substantially higher.

The school found unspecified research by Child Poverty Action Group on hidden poverty which said that an extra 42% of learners in Wales live in poverty but are not eFSM. The school used this data to suggest that a figure of nearer 84% eFSM could be a more accurate reflection of their school. They used this as evidence to make the case that focusing on vulnerable and

disadvantaged learners was likely to help most learners. Applying national statistics to local data in this way is challenging. For example, differences between demographics of the school population and the national population will influence the extent to which a national figure can be applied to any individual school. This demonstrates the potential for quantitative training and upskilling to allow staff to add caveats such as this to interpretation of data. However, it also shows the usefulness of looking for evidence to support and explain what you know about your community. It also demonstrates the importance of schools trusting their knowledge of their communities. Good practice might well mean combining professional knowledge of your community with data to get a fuller picture of wellbeing need.

3.3.2. Practice example: 'closing the gap dashboard'

School K had designed a live platform, which they called a 'closing the gap dashboard', which brought all information for every child into one place. The closing the gap dashboard was for the use of SLT and staff with certain responsibilities; an example of bringing data together in a format that was helpful for all teachers can be found in school A's class rationales which is discussed under area 3. The dashboard held a lot of regularly collected information (e.g. areas of school work that needed to be reviewed; provision that needed to be enhanced, adapted or removed; attendance; achievements; wellbeing provisions that have been identified). It included a radar diagram that brought together all the tracking data available in the school. The aim of the tool was to bring together data and interrogate it in terms of performance levels across different characteristic groupings, for example, eFSM, gender, More Able and Talented (MAT), children looked after (LAC or CLA). Their advice for other schools wishing to do the same included:

- Develop and refine what data is collected and how as it is used
- Adapt how you analyse data and be prepared to learn and respond to what does and does not work
- Make it user-friendly and easy to use as a central point to access all tracking data
- Understand that success is partly dependent on others adding their tracking data; introduce processes to make sure this always happens correctly and on time
- Some data has a shelf-life and needs to be collected frequently; they found some data that was collected yearly needed to be collected termly to ensure reporting is up to date

Any school considering implementing a similar tool should also pay attention to any GDPR requirements.

3.4. Work to get buy-in to the WSAEMWB across the school community

Staff buy-in is important to the success of a WSAEMWB and developing strategies to help achieve this should be part of WSAEMWB planning. Some key considerations for schools starting out on the journey are outlined below. Underlying this is the importance of listening to staff voice, as discussed in section 4 of the report.

Developing and delivering a WSAEMWB can involve a lot of change and managing that change is key to success. Achieving staff buy-in to the WSAEMWB requires sensitivity to the fact that the education workforce in Wales has been through substantial and ongoing change over the past few years and schools highlighted that the impact on staff wellbeing of going through the process of implementing a WSAEMWB should be carefully considered.

Supporting staff through development and implementation of WSAEMWB is important. They may be especially worried that it may add to an already full workload. Staff need to have confidence in their own understanding of the WSAEMWB and the delivery of all activity within it. This begins with ensuring the SLT and WSAEMWB leadership team are confident; external support from coordinators and other experts can help here. Leadership should adopt strategies to address the fact that the WSAEMWB will add new workload and ensure this doesn't have an overall detrimental impact on workload.

Implementing a WSA generally involves adjustments to existing practice, and effective change management is therefore an important part of the process. When planning implementation, it is helpful to recognise the substantial programme of reform the education workforce in Wales has navigated in recent years. Introducing a WSA should be aligned with current priorities and structured in a way that supports staff wellbeing.

During the early stages, staff may require clear information about what the WSA involves and how it will integrate with existing responsibilities. Providing appropriate support can help staff develop confidence in their understanding of the WSA and in delivering associated activity. Ensuring the SLT and the WSA leadership team have a strong foundation of knowledge is an essential first step, and external guidance from coordinators or other specialists can be valuable.

Leadership teams should also consider the implications of WSA-related work for staff workload and plan accordingly. Establishing proportionate and phased expectations can help ensure that the introduction of the WSA is manageable and does not result in an overall increase in workload pressures.

It may not be possible to secure the engagement of every staff member immediately. However, developing broad support across the workforce is important for embedding the WSA and influencing school culture. As understanding and confidence grow, staff who are engaged in the approach can play a constructive role in supporting and encouraging colleagues. Building a critical mass of support can help increase participation over time.

Communicating the WSAEMWB vision clearly to all members of the community is important. Messaging around wellbeing needs to be clear, strong and consistent. Practice like using micro-scripts can help consistency of messaging in schools. Communication also includes supporting staff to understand the importance of the WSAEMWB, its benefits and how it links to learning. While the implementation of WSAEMWB is a statutory requirement, schools reported that there are still some staff who are concerned that

schools are being asked to solve societal issues rather than focusing on teaching. It is important to help staff understand the whole school approach and holistic understandings of health which explain why good health and wellbeing have positive educational outcomes for all members of the school community. When introducing a new activity, helping staff see it in action and to see its impact can also improve buy-in to the idea.

Clear communication includes using communication methods preferred by members of the school community (e.g. particular social media, email, bespoke platforms). It also includes using appropriate language and formats. Schools know how best to communicate with their learners and families and if they are unsure, they should find out. From the start, messaging around wellbeing activity needs to be carefully thought through.

3.4.1. Practice example: change management

School A has had a lot of success in changing culture. While they have made many changes over time, they suggested that it is best to change one thing at a time rather than lots of things at once. Drawing on Kotter's change management model, they said that this has allowed them to sell an idea, get buy-in and roll the change out and then ensure it is working before moving on. If schools are struggling to engage staff, this practice may help because the school reported that each success makes staff more confident that the next change will work. A senior leader in a different school, school B, supported a similar view, reporting that consistency is key to successful change, saying, "you think you might be able to do something for a period of time, but if the consistency of it isn't there over a long more extended period, then it won't succeed".

3.4.2. Practice example: taking staff on the WSAEMWB journey

Part of schools L and T's WSAEMWB practice included adopting a commercial model based around circle time. The model had an ethos and structure focussed on family, belonging and connectedness. It consisted of a session of about 25 to 30 minutes at the start of the day, and about 10 to 15 minutes at the end of the day, which gave learners the space and opportunity to talk and share their feelings with one another, as well as to hear and respond to the feelings of others.

Staff had spent a lot of time adapting the model to their own school using their evidence-based and reflective approach discussed earlier. Topics covered in sessions were planned for all classes in advance and designed to parallel curriculum topics; this was designed at a school level. The model also had flexibility to be responsive to wellbeing need; sessions were a time for learners to share any concerns or topics of their own, and for teachers to listen and observe their class, and deepen relationships. These sessions also fed back into the school curriculum. While the school adapted the model to their needs, they felt that improvements were still needed.

The leadership team reflected on the fact that bringing staff on this journey has been hard and there had been sticking points along the way. Staff with an already full workload, in a sector that has undergone hugely significant legislative, curriculum and system changes since the publication of the

WSAEMWB were understandably wary of what can be more work. While there had been challenges, they have learned from these.

While the SLT could see the benefits of the model, they wanted every member of staff to see it for themselves. All staff went to visit a school that had already embedded the practice, to see it in action and to see its benefits. Following the visit, they put together a working party that included staff from outside the SLT and talked about how they could adapt the model to their bigger class sizes, decide what they wanted from it and work out how to get where they wanted to go.

As discussed earlier in this section, the SLT said that, when adopting a new culture, sometimes it's about 'sitting in discomfort'; not everything is going to be linear and easy, and they reported that the process for the schools "has been bumpy". In addition, they found that time was always a challenge, especially when trying to develop, finesse and embed a new culture. However, there were steps the schools had made to smooth the process, including creating a working party; including all staff in the process; giving staff the theory/reason for change; and giving staff time to learn, collaborate and think (e.g. during INSET). It was apparent that, as staff became enthused, they enthused other staff until a critical mass of staff engagement was reached.

3.5. Support learners and families in managing anxiety

Schools noted that anxiety stems from a wide range of sources, many of which fall outside school life, although the consequences are often felt within the school environment. While some anxiety is linked directly to schooling, much arises from broader societal pressures on learners and their families. Schools reported that rising levels of anxiety in society are contributing to increased pupil absence, driven by both learner and parental anxiety. In response, many schools are exploring ways to support learners experiencing anxiety, which at times includes recognising and addressing parental anxiety as well. One school described how collaboration with their local authority and medical professionals helped them develop strategies to support anxious learners and improve school attendance. Strategies to deal with learner anxiety on a day-to-day basis included taking time out when needed then rejoining the class when they felt ready. Support for learners at these times included:

- Quiet space
- Cosy cushions
- Reading corner
- Cool area
- Low lighting

Since Covid, many schools have reported rises in learner and parental anxiety over exams and a reluctance to sit in public exam halls. Some schools were exploring ways to help manage this anxiety. School M was a secondary school that had adopted the use of circle time for younger learners. Having noticed many learners struggling with anxiety around oral examinations, at the time of the research they were monitoring to see whether learners who had

followed the circle time approach in Years 7 and 8 eventually had more confidence in oral exams. School A provided an interesting example of practice to help tackle exam anxiety.

3.5.1. Practice example: tackling exam anxiety

School A had found that rising learner reluctance to go into exam halls was challenging to accommodate both logistically and financially. While working with learners who needed reasonable adjustments, one of their main wellbeing innovations had been to try and address exam anxiety by introducing an assessment fortnight.

In the last 2 weeks before Christmas, the school came off timetable (1) on Wednesday to Friday in the penultimate week and (2) on Monday to Wednesday in the final week. They adopted a vertical teaching method in which years 7 to 13 were mixed together in different classrooms, undertaking supervised revision and assessment sessions. The effect was that, each classroom had a mixture of different age learners working side-by-side under exam conditions, either revising or doing subject assessments at any one time. As part of the practice for these 2 weeks, staff shared strategies for revision and stress management with learners. Staff also marked assessments during the sessions to reduce their marking workload out of hours and help ensure they had a full Christmas break. Because it was a long time to sit in silence every day, support staff were on hand to check-in on learners.

Assessment fortnight was followed by 2 INSET days so learners finished 2 days earlier for Christmas. Staff had 1 day working at home and the second they had as leave as the INSET had been covered using twilight sessions. On the last day of the assessment period, learners were allowed to wear Christmas jumpers and sometimes had a cookie from the school bakery. Learners got their results in early January, on an assessment results day.

Initially, when implementing assessment fortnight, the school had to alleviate the concerns of some parents but said that many members of the school community (staff, learners and parents) had seen the benefits. The practice was helping normalise exam practice and learners were getting used to exam behaviour from year 7. Attendance was up during assessment fortnight and they reported that fewer learners required special exam arrangements.

In another school (school M) they had noticed that more students had anxiety over doing English/Welsh oral exams and that some learners were not turning up to school because of a general lack of confidence in their oral communication skills. The school had introduced circle time in years 7 and 8, as described below, where they had a weekly chance to talk freely and the opportunity to speak in front of their class. As the first circle time cohort progressed through the school, staff were planning to assess whether this experience of speaking during circle time had also increased learner confidence when it came to oral exams.

3.6. Help learners express and manage their feelings

A variety of practices was used to help learners express and manage their feelings. It is important for learners to be able to identify and share their feelings, and as such these approaches are an important part of a WSAEMWB. The examples of practice below give a range of practice that schools may consider using.

Some schools reported that the use of animals, most often dogs, had positive impacts on learner feelings. Where schools use animals, potential health and safety impacts should be risk assessed and care must be taken with learners who find interacting with animals uncomfortable. As well as dogs, schools L and T used staff contacts to bring different animals into school. This included hatching eggs into chicks, which had now grown and were kept in a chicken coop and the learners helped look after them. Schools reported examples of animals reducing anxiety for learners, for example:

> "This child [in my class] had a real dysregulated moment and was on the floor and the dog came into the class and just laid on the floor next to this child, didn't bark, did nothing, just laid by this child and the child came round just like that and it was as if the dog knew. But the dog laid there and then the dog sat up and sat by that child while they stroked it and stroked it. It was this moment, no words needed to be said, the child needed that connection, they didn't need to engage verbally they just needed the sense of that animal - it was just phenomenal, that experience."

Another set of practices gave learners agency to express and control their emotions. For example, schools have adopted different ways to help all learners (but particularly younger learners and those with ALN) to share their feelings. Different schools and teachers have found what works for their classes, which included:

- Emotion picture cards, sometimes carried on a lanyard by the teacher. These were a series of images that learners could point at to express their feelings without verbalising
- Learners could express their emotions by placing their name in an item, or on a board that represented the way they feel (e.g. their name on a lolly stick placed in the cup with the emotion that best described their own current feelings; name tags stuck onto a board in the section labelled with the emotion which best described how the learner currently felt)
- Worry boxes and worry monsters allowed learners to draw or write their concerns on a piece of paper and 'discard them' in a box or soft toy. In some cases, teachers read these to understand learner emotions. If other schools implement a similar process, they must consider how learners are made aware of what will happen to the information they submit
- Wellbeing benches to promote interaction between learners; learners who felt sad or lonely, or who just wanted to talk could sit on the bench

and learners were encouraged to speak to anyone who was sat on the bench

Some schools provided learners with fidget toys which are tactile objects that can be played with quietly to help calm learners down and manage feelings, improving behaviour and concentration. As well as the examples from school S below, worry stones and worry coins were tactile objects used for learners to play with in order to calm themselves down.

3.6.1. Example: fidget toys

In response to behaviour and concentration issues, school S had invested in a range of quiet fidget toys (e.g. small stress balls; 'poppers' (think rubber bubble wrap for repeated popping), fidget spinners for all learners to use if needed. They also had resistance bands on chair legs so children who tended to move their feet/legs repetitively could do so without disturbing others or swinging on chairs). There was a rule that the rest of class should not be able to hear the fidget toys, so if learners want to tap, they put a blanket under their feet or a mat on the desk so they did not disturb others. Each class also had a wellbeing area which had a pedal gadget so that children could cycle while reading, as the school had found research showing this aids concentration.

3.7. The use of 'wellbeing groups'

Learner wellbeing groups were sometimes used as part of WSAEMWB activity. Wellbeing groups were called different things, but they all brought groups of learners together to undertake activity related to wellbeing and which supported delivery of the WSAEMWB.

Groups worked in different ways, with different purposes, as illustrated by the examples below where one group brought learners together to help guide wellbeing activity in the school while the other bought learners to support those learners' own wellbeing.

It may be helpful to consider the purpose of wellbeing groups in relation to the WSAEMWB and ensure that the ways in which learners become members of wellbeing groups are appropriate to the purpose of the group. For example, if learners volunteer to take part in groups, there may be overrepresentation of learners who tend to volunteer and it may be helpful to find strategies to get broader representation of all learners, especially where wellbeing groups help decide school approaches to wellbeing. Ensuring that learners have agency in these groups and that group agendas are learner-led also helps WSAEMWB (e.g. learner voice is heard; helps develop learner independence).

3.7.1. Practice examples: wellbeing groups

In the primary phase of school K, staff ran a wellbeing club. The club met once a week and staff invited four learners from every class to take part. Learners were chosen because they were likely to benefit from wellbeing club activity which included; opportunities for learners to socialise, including with learners they may not otherwise interact with; circle time for sharing feelings and activities such as sport. Learners were also provided with refreshments.

In school A, the wellbeing group were self-selected. They worked together to improve how learners could access help for their wellbeing needs. They helped improve things for students and raised awareness about talking about feelings. They made sure learners knew about the help available through posters and assemblies. They used questionnaires to understand how support could be improved.

3.8. Create 'spaces for sharing' within the school day

In some schools, wellbeing activity to support the WSAEMWB included creating 'spaces for sharing'. These were times in the school day, or the curriculum, where learners were encouraged to talk, listen and share their thoughts and feelings. Most teachers will recognise the idea of 'circle time' as a generic term for sessions which bring learners together to undertake learning activity, which can include sharing feelings as part of improving social and emotional literacy. While most examples in the research were described as circle time, one school was keen to emphasise that what they were doing was more developed than circle time and did not like to use that term. In some cases, understanding of wellbeing need gained by staff by listening to learners at these times was used to design wellbeing activity as well as to develop the curriculum; integration of WSAEMWB and curriculum is key.

Before looking at examples of practice, it is worth noting that while some schools buy-in models based around circle time, many schools adopt circle time approaches with no extra cost. For example, PHW provide an evidence review of Circle Solutions as part of their WSAEMWB What Works Toolkit (PHW, 2021) which was inconclusive on the effectiveness of this particular commercial approach due to a lack of research evidence.

The way in which schools L and T adopted a circle-based model from a secondary into a primary context is discussed above, as are the ways in which it was linked to the curriculum and even used to develop the curriculum. When observing one of these sessions with year 6 learners who had attended high school transition days the day before, it was clear how the session not only allowed the learners to share their excitement and worries about moving up to secondary school but also allowed the class teacher to see how current class dynamics may be being impacted by differences in transition-related anxiety.

School M had adopted circle time from a primary into a secondary context. Their experiences and advice to other schools are described in the example below. This includes benefits of circle time but also the observation that it may not be suitable for all learners.

3.8.1. Practice example: circle time in a secondary context

School M is a secondary school with just under 400 students. Feedback from pupil voice and SHRN results had helped SLT understand that relationships between learners needed improvement; there was a lot of friction and arguing. Staff also reported that classrooms did not feel coherent, and learners did not seem to act like peers. As a secondary school, staff were initially hesitant about introducing circle time, as it is often associated with primary school practice. However, after piloting the approach, they found it to be beneficial.

Two years ago, the school started introducing circle time with year 7. Staff received training from the local authority Healthy Schools team. One teacher was primary trained and had previously worked in the primary sector. They started with this teacher's form class and then rolled out the practice across years 7 and 8.

Reported benefits of circle time in this secondary school included:

- Circle time was a big help to learners who were struggling with the transition from primary to secondary school
- Learners who were used to circle time in primary school felt it gave them continuity between primary and secondary schools
- While some circle group members were more confident than others, it gave confidence to many learners and encourage them to talk to one another
- Learners felt that it was a good platform to share any concerns when they were experiencing many new things in secondary school
- Learners reported appreciating circle time to discuss what was happening outside of school as well as any worries in school. For example, one learner said that online bullying had been a school assembly topic which was followed-up in circle time group discussion. They found this particularly valuable as there had been issues at the school
- Learners reported feeling that sharing an experience, or hearing an experience shared, made them feel like they were not alone and that other people felt or experienced the same things
- Learners felt they could learn a lot from other people's experience
- Learners reported learning empathy
- Learners appeared to feel connected and trusted the environment, with one learner saying, "I really enjoyed circle time, it felt like a safe space to discuss things"

Challenges to circle time highlighted by school M included:

- Staff capacity and timetabling were barriers to circle time in the school. This meant that learners did not take part in circle time after year 8 although both learners and staff felt that they would benefit from it as they approached exams
- Learners missed circle time and felt they had lost an important space for sharing. They felt that the wellbeing focus was now on physical health. Some learners said that they would start circle time again if they could
- Some learners did not like circle time. For example, one learner said they preferred discussing things 1-to-1 with staff because they felt that they could not trust some people within the class group
- Learner attitudes could influence the success of circle time

School M gave the following advice to other schools wanting to try something similar:

- Follow a structure. School M had bought in an approach that they had found helpful. However, it should be noted that, while commercial approaches are available, the PHW WSAEMWB What Works Toolkit review of Circle Solutions pointed out that circle time approaches are already conducted for free in many schools across Wales
- Be prepared to deal with quite heavy topics. For example, in the past a learner was concerned that their grandfather would die because he was unwell
- If some learners are more reluctant to talk, change the topic
- Some topics may be too sensitive to discuss in a group
- Learner advice to other schools would be: it is important for learners to talk about their feelings and to have the chance to do that; if a school does not do circle time, then they should still provide space for discussion. Sharing emotions also brings people together that may not be in the same friendship groups

3.9. Design physical space to support learner wellbeing

The use of physical space to support family wellbeing and build relationships (e.g. family rooms, community rooms) is discussed in area 2 and the use of physical space to support staff wellbeing (e.g. staff rooms, Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) rooms) is discussed in area 3. However, the use of physical space to support learner wellbeing is an area of the whole school environment that is sometimes overlooked. However, some schools had designed physical space to support learner wellbeing in different ways.

For example, school K had a sensory room in the primary phase, where children could decompress but they also had a sensory classroom to take children out and teach them the mainstream curriculum in a different environment. Learners could then re-enter the mainstream classroom when they were ready.

Secondary level learners in school K also reported that there were rooms where they could go if they were having a bad moment. Learners felt that a space where pupils could regulate their emotions was helpful, with one saying "*if you are feeling a little bit bummed on that day, you can go and sit in the room for maybe an hour or so to like just maybe like calm yourself down or just like have like a nice breath of fresh air and then, you know, that really sometimes that really means a lot to people to have that*." School B had a dedicated space where learners could check in every morning and at the end of the day or if they needed to during the day. Learners could self-refer or be referred by staff. During transition, year 6 learners who may benefit for referral to this space when they arrive at the school were identified.

Some schools had extended notions of calmer space throughout the school, taking time to create calm and productive spaces using:

- Lighting (e.g. low lighting; natural light)

- Music
- Natural materials (e.g. lots of wood; plants)
- Breaking up walls (e.g. pops of colour, pictures)
- School L uses cooling fans, for young learners with ADHD who find the heat uncomfortable and distracting.

3.9.1. Practice example: creating a calming environment

In response to concerns from parents and research into the effect of excessive screen time on children's wellbeing and sleep, school S was addressing the negative aspects of blue light withdrawal by also reducing screen time in the classroom, with one member of staff saying, “If the screen is not needed, it’s not used. The light in the classrooms isn’t on or if it’s needed in darker months only half the lights are put on. The learners get accustomed very quickly.” Staff felt that the atmosphere in the classroom was generally calmer and more productive with these changes. Teaching staff at school S also regularly used background noise or music, played at a low level in the classroom. They said that the music they played was specifically designed for learners with ADHD. It promoted a calming atmosphere, and teachers reported that children moderated their voices in response and that overall noise was reduced.

4. Area of practice 2: Building relationships across the whole school community

4.1. Introduction

Building strong, quality relationships between staff, learners, families and, where possible, the wider community is at the heart of a successful WSAEMWB. If schools take time to build strong relationships it can be helpful for many reasons including: helping create trust, empathy and a sense of belonging; helping produce school and home environments which support all members of the school community; and supporting the activity needed to successfully deliver a WSAEMWB.

The examples in this section include practice which schools reported being helpful for building school-learner relationships and school-home relationships. Schools may also want to consider staff-staff and learner-home relationships as well as engaging the wider community.

Summary of practice, by theme, covered in area 2:

4.1.1. Make connections with learners

- Having staff on the school gate at the beginning and end of day in secondary as well as primary schools can help build connections with learners
- Having staff on classroom doors to welcome learners to lessons can help build connections with learners
- Encourage and listen to pupil voice using appropriate methods; consider and act on what is said and communicate the response clearly
- Learner surveys can help understanding learner perspectives; results can be used to address issues in different ways including curriculum development
- Digital and paper contact forms can be created to allow learners to report concerns to staff which should be responded to in an appropriate and timely manner
- Mobile phone restrictions can improve interactions, but consideration should be given to how best to implement them in any given school

4.1.2. Focus on transition from primary to secondary school

- Focus on transition as a time when the wellbeing of learners and families should be a focus (e.g. managing anxiety)
- Listen to learner and parent concerns and respond to them
- Where possible, build relationships between learners before and after they make the transition to secondary school
- Data sharing arrangements should ensure that all provision in place for all learners in primary school is understood
- Providing enhanced transition activity can benefit some learners

4.1.3. Make connections with families

- Building relationships can be hard and take time, patience and schools describe the need to be a consistent presence. This is particularly true when working with families who feel disengaged and alienated from school, sometimes over multiple generations
- Schools need to be clear about the reasons for community engagement and its relationship to the WSAEMWB; being clear of it helps explain it to others
- Explore a range of communication methods and use those most appropriate to families
- Encourage and listen to family voice using appropriate methods; consider and act on what is said and communicate the response clearly
- Find ways to engage those who are harder to engage (e.g. coffee mornings; practical support; signposting; skills courses)
- Family Engagement Officers (FEOs) are beneficial to family engagement, where schools do not have them the need for other staff to take on this role must be supported by leadership

4.1.4. Providing extra support with food can help support wellbeing and build relationships

- Finding ways to provide extra support with food for learners and families can help create a school culture which supports learner and family wellbeing

4.1.5. Make connections with the wider community

- Whole school approaches work across the whole school community which can be defined as everyone that a school engages with to support learners
- Whole school community includes learners, families and staff, professional and specialist services (e.g. CAMHS) and other members of the local community (e.g. charities, businesses, local community members)
- Making connections across all these members of the school community can be helpful

4.2. Make connections with learners

Building relationships with learners is important to help create a sense of belonging. Belonging is defined by PHW as “feeling an emotional attachment to the school. It includes feeling accepted, respected, included and supported,” (PHW 2024:4). The research suggested that feeling comfortable in school and trusting the people in it are also important to a sense of belonging. This section reports on different types of practice that schools used to help make connections with learners.

Some schools mentioned the importance of staff standing at the door to welcome learners at the beginning of every lesson; partly, this helped build connections with learners.

However, more commonly mentioned practice was primary schools developing relationships with learners and their families by having various combinations of senior leaders and classroom staff stand on the school gate at either end of the school day. Schools S, L, T as well as the primary phase of school K all highlighted this as an important part of getting to know their community, building trust and deepening connection. This early interaction in the day also gave staff an opportunity for early interventions, noticing when something might be amiss with a learner through observation. It also flagged up absences and gave staff a chance to check in with all learners including those considered vulnerable. While described as common practice in primary schools, there was some suggestion it may not happen in every primary school and is certainly far less common in secondary schools. School K, an all-through school, had started putting staff on the gate in their secondary phase to replicate its usefulness in their primary phase, as described in the example below; this is an example of how practice may be transferred between primary and secondary schools.

Listening to learners is important for building relationships between learners and the school. With Welsh commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), pupil voice is fundamental and already integrated into Welsh school practice (e.g. school councils). However, school councils are often self-selected and in workshops it was pointed out that strategies to achieve broader representation of the learner population should be considered where these are used. As with strategies for listening to parent and staff voice, successful approaches to listening to learners often contained these elements:

- Allow learners to express their thoughts and concerns using methods appropriate to the school and individuals (some prompted, some unprompted)
- Consider and act on what learners say
- Communicate school response clearly and using methods appropriate to the school and audience. A good method is to use, “you said, we did…” If the response involves pushing back or saying no, explain why

Many schools had used learner surveys, either to all learners or a proportion of them, to listen to them directly and in a structured way. Feedback from surveys could be shared with members of the community, with staff paying attention to low-scoring areas of wellbeing. These areas were addressed directly with learners, for example through assemblies or special lessons. Depending on the themes coming from the surveys, which were also sometimes used as a wellbeing benchmark, responses may be quick or take more time to address.

Sometimes, surveys raised issues that affected a small number of learners, who were then supported individually or on a small group basis.

Some schools reported that they made adjustments to their curriculum in response to wellbeing challenges identified through surveys as affecting large numbers of learners, or the community in general. In the previous section, the importance of listening to learners through creating time in the day for learners to share their thoughts and feelings was described, as was the way that learning from these sessions could also impact curriculum design.

Making connections with learners may also be helped through the use of contact forms which allow learners to check-in with staff and report any concerns. For example, school K had created 2 digital communication forms for learners to use, as described below.

Many schools are bringing in mobile phone policies, partly to improve interaction between learners. Members of the pupil school council in school K reported that the ban on mobile phones in their school had increased interaction between learners both in and out of school. School B discussed their introduction of a mobile ban which illustrated the importance of several factors which were also apparent in other schools:

- Consultation with the whole school; as with all practice identified in this report, activity must be adapted to suit each school, and a well-designed consultation will help understand how to do this
- Using the consultation findings to identify and address concerns during policy development
- The importance of communication around a ban across a reasonable lead-in period before implementation
- Support for staff to ensure consistent policy implementation

4.2.1. Practice example: staff 'on the gate' in secondary school

School K found value in bringing the primary-associated school gate welcome into its secondary school. Realising that getting to know learners takes time, vulnerable learner leads greeted learners at the various entrances allocated to different year groups every morning and, although it was a recent innovation, had already observed a positive impact on wellbeing, describing the initiative as invaluable.

> "You can see the pupils, you can see if they're looking sad and can intervene then rather than have it roll on and need to be dealt with in middle of a lesson."

Because staff knew the learners, they could also pick up on body language, attitude or anything that could be fed into the team if they sensed something that might need attention. This could have been either a quick word with their teacher at the classroom door, or by dropping a message on Class Charts to the on-call team who could offer immediate help. Staff also reported that they were quicker to pick up on any absent learners, keeping an eye out for those considered vulnerable.

The morning welcome was not just a chance to address potential issues, or to check on an upset learner, but it also created a moment to say hello and share something positive or just to check in.

The initiative, which also supported transition from primary school, seemed to be welcomed by the learners; staff said that if the usual member of staff on the door was absent, learners would often ask where they were.

4.2.2. Practice example: communication forms for learners

Staff in school K recognised that as learners progressed to secondary school, there was less time for learners to have contact with a member of staff who saw them regularly and who could pick up issues early. As well as having staff on the gate in their secondary phase, School K had developed a dedicated area on the wellbeing section of its website, from which 2 forms could be accessed.

The first form was called, 'I wish my teacher knew…'. This form allowed learners and families to report any issues before the school day had started, raising awareness of incidents so that wellbeing support could be ready to go when learners arrived. The school found that the form was used more in the secondary phase. The school had experienced success with this form, including putting learners on their radar who may not usually have been identified as needing support. For example, they talked about a very high functioning learner who staff did not have concerns about and who was not thought of as vulnerable but who had said something using this form which had led to an important intervention and also allowed support to be put in place when the learner moved on to college. Advice for other schools on introducing a form like this includes:

- A timely and appropriate response to reported concerns is crucial
- Do not buy expensive software platforms, use free software (e.g. MS Forms, Google Sheets)
- Make sure the form is suitable for your audience; work with learners to refine design. For example, learners found the form a valuable tool but felt it could be more accessible (e.g. laid out more simply and clearly as they felt someone visually impaired may struggle to read it; a paper version should be available)

The school also used a platform where learners could report being bullied or seeing bullying. To support this staff have had to work against a local culture in the community which promotes 'not grassing people up.' They have also had to work to help learners understand definitions of bullying (e.g. the school will support you if you have had a falling out with your friend, but this is not necessarily bullying). This platform also served as a working document which could demonstrate what actions had been taken in all cases of bullying, as required.

4.2.3. Practice example: introducing a mobile phone ban

"We decided that that was something we felt was needed based on the number of mobile phone points that were coming through, and staff feedback"

In laying the groundwork for a mobile phone policy, school B had asked for feedback from staff, students and parents, opening a consultation to discuss the issue and to explore the feasibility of addressing it. They had gathered information on the positive and negative perceptions of a mobile ban, along with resistance to any imposed ban. Surprisingly, the consultation had revealed that learners were one of the groups most positive about it. With the consultation supporting the initiative, they created a mobile phone policy that tried to mitigate the issues identified in the consultation.

The school used a clear communication plan to make sure the whole school community, including families, knew about the upcoming mobile ban. They talked about it in assemblies, sent letters home and created a countdown as part of the implementation phase.

The school supported the ban by purchasing lockable boxes to store mobiles for learners during the day, which could be accessed for emergencies and medical use. Staff were also given a script if it was needed for any pushback. Staff felt that the mobile ban had been one of the strongest moves the school had made to help improve the school culture, and it had had a positive impact on class attendance and behaviour, along with positive feedback from the whole school.

4.3. Focus on transition from primary to secondary school

Transition is a key point in the school journey of all learners and both primary and secondary schools already put a lot of work into supporting transition. The research emphasised that transition is a key time where learner and family wellbeing should be a focus. Practice which focussed on building relationships between both school-learners and learners-learners around transition included:

- Some smaller schools in a rural area (one of which was school S) took all learners from different feeder schools to a residential towards the end of year 6 (may be harder in schools with more learners)
- Schools should listen to learners to hear their concerns about transition (e.g. through spaces of sharing)
- Recreating primary school practice designed to build relationships (e.g. staff on the gate; trying to provide a consistent staff presence; circle time)
- Avoid learners ‘falling through the gaps’ during transition by ensuring all provision in place for all learners in primary schools is understood. Some workshop attendees commented that schools were looking to have better reciprocal data sharing arrangements between secondary schools and their primary feeder schools
- Enhanced transition for learners who need it. Ideas include extra school visits and transition summer camps
- Managing family anxiety is as important as managing learner anxiety (e.g. school I had a wellbeing consultation where transition families could request to be allocated a member of staff to support transition)

4.3.1. Practice example: enhanced transition

School B undertook a range of enhanced transition activity which they found that more learners needed due to the characteristics of their catchment area. The numbers of learners coming to the school had been increasing which placed a lot of demand on the transition team. Some of the activity they undertook is described here.

The school have a data tracking sheet which collects information about learners coming to the school. Data includes personal and pastoral assessments, medical care and progress in different AoLEs. The school were aware that primary schools may find this data onerous to collate. However, from this data, Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and conversations with primary schools (e.g. head teachers, class teachers, ALNCo) they established which learners may need enhanced transition. Enhanced transition was offered to ALN learners as well as learners who were particularly worried or anxious about the move to secondary school. Enhanced transition activity included:

- Extra visits to the school (up to once a week in the summer term)
- Families being allowed extra visits to look around the school
- Extra visits to learners' primary schools by the transition team
- Taster lessons (e.g. Forest Schools)

Data provided by primary schools also included information on which learners it may be helpful to keep in the same classes. School B also tried to group learners, so they were with other learners from the same broad geographical area. This data was available in Class Charts to inform classroom practice. The school gave an example of a year 6 girl who was new to the area and spoke very little English. The primary school were worried how she would manage, including getting to the school. So, they invited her in and, while her dad waited in reception, asked 2 sixth formers who spoke Arabic to show her around the school. This was highly beneficial and supported her transition to the school.

The school also worked to build relations with families during transition. The school had a very wide catchment area with learners coming from nearly 30 different primary schools, some from quite far away. This could raise parental concerns about how learners would get to school so transition activity included talking with families about different methods of getting to school without being late.

4.4. Make connections with families

Family engagement is vital to a WSAEMWB. Building relationships can be hard, especially when schools are working with families who feel disengaged and alienated from school, sometimes over multiple generations. Where families had bad experiences of school themselves, they can still find it hard to engage with schools, even though they are no longer learners themselves. Building relationships takes time, patience and school staff being a consistent presence. Schools need to be clear about the reasons for community engagement and its relationship to the WSAEMWB; being clear of it helps explain it to others. For example, one school reported that their local authority sometimes questioned why they were doing so much community engagement

when this was clearly fundamental to their ethos and WSAEMWB to support teaching and learning.

Some of the practice observed involved engaging vulnerable and disadvantaged learners and their families. In these contexts, people often need more support, however insights from these practices can be adapted to other schools and to working with all members of a school community.

Schools that were well progressed on their WSAEMWB journey often understood the importance of building relationships with families and undertook a range of approaches to improve how they communicated and what they communicated. Examples of reported practice included:

- Parent survey
- Parents forum
- Parental engagement sessions in school
- Clear contacts on the school website, plus external signposting
- Emailed newsletters
- Apps such as HWB, Google Classroom and Seesaw
- Greeting at the gate
- Family engagement officers (FEOs)
- Parents evenings
- Family events
- Facebook groups

Schools found that these approaches helped improve engagement. Aims of engagement included boosting interest in learners' education, fostering strong relationships and encouraging an environment at home which supported wellbeing and, in turn, learning. Schools said that it has been important to listen to how parents wanted to be communicated with, and to continue a cycle of listening, acting and updating families to improve engagement. Understanding community wellbeing need, as discussed in area 1, was an important part of building relationships.

Listening to families was an important part of building relationships. Some examples of different practice are provided below. As with strategies for listening to learners and staff, successful approaches to listening to parents often contained these elements:

- Allow families to express their thoughts and concerns using methods appropriate to the school and individuals
- Consider and act on what families say
- Communicate response clearly and using methods appropriate to the audience. A good method is to use, "you said, we did…" If the response involves pushing back or saying no, explain that response

It is important to be aware that some people may not understand the need to pursue community engagement. Having a clear and reasoned community engagement strategy linked to school ethos could help schools justify community engagement activity.

Along with general efforts to raise overall parental engagement, schools often needed to develop additional ways to reach non-engaged and less-engaged parents. Some learners had low attendance and came from homes with a complex range of challenges and barriers such as deprivation, low literacy, school trauma and low employment levels. When visiting schools which appeared to have robust practices for working with these families, they were asked how they do this. The take home message was that this is hard and the key to success was persistence, consistency and kindness as well as being to support families there when needed.

Some schools had one or more full-time or part-time Family Engagement Officers (FEOs). While these roles had different names in different schools (e.g. Family Liaison Officer, Community Engagement Officer), we will refer to them as FEOs. Some schools paid for FEOs from the school budget or by accessing funding, although access to funding varied between schools. Schools who had FEOs said that they did not know how schools without them managed to respond to, or engage with families in a deeper, more meaningful and more timely manner than schools who had people in these roles can. Because FEO's time was dedicated to the role – sometimes including in school holidays - they could have a consistent and familiar presence, engaging in activity such as that described in the examples below. In doing so, they ultimately helped create a better home environment to support the wellbeing of learners as well as the wellbeing of families themselves. However, not all schools have FEOs. Where there is no FEO, other staff must take this role on which requires support from leadership (e.g. impacts on workload). With cluster working being identified as important for WSAEMWB, there may also be scope to share an FEO across a cluster. A participant in the feedback workshop said:

> "I was in a large primary yesterday with no family liaison officer, so all staff have a role with family liaison and engagement in that school. I think that was a really nice piece of good practice. They didn't have the money to fund the dedicated FLO so elements of family liaison and engagement is in everybody's [job description], there's an expectation that everybody can be a FLO. And I thought that was really nice. So it was about capacity building."

Below are some examples of work done by schools. Practice can be helpfully classified into the following types of activity which schools may adopt to support delivery of a WSAEMWB:

- Get to know your community
- Be visible and present for families
- Meet people where they are
- Listen to families
- Build trust with families – timely responses and small steps count
- Provide support and signposting for families
- Bring families into school (community and into school itself)
- Develop dedicated spaces to support families
- Parental classes (upskills parents and builds connections)

The examples of practice outlined above are demonstrated in the following case studies.

4.4.1. Practice example: working with families

School T had a dedicated, full time FEO. The school was in an area where there were some significant socio-economic challenges including high levels of distrust, so building relationships and trust took constant effort. According to the FEO, being approachable and non-judgmental was key to building relationships.

The FEO worked hard to engage hard-to-reach families, through providing a constant presence at school drop-off and by becoming a familiar, friendly face. The hope was that this meant that when the FEO did approach families, the FEO felt less like a stranger and were a positive presence. With most hard-to-reach families, it was about taking small steps to gain trust and build connections.

There was no one-size-fits all approach to engaging with parents, so the school had developed a range of ways to encourage a positive response:

- They had a family room, with 2 sofas, soft blankets, muted colours, soft cushions and a calming fragrance plug-in to make the space feel welcoming and relaxing and less like school
- They held coffee mornings
- Practical support came in the form of a food bank and providing uniforms for families who faced affordability challenges
- They ran a parenting course which was not promoted as a parenting course, but as a course designed to help their children. Ten parents who the school thought might benefit were invited by the school for 2-hour sessions, where they had tea, coffee and a chat. During the first hour, parents talked about their struggles, issues and concerns, and got to know one another. Often there were some very strong negative experiences among them, but they learned that they were not alone and that their issues were often ones which had been faced by others. This helped to reduce isolation and gave them ‘permission’ to share their experiences and begin to form a bond. Some mums still met up after the course
- They had a small café which allowed parents who were nervous about leaving their children at drop-off time to sit with a coffee and stay close by for an hour. This sometimes gave peace of mind to their children too, who also often had school-based anxiety
- Involving fathers sometimes involved a different approach which was adapted to suit them better. Rather than sitting and talking, fathers were asked to help practically by building planters, fencing or something to improve the café unit. This still allowed them to talk to each other, and to the FEO and build connections and share concerns

Rather than traditional school term-time contracts, the FEO support ran through most of the holidays, to create continuity of support. This change occurred after the FEO identified that connections developed during term time dropped after a long break and that restarting relationship building in a new term felt like a step had been taken backwards. At the time of the research, engagement often seemed better, leading to improved attendance and better supported families and learners.

4.4.2. Practice example: community engagement

School G was a secondary school with a long and valued tradition of engaging with its community. Its isolated geographical location meant that the school had always been at the heart of the town and supportive of local initiatives to help alleviate social problems and promote wellbeing. The current leadership had deepened and widened these programmes in response to growing pressures from the cost-of-living crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Their approach was evidence led and the SLT had strived to ensure staff buy-in by demonstrating how a focus on learner wellbeing improved behaviour and increased engagement in learning. A wide range of outreach activities in the community were supported with funding and staff release. A community champion had also been employed to work with families needing targeted support and the headteacher acknowledged that funding for that post was vital to the WSAEMWB as it ensured inclusion and participation of vulnerable learners and their families.

School G had created an approach based on these 3 principles:

- responsibility
- respect
- collaboration

Relationships between learners and teachers were seen as extremely important. All staff were trauma informed, including the catering staff. The school expected collaboration between learners and staff and there was a sense of mutual respect throughout the school. Learners had a responsibility to come to school wearing the correct uniform. If they did not then it was their responsibility to collect the right uniform, which was available to them by school reception. There was no stigma attached to this, but it was expected that the learners took this responsibility upon themselves to be correctly dressed

Under the organisation of what they called a ‘community liaison officer’, a series of activities and initiatives had been implemented to tie the school and the local community closer together. These included:

- Donated food from a local supermarket could be used by the Food and Nutrition department with their classes. The learners knew that the food was in the fridge and the most vulnerable knew that they could take the items home without stigma, although it was not clear how this process worked logistically

- Funding had been sourced for a community room where learners could engage in activities with the younger children from a local nursery, playing games and using story cubes. Funding was obtained via a community grant from the local authority

- The same room was also used for Welsh learners to attend an afternoon tea which took place once a month in order to practise their Welsh in a nurturing environment, along with elderly people in the community. Learners served tea and chatted and played games with attendees from the community

- A local florist had taught learners to arrange flowers. Learners used donated flowers from a local supermarket to show their creative skills and arranged flowers for the afternoon tea. The school also offered to deliver flowers for the shop at busy times. If schools involve learners in such activities, consideration needs to be paid to safety and should be supervised with a risk assessment put in place

- The school had links with a community group who worked with disabled children and learners had helped with gardening; they had also attended workshops run by the same organisation which also offered accessible holidays.

4.4.3. Practice example: working with rural communities

Schools working within rural communities faced different challenges to schools where the community was nearer to the doorstep. For example, school M was isolated geographically and was building a community room which will include facilities where outside agencies (e.g. social services) can hold hearings/meetings via video link. This community resource eliminated the need for families to travel and provided a familiar ‘safe’ space in a stressful situation. It also improved communication with services and staff who are often based far from the school. Schools need to adapt to the size and spread of their catchment.

4.4.4. Practice example: overcoming parental bias

Building relationships with families started early for staff at school F. They encouraged a lot of direct contact through phone calls and visits, often facing challenges from parental school biases. They worked hard to make sure the contact was not only when there were absences or other negative reasons for communication, but to share positive outcomes too, and tell families about good days.

With learners often coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, staff at the school had found it important to make interactions and the school environment as positive as they could, and to share that with families. Staff filled Seesaw with pictures, wellbeing links and positivity each day, encouraging two-way communication and interaction through the app.

Where possible, they paired this approach with something that directly impacted the families in a positive way and made the most of occasions when they saw them in person, such as when a family needed a package from the food bank they had set up at the school.

> “We collect food from a local church, so that's a nice way of having a positive connection with parents. They call up and ask for an emergency food parcel, so we supply them with food. Sometimes we'll deliver it, it's making and maintaining those positive links

between school and home. They can see us as [establishment] from their times in school. They've obviously had a very hard upbringing or hated school, and we're fighting against that."

4.5. Providing extra support with food can help support wellbeing and build relationships

As part of a creating a school culture which focused on supporting learner and family wellbeing, some schools focused on ways to provide extra support with food for their learners and families. Sometimes schools drew on existing schemes such as Big Bocs Bwyd, the installation of which should be linked to the 4 purposes of Curriculum for Wales. Some schools provided food for their community in other ways including giving food parcels to vulnerable families or by providing breakfast for learners. Providing food was often also used as an opportunity to connect with families, building and nurturing relationships and trust.

One of the biggest challenges in providing food was that schools across Wales had varying access to connections and links to support this. Particularly, there could be big differences between available support in rural and urban areas. For example, one urban school had links to several big chain stores while a rural school said that with no large shops nearby, these sort of links were harder to establish and maintain. In the feedback workshop, a member of staff from the rural school said, "I was listening to people saying, oh, Tesco gives us this and so on, our nearest Tesco is an hour away, we're rural, you know, we've got a Co-op which work extremely well with us and we have a Spar, so that in itself makes it quite difficult". This shows the importance of adapting practice to each school's context and local resources. It is worth schools noting that some major chains have funding streams to support schools (see example below). School A had a member of staff whose role includes looking for such funding. They suggested that, if schools do not have capacity to do this, they could build it into a staff member's directed time or could work together in clusters to find funding.

4.5.1. Practice example: finding support for food provision

School A had accessed support from at least 2 different major chain stores. The school had what they called a 'community engagement officer' who looked for funding opportunities and who had found that lots of organisations have funding that schools can access. In their school, the bakery chain Greggs had been funding their breakfast club and providing food. At the same time, Tesco had provided lots of fruit for the school; in May and June, they put this out, mainly so that students taking exams had access to fruit, although any learner could help themselves to some.

4.5.2. Practice example: starting with breakfast

School F had noticed that learners were coming to school hungry. This negatively affected things like mood, learning ability and overall wellbeing. After one teacher provided breakfast for their class and saw benefits, the practice had been rolled out across the school; learners and staff now all started their day with breakfast together in each class. Staff used this as an opportunity to provide learners with the energy and nutrition they needed, but also to build and deepen staff-learner and learner-learner relationships.

During breakfast they played games and chatted, making each morning a positive experience and giving the learners structure and stability. Again, funding to support this was important. Extending this practice to all learners is also likely to be easier to do in a smaller school like school F, than in a larger school.

> "I used to buy bread [and cereals] myself…then I did a nurture course for 3 days and I said in an INSET day that I think we should all be doing this. So that's kind of what they did, they did it whole school. They put a little kitchen area in every room with kettles and cereals and toastie makers and it's just gone from there. I think that's where a lot of change has come from. We sit down, we play something with them every morning and I think is really good."

4.6. Make connections with the wider whole school community

Whole school approaches work across the whole school community. In this research, the whole school community includes everyone that a school engages with to support learners. Most commonly, discussion of the whole school community included learners, families and staff. However, the whole school community can be thought of as all the people schools engage with, or who they could helpfully engage with. They may include specialist service providers (e.g. CAMHS), but other members of the community too, such as businesses, local residents, and local charities. Making connections across all these members of the school community can be helpful. Practice working with the wider community that was reported included:

- Using external service providers to support mental health and wellbeing of learners, staff and families
- Engaging with the fire brigade (e.g. fire safety talks and provision of fire alarms)
- Taking learners to into the community to help build community cohesion and interpersonal skills (e.g. local residential care homes). One school reported that, working with a community that experienced multigenerational disengagement from school, taking learners to a residential care home contributed to building greater community-school trust and community cohesion
- Bringing the community into the school to engage with learners also helps build community cohesion and interpersonal skills
- Finding opportunities for support from local business and industry (e.g. for work experience and insights, as discussed in area 3; to help provide food, as discussed above

5. Area of practice 3: Aligning the WSAEMWB with Curriculum for Wales

5.1. Introduction

The WSAEMWB framework makes it clear that WSAEMWB is meant to complement the school curriculum. The examples in this section include practice which schools reported being helpful for making links between the WSAEMWB and the school curriculum. Table 4 summarises the practice covered in this section.

Summary of practice, by theme, covered in area 3

5.1.1. Make clear links between WSAEMWB and curriculum

- Written and non-negotiable expectations for health and wellbeing in the curriculum and monitor that these are done can be helpful
- Monitoring wellbeing need can be used to help develop curriculum
- Outdoor education can help develop connections that support learning

5.1.2. Build wellbeing into directed time

- Build wellbeing into directed time to emphasise its importance as a key part of curriculum and culture and not an 'add-on'
- Use some directed time for wellbeing phone calls to parents
- Directed time dedicated to giving learners positive feedback
- Build time into the curriculum for learners to talk, listen and share their thoughts and feelings; understandings of wellbeing need gained by staff can be used to develop curriculum
- Improvement working groups which focus on wellbeing and the curriculum (e.g. Joint Practice Development Groups which focussed on wellbeing and the Health and Wellbeing AoLE)

5.1.3. Provide learners with opportunities and experience

- Consider how opportunity and experience link to learner health and wellbeing and other elements of the 4 purposes of Curriculum for Wales
- Provide learners experience and opportunities they may not otherwise have
- Show learners career paths they may be unaware of
- Help learners understand progression pathways into careers
- Use local people and former learners as role models
- Promote pathways to suit all learners
- When promoting pathways into higher education, take learners' families on university visits (families can be reluctant for learners to attend university where there is a lack of familiarity with what it entails)
- Connect with local business and industry to arrange opportunities for learners to see work in action
- Help learners prepare for job applications and interviews

5.1.4. Consider the implications of onsite provision

- Where alternative provision is not available onsite, mitigate against potential impacts on learner sense of belonging

5.1.5. Ensure affordability does not exclude learners from lessons

- Use funding to ensure learners are not excluded from curriculum based on their ability to afford equipment (e.g. cookery, music, sport)
- Ensure all learners can participate in lessons regardless of their economic circumstances

5.1.6. Consider what learners understand about wellbeing

- Reflect on how understanding of wellbeing changes as learners progress through school
- Consider how learners understand wellbeing

5.2. Make clear links between WSAEMWB and curriculum

Some schools made clear links between the WSAEMWB and Curriculum for Wales, including the health and wellbeing AoLE. Making deliberate decisions about the links in this way is likely to help embed the WSAEMWB in delivery of the curriculum. Examples of this included:

- Had written and non-negotiable expectations for health and wellbeing in the curriculum and monitored that these were met
- Used monitoring of wellbeing need to develop curriculum
- Used outdoor education to develop connections that support learning
- Built wellbeing into directed time
- Supported staff buy-in to the WSAEMWB
- Help all staff understand the importance of WSAEMWB for positive educational outcomes
- Provided training to support staff delivering new approaches

5.2.1. Practice example: wellbeing need informs curriculum

Some schools used their understanding of community needs, and how those needs changed, to inform curriculum development. Multiple schools who took part in this research sent surveys to learners and parents. The findings of these surveys fed into the understanding of key issues and elements across the whole school including, in some cases, how the curriculum addressed wellbeing. In area 1, it was described how school K sent surveys to learners and parents to develop their understanding of current key issues in the community, and they then used this to redesign the curriculum for the following few terms to make sure curriculum topics and PSE addressed issues that were important in the community. It also described how, in schools L and T, the circle-time based model they had adopted and adapted allowed understanding of wellbeing need to be feed back into curriculum design and allowed staff to understand current classroom dynamics which may impact classroom management.

5.2.2. Practice example: outdoor learning

Taking learners to spaces other than schools is not only about accessing a different environment, but it is often about giving them the opportunity to develop different skills and learn in different ways. Accessing outdoor learning is a good example of this, with many schools providing access to outdoor learning for learners. The use of outdoor spaces should be carefully considered to ensure it proactively supports the wellbeing needs of learners and staff, and the advantages it may offer in contrast with a traditional classroom. School F had well-thought-through outdoor learning practice that underlay a lot of their curriculum.

School F spent a lot of time outdoors with learners, having created different spaces to encourage gardening and landscaping, plus peaceful areas for when learners needed some quiet time. They also had designated outdoor education days and planned school trips that focussed on being outside. Spending time outside with the learners created the chance for 'more natural' conversations, and staff found that young people opened up more, compared to in the classroom, which could be a barrier for some who felt less comfortable in a formal setting.

> "Ten minutes of just walking and chatting about absolute nonsense, then they open up and it just grows into a conversation that's a bit more meaningful. It just happens really naturally. And those bonds on outdoor ed days and trips are the foundation of how of how we go about building our relationships."

Often the advantages of being outside was in building relationships. Working together, side-by-side, could be less intense than face-to-face conversation. Along with a shared purpose, these experiences could help build relationships and trust. One teacher in school F described how they worked with learners who often do not have adult figures in their lives. These learners may feel that they are too grown up and 'cool' to answer to an adult and this could hamper relationship building. However, when they were outside and doing something that was unfamiliar and scary (e.g. surfing, climbing), there were sometimes moment when they needed an adult to rely on and staff were there to be that adult. This provided a moment of dependence, connection and trust that could be built on going forward.

5.3. Build wellbeing into directed time

Building wellbeing into directed time strongly emphasised its importance to staff. It showed wellbeing activity not as an 'add-on' but as expected activity and a key part of curriculum and culture. Examples of the ways schools do this included:

- Used some directed time for staff to make wellbeing phone calls to parents (e.g. schools A, L)
- Directed time dedicated to giving learners positive feedback (e.g. Praise Fridays, school K)
- Build 'spaces for sharing' (i.e. time in the school day for learners to talk, listen and share their thoughts and feelings) into the curriculum; understandings of wellbeing need gained by staff can be used to develop the curriculum, as discussed in area 1

- Joint Practice Development Groups in school K, described below, were undertaken during directed time

Adding WSAEMWB activity to directed time necessitated support from senior leaders to mitigate against its impacts on workload. Supporting staff in terms of delivering the curriculum, including helping with time and workload, are explored further in area 4. School K had created Joint Practice Development Groups, which were an example of practice which both made strong links between the WSAEMWB and curriculum and built wellbeing activity into directed time to maintain wellbeing as high profile and encourage staff buy-in.

5.3.1. Practice example: Joint Practice Development Groups

Staff in school K had built WSAEMWB into the curriculum in different ways. A useful model of practice was their development of Joint Practice Development Groups. These involved Groups of staff from across both primary and secondary phases, and from a range of roles, forming improvement working groups focusing on school improvement linked to the school development priorities. These groups operated across the school in areas such as literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, with one also dedicated to wellbeing and the wellbeing AoLE. These improvement groups worked collaboratively on school priorities in their area of focus, developing understanding and activity. Meeting times of Joint Practice Development Groups were built into directed time once a month and some INSET time was also dedicated to them. This emphasised their value and helped ensure that staff did not see it as an 'add-on' but as part of their role. At the end of each term, there was a showcase where each group presented what they had done, what had been trialled and tested and how this could be rolled out across the school. Having a wellbeing Joint Practice Development Group kept the topic high profile through having a group dedicated to developing and promoting wellbeing activity and providing regular feedback to staff. It also encouraged staff buy-in in a school where wellbeing underlay most activity. It also increased cross-school and cross-phase working and relationships.

5.4. Provide learners with opportunities and experiences

Several schools talked about the importance of creating and exposing learners to meaningful opportunities and experiences. Curriculum for Wales connects the notion of individual health and wellbeing with the purposes of the curriculum such as being independent, confident and informed citizens ready to live fulfilling lives. Therefore, offering learners opportunities and experiences designed to help fulfil the 4 purposes of the curriculum is valuable and can help create links between the WSAEMWB and Curriculum for Wales. When developing and maintaining a WSAEMWB, it may be helpful for schools to consider how opportunity and experience link to learner health and wellbeing as well as other elements of the 4 purposes. This is especially important in communities where many, most, or all learners are likely to have minimal opportunities.

Sometimes, schools provided learners experiences that they may not have outside of school. For example, during the case study visit to one school,

young primary school learners were visiting the beach for the day, many not ever having been before. Schools also offered learners the chance to attend clubs during the school day which gave them access to a range of skills and activities which some of them went on to take up outside school (e.g. joining football teams which could promote physical and mental wellbeing as well as community connection). Knowledge of their community had helped school B to address potential gaps in their learners' wellbeing. They understood that learners might not have access to sports clubs and many green spaces outside of school, so prioritised these physical spaces and activities for clubs at breaktime, lunch time and after school.

Sometimes schools focussed on the idea that "if you don't see it, you can't be it", providing opportunities for learners to see possibilities for future careers and pathways to achieving those possibilities. This may be especially important in areas of high unemployment rates across generations, due to local economic circumstances. Examples of how different schools have provided these sorts of opportunities to learners are described in the examples below and included:

- Showing learners a variety of career paths in different sectors
- Helping learners understand progression pathways into careers
- Using local people and former learners as role models
- Including pathways to suit all your learners, for example:
    - Helping learners see pathways into Higher Education (HE), especially in areas where few people have traditionally gone to university. This could involve taking families on university visits with learners as some families can be reluctant for their child to attend university due to a lack of familiarity with what it entails; showing families the benefits and achievability of HE pathways can help some learners feel able take this route
    - Providing vocational courses for trades-based jobs, especially those in demand locally
- Connecting with local business and industry to arrange opportunities for learners to see work in action
- Helping learners prepare for job applications and interviews

5.4.1. Practice example: breaking barriers and showing possibilities

School K was in an area with generational disadvantage and lack of opportunity, including a tough local economy. Staff reported that both learners and families had a lack of opportunity and staff found that families sometimes did not see or believe in the possibilities that learners' pathways after school could take. Staff talked about creating an environment of 'aspiration' for learners by showing them possible careers, progression paths, local role models and the achievements of past learners. They tried to show learners career paths that they may not have otherwise been aware of. This was demonstrated in the school's approach to introducing the idea of going to university to learners. In an area where not many people had traditionally gone to university, families could be reluctant for their child to attend university due to a lack of familiarity with what it entails or a perception that it

was not worthwhile or not achievable (e.g. too expensive). Staff said that it may not even have been on the family's radar as a possibility. The school also found that some learners who were interested in university were put off by their families. So, the school highlighted university pathways and showed learners what they needed to do to attend. Crucially, when they took even young learners to see universities, they took their families as well so that they could also see that it is something that was achievable and how it could be achieved.

The school was also aware that the higher education pathway would not appeal to lots of their learners. In response to learner requests for information about non-university pathways more hands-on jobs, they provided vocational courses and qualifications including bricklaying, electrical, carpentry, tiling, plastering, and painting and decorating. Many of these courses had the potential to provide high-skilled and increasingly well-paid employment and were also in demand locally. They explained pathways to various careers and sought opportunities with local businesses and industry. For example, they used to regularly take learners to visit the site of a local long-term, large scale infrastructure project involving lots of trades. Learners met key staff and watched the project progress, introducing them to a wide range of potential careers in and around construction.

5.4.2. Practice example: showing possibilities

The importance of including communities and families when it comes to developing a WSAEMWB could be seen in the work done by teaching staff at school F. School F was a special school that took in learners from a wide geographical area and with high levels of deprivation among its intake and their families. Many of their learners had struggled in mainstream school and, in the past, many learners had not gone on to employment. So, a key aim of staff was to encourage learners into employment. Part of this was leaning into learners' skills, but also actively working with local businesses to show what opportunities might be available for them. Garages, mechanics, dog groomers, cafes, restaurants, all sorts of businesses had helped through visits and offering work experience.

> "With regards to aspirations, we try and get people to visit, or we would try to visit professionals, to do talks about the building industry etcetera, to give them some idea of what they can achieve and to hear it from the horse's mouth"

In addition, staff had helped learners prepare for and get to job interviews, and if successful had offered further support such as helping learners with their provisional drivers' licence, getting their ID documents, opening a bank account and helping learners learn how to catch a bus for independent travel. Learners appeared to have found these opportunities motivating and the school reported that these efforts had been rewarded with an increase in the proportion of learners going on to employment or further education.

5.5. Consider the implications of onsite provision

Some participants pointed out that where learners required alternative provision, sending them to external providers could undermine a sense of

belonging to the school. Creating this provision on-site was likely to help keep these learners connected to the school community.

While there are good examples of on-site provision, the ability to undertake this practice was dictated by school size and budget. Some small schools made it clear that it would be impossible for them to ensure alternative provision was onsite. This is important to recognise and, where learners go off-site for alternative provision for some of the time, schools should be aware that this may undermine their sense of belonging and put practice in place to try and maintain belonging. A focus on building connections between these learners and other learners and staff seems important to help this.

5.6. Ensure affordability does not exclude learners from lessons

Curriculum for Wales guidance makes it clear that the school curriculum must be inclusive to all learners. To help address this, some schools used funding (e.g. PDG) to ensure that learners were not unintentionally excluded from the curriculum based on their ability to afford equipment. For example, part of the ethos of school K was captured in the principle that no child should worry about access or provision.

Examples of the way funding was used to create a more inclusive curriculum across schools included:

- All ingredients for cookery lessons were paid for, learners just had to turn up and they could cook. One school reported that it was important to remember that asking for families to pay for ingredients could create additional, ‘hidden’ demands, in particular, time and transport costs to get to the shop
- Music provision was paid for
- Sports equipment was provided (e.g. trainers provided so all learners could use the new 4G pitch)

Secondary phase learners in school K, who were also on the School Council, recognised that this kind of support was provided for learners and valued it with one saying of music lessons, “I like the opportunities they give us, like for example we have music lessons and they're free for every instrument. So we can just sign up whenever you want, if there's space available. [It’s] a very good opportunity”.

School K also highlighted the importance of cultural capital. This included making sure that learners were not excluded based on their experience and knowledge. For example, they would expect staff not to set a task like ‘write about going on an aeroplane’ as they knew that many learners have not been on one.

5.7. Consider how learners understand wellbeing

It may be helpful to think about the progression of how learners understanding of wellbeing changes as they develop.

For example, when asked about wellbeing, primary school learners in one school mentioned words like ‘health’ and ‘being well’ but without any

elaboration. They had all been selected by staff to be part of a wellbeing club to give them opportunities they might not have elsewhere. While they identified their interactions and activities as fun, they were not at a stage where they could relate this to wellbeing.

Secondary school learners, and members of the school council, in the same all-through school, however, understood and described wellbeing more fully. They talked about a difference between physical and mental wellbeing. Explanation of wellbeing focussed on feelings and emotions and how these may impact the ability to engage and perform. Learners in another secondary school focussed explanation of wellbeing on the importance of knowing where to get help as their group's focus was supporting other learners.

It should be recognised that in both secondary schools these discussions were with learners who were members of the school council or wellbeing clubs so may not represent average understanding. However, the findings suggest that as part of their WSAEMWB, schools should reflect on how effectively and appropriately understanding what wellbeing is, is written into the curriculum. This might include understanding of how understanding of wellbeing changes with learner development. Feedback in one workshop supported this suggestion, with a participant saying that when they work with schools:

> "I often ask pupils or what does your school do to make it a healthy school and they'll rattle off things like oh, we're allowed to have water on our desks, we have healthy fruit for break and they'll rattle off some examples. But I'm not sure they understand the why. So, they'll know the actions that they do to make it a healthy school, but it's really getting that understanding of why things we ask about are important".

6. Area of practice 4: supporting staff wellbeing

6.1. Introduction

During the scoping phase, participants reported that the emotional and mental wellbeing of the educational workforce in Wales is low and that activity in this area is likely to be welcomed and have positive outcomes for both staff and learners as part of a WSAEMWB. The scoping phase found a range of research suggesting that improving staff wellbeing also helps improve learner wellbeing. This was echoed by participants in the schools workshop, case studies and the feedback workshops; staff wellbeing was seen as important both in its own right and in order to help create an environment where staff felt supported, listened to and had good mental wellbeing meaning they were well placed to support learners and the WSAEMWB.

Some practice supporting staff wellbeing may be quicker to implement than others. Some staff thought that these 'quick wins' (e.g. providing tea and coffee in staff rooms) were helpful. Others saw them as 'gimmicks' and felt that staff wellbeing can only be improved by providing a professional, supportive and appropriate environment for teaching and learning. However, as suggested by several participants, it is likely that it is important to use a combination of practice as part of a holistic approach to staff wellbeing. The examples in this section include practice which schools reported being helpful for improving staff wellbeing. Examples from school A feature several times because they had worked to improve staff wellbeing across several areas of the school as part of a WSAEMWB, including linking this to the curriculum and improved teaching and learning strategies. Table 5 summarises the practice covered in this section.

Summary of practice, by theme, covered in area 4:

6.1.1. Provide tea, coffee and snacks

- Use school budget to provide tea, coffee and snacks
- Consider the implications of unhealthy snacks on whole school messaging

6.1.2. Put on staff wellbeing activities

- Put on different types of wellbeing activity but be aware that not all staff may enjoy this
- Agree purpose, format and content of wellbeing activity with staff
- Look for funding or links to local businesses to support these activities
- Use staff expertise and skills to run sessions

6.1.3. Provide 1-to-1 personal support for staff

- External support and advice from professionals (e.g. finance, counselling)
- SLT provide and signpost support
- SLT open door policy
- Designated drop-in sessions for staff
- Drop-in support for wellbeing leads

- Provide wellbeing support for head teachers

6.1.4. Signpost wellbeing information

- Email information to staff
- Posters in staffroom / around school
- A one-stop shop for wellbeing information is probably the most effective practice
- Digital one-stop-shops are most useful (e.g. create a Google Classroom / Padlet)
- Allocate an individual or team responsible for managing the one-stop-shop

6.1.5. Allow staff time off for family reasons

- Allow staff time off to attend appointments that may help their own mental health and wellbeing
- Allow staff time off to attend their own children's school events
- Allowing flexibility in the use of Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time

6.1.6. Create an environment that supports teaching and learning

- Appropriate behaviour management policies and practices
- Ensuring staff know that senior leaders are supportive when they implement behaviour policies and practices
- Adopt high quality, whole school teaching and learning models

6.1.7. Support with workload

- Book marking replaced by a dynamic, live feedback model
- Reduced reporting for class teachers
- Reduced out-of-hours exam marking
- Weeks where out-of-hours meetings are cancelled
- Making Quality Assurance processes less onerous
- Make sure all activity has a purpose (avoid box-ticking)

6.1.8. Provide continual professional development opportunities

- Support staff with a commitment to training and Continual Professional Development (CPD)

6.1.9. Redesign staff rooms to support wellbeing

- Redesign staff rooms to focus on rest rather than work
- Design staff rooms to encourage interaction
- Provide facilities for storing and preparing food
- Link to the provision of tea, coffee and snacks

6.1.10. Creating space for PPA

- Create a physical dedicated PPA space
- Create rules to ensure staff doing PPA are not allowed to be disturbed
- Flexibility in where staff are allowed to do PPA (e.g. off-site)

6.1.11. Staff voice

- Allow staff to express their thoughts and concerns using methods appropriate to the school and the individuals involved
- Consider and act on what staff say
- Communicate responses clearly and using methods appropriate to the school (e.g. “you said, we did…”)
- “I wish my SLT knew…” forms

6.2. Provide tea, coffee and snacks

Schools F, K and P reported using the school budget to provide staff with tea, coffee and snacks. Where snacks include unhealthy items such as cakes or biscuits, it may raise tensions with the idea of role-modelling healthy eating behaviour as part of a whole school approach. However, schools felt that these small gestures made staff feel valued and invested in. In schools that were doing this, staff certainly seemed to appreciate it. Where adopted, schools may need to consider how they manage the balance between staff appreciation of snacks and whole school messaging.

However, this may not be possible for all schools to achieve due to local funding decisions and priorities, as mentioned by schools E and W who said this was not an option for their setting. Schools considering purchasing food and drink for staff from the school budget should be certain what local financial rules allow.

6.3. Put on staff wellbeing activities

Some schools said that they found it helpful to put on wellbeing activities for staff. Sometimes these were part of an INSET. Other times they were out of school hours. One school held ‘Wellbeing Wednesdays’ as they worked extended hours midweek. Activities tended to be relatively short sessions doing things that were often creative or involved physical activity. Examples of wellbeing activity from across all schools included: gaming, cooking, yoga, skittles, wreath making with yoga, free swim/sauna/steam in the local leisure centre and walking groups.

School F offered longer activities to staff, with the option to opt into things like day trips, Tough Mudder or weekend trips, with one member of staff saying “we’re going to Manorbier this weekend as a staff. We’re going on the beach all day and then staying at the youth hostel”.

Activities like these are aimed at providing a space to unwind, often within directed time. But schools may find that they can also help build relationships and connectivity between staff. As a member of staff in school K said: “It allows you to have that time to connect with your colleagues and not talk about work and planning and things like that.” As school K was an all-through school (3-18), these activities also helped develop connections across the primary and secondary phase sites.

However, schools should be aware that not all staff may like this sort of activity. Some may feel that they are being forced to do something they would rather not do, which could have a detrimental impact on wellbeing. It may be

helpful to agree the purpose, format and content of wellbeing activity with staff. It may also be important to understand messaging around wellbeing activity. For example, one school focussed an INSET day on wellbeing. The morning involved an evidence-based talk on wellbeing in the school, and the afternoon included different wellbeing activities staff could opt-in to. While some staff remembered the wellbeing activity positively, others said they felt that “graphs don’t feel like wellbeing”. This shows the importance of messaging and being aware of staff perception.

Schools explored various funding avenues to help cover the cost of activities like these and they developed links with local businesses to help provide access to activities. Some schools also drew on staff expertise or hobbies to run wellbeing sessions. Where staff are keen to do this, it can also add to their own sense of value within the school community.

6.4. Provide 1-to-1 personal support for staff

It is vital that staff feel supported for their wellbeing. The provision of 1-to-1 support for staff can help. Many schools will already be providing some level of support. Examples which may be adapted to all school types included:

- External support and advice from professionals (e.g. finance, counselling)
- SLT provide and signpost support (see listening to staff for examples)
- SLT open door policy means staff can get support when they need it
- Designated drop-in sessions for staff
- Drop-in support for wellbeing leads

Examples of professional support provided for staff included schools L and T which brought outside agencies in to help staff understand how to look after their own health and wellbeing (e.g. self-referral to physiotherapists and nurses). This was done as part of professional learning time which highlighted personal wellbeing as important for work. Because GP appointments could be hard to get, they also ran a scheme where they brought nurses into the school and staff could book appointments with them.

Feedback workshops suggested that an area that is probably missing in discussion of the WSAEMWB is support for head teachers who are key to the WSAEMWB approach. Participants suggested that head teachers are least likely to access support for their mental health and wellbeing, despite the demands of their role. Wellbeing support for the head teacher should be considered as a vital part of the WSAEMWB. The governing body and cluster head meetings may play an important role in supporting the head teacher (e.g. cluster heads meetings). External support (e.g. coordinators, counsellors) also have a role to play.

6.5. Signpost wellbeing information

Participants suggested the importance of signposting wellbeing information for staff. As well as information about the WSAEMWB, this included information to support staff’s own wellbeing. Examples of methods for sharing wellbeing information included:

- Emailing information to staff

- Posters in staffroom / around school
- One-stop shop for wellbeing information on staff section of school website which can be accessed when needed
- Create a Google Classroom / Padlet to share information

It is important for schools to understand staff communication preferences. This is because, as pointed out in the feedback workshops, there is so much information given to staff that having one easily accessible place for them to find wellbeing information easily means information is less likely to be missed. Schools reported that where information was provided on an ad hoc basis (e.g. via a member of SLT signposting resources) or in various places, it could be hard to keep track of. For this reason, creation of a one-stop-shop for wellbeing information may be the most effective practice. For example, one school who used to use email to share information realised that staff found it hard to keep up with all the emails that regularly arrived. Instead, they set up a Google Classroom to hold all the information so that staff could access it when they wanted or needed to.

The most useful platforms for one-stop-shops are probably digital ones, which allow staff to access the information they want, when they want it and anonymously. Schools reported that information could include professional information (e.g. WSAEMWB-related information) and information to support personal wellbeing (e.g. counselling services; financial services; benefits and offers for members of staff).

For one-stop-shops to work, it may be helpful to allocate an individual or team responsible for collating and uploading information to the one-stop-shop as well as allowing any staff member to upload and share anything of interest.

6.6. Allow staff time off for family reasons

Participants reported that some schools allowed staff some flexibility to take time off for personal and family reasons in order to support staff wellbeing. This may be for appointments either for themselves or for their families (e.g. health and wellbeing, financial). Participants reported that some schools also allowed staff to take time off to see their own children's school plays or sports days. This flexibility can ensure that staff do not miss out on their own child's key school events, in the same way that they make efforts to ensure that their own learners' families engage in this type of important event. Teachers' children could also find their teacher family members were absent from these events. With the WSAEMWB placing emphasis on family health and wellbeing, there was a strong feeling that allowing staff to attend school plays and sports days, for example, can contribute to staff's own families' mental wellbeing, and therefore staff members' mental wellbeing.

If adopting similar approaches, schools need to consider how they can cover staff who are absent. Larger schools may have better capacity to cover this internally by moving PPA around, for example.

6.6.1. Practice example: 'family first'

School F had a philosophy of 'family first' as part of their strong commitment to staff wellbeing. School F is a special school and recognised that their staff

needed to have good wellbeing, with a member of SLT saying “I think about staff wellbeing, for us, our staff obviously can't do the work they do with the children, with the needs that our children have, unless they're in a good place.”

The SLT at school F worked to support staff in making sure that their families and work-life balance were recognised as a priority and tried to help them by giving staff time to attend school plays, children's sports days and appointments (e.g. doctors, banks) which could be hard to fit in around the usual school day. As the head said, “all the different things that often when you're working as a teacher you have to forfeit a lot of these.” They also helped achieve this work-family balance by giving staff a full day of PPA with their wellbeing charter saying that the PPA day can be used however staff want to use it as long as the work that needs to be done gets done.

With many teachers talking about heavy workloads and long hours, staff in school F talked about feeling supported, listened to and seen when they are treated with fairness. This might be when their own children are poorly or have an event, or when they put in hours outside of the school day:

> “I was in here 6:45 setting up Sports Day, our old head would have probably kept us here ‘till the time we’re meant to go, but [the new head is] like ‘guys you’ve done a shift, go home’. Little tiny things like that really count for me. I've got 2 children, and if there's things like I want to see my daughter’s concerts he says ‘just go’, it's those little things are really nice.”

6.7. Create an environment that supports teaching and learning

Some participants felt that the main part of a WSAEMWB that can support staff wellbeing is for leadership to create a professional environment that supports their teaching and learning. In a demanding profession, it was seen as important that staff feel they are working in an environment where senior leaders put into place strategies to support their practice. The following practice examples highlighted some ways that different schools have addressed this, and include:

- Providing appropriate behaviour management policies and practices
- Ensuring staff know that senior leaders are supportive when they implement behaviour policies and practices (e.g. SLT on-call to support challenging behaviour)
- Adopting high quality, whole school teaching and learning models
- Use of class rationales as explained in the example below

6.7.1. Practice example: supporting behaviour management

Providing an environment which supports staff by managing behaviour can help staff wellbeing. For example, in school M, staff were frustrated because they felt that bad behaviour was a big issue and there was a lack of structure to deal with it. In response to staff, the SLT put together a behaviour group with the headteacher and any other teachers that were interested. A new

system was put in place which, after some teething troubles, had helped improve the situation.

Two schools reported having SLT on-call to help manage challenging behaviour from learners. There was not a one-size-fits-all approach to this and SLT on-call worked in 2 ways. In one school, the member of SLT would take over dealing with the challenging behaviour (e.g. remove a mobile phone) allowing the staff member to focus on the rest of the class. In the other school, staff found it more helpful if they take ownership of the challenging behaviour themselves, with the member of SLT looking after the rest of the class in the meantime:

> "If a child is dysregulated for example, we've got an SLT on-call button where they will then come in and take our role, and then we will deal with the child in crisis. That's really made a difference in the relationship between the teacher and the child because …we don't pass behaviour on, it's everybody's responsibility. I believe that, if I do an SLT on-call for a child in crisis or they are dysregulated within my classroom, if I then press an SLT on-call and then [a member of SLT] comes in and takes over that behaviour, surely that's showing that child that I can't deal with that, I'm passing that on. So, we will have a little restorative approach. We know our children best. We know the strategies that they need."

6.7.2. Practice example: support quality teaching and learning

From the headteacher downwards, school A placed a heavy emphasis on a professional environment that supports teaching and learning as a key element of supporting wellbeing. This message was consistent across all SLT. Although SLT recognised that getting all staff on board was a challenge, they said that most staff were invested in changes made to the learning environment both to improve learning and teaching and to support staff and that this was important to success.

At the SLT level, there was a belief that good quality teaching was important to support the mental wellbeing of learners. They felt that high quality teaching is important to help encourage learner engagement and connectedness with school. The school model was built on putting quality teaching and learning first. They said that good lessons meant learners were well-regulated and ready to learn which meant staff were more positive too. Happier staff are good role models and can be more engaged both in the classroom and outside the classroom (e.g. running after-school clubs). The school had a very consistent, directed teaching approach. Consistency of staff behaviour was seen as vital for wellbeing, especially for anxious learners, or others with wellbeing needs. They expected all teachers to follow the school teaching model the majority of the time. This meant that learners knew what to expect regardless of the teacher (e.g. they could walk into any class and know what the structure would be). This ensured high-quality, structured teaching and learning while still allowing teachers to express their own personalities in their

teaching. The teaching model also supported workload as described below in the section on support for workload.

One of school A's key practices for supporting learners and staff was their 'class rationales.' These were similar to the 'class on a page' used in some primary schools, but they were considered more unusual in a secondary school setting as teachers lead more than one class and need to complete one for every class that they teach. Class rationales were documents which summarised essential information about each class, including data from their learner information system, attainment levels, eFSM, EAL (English as an Additional Language), MAT learners and key adaptive teaching strategies for individual learners. These helped the teacher-learner relationships to develop as staff knew learners better and this also impacted whole-class teaching. In workshops, another school was interested in learning more about the way that school A worked at a class-level. An introduction to class rationales was a key part of induction for new staff to ensure buy-in and consistency.

The school dedicated time at the start of the year through one of the INSETs for staff to prepare these rationales. Various documents (e.g. pupil learner plans, pupil learner records, pupil passports) were summarised into relevant, subject-specific strategies. Class rationales included lots of information and the documents and their ongoing implementation were quality assured by a member of SLT who led on the strategy. Their contents included:

- Provisions for learners. For example, a learner's plan might have specified and agreed approaches to working with them to create positive interactions.
- Wellbeing information. For example, a learner who valued kindness might be given classroom responsibilities to hand out books to build confidence and engagement, which then encouraged them to do some writing which they may not enjoy doing, or may not normally want to do
- ALN and wellbeing were reported to often go hand-in-hand, so this information was shared in class rationales too (e.g. whether learners had issues in the home)
- Subject-specific considerations were also included (e.g., knife skills for learners with dyspraxia in Food Technology, or private changing arrangements in PE for learners with anxiety around PE - the school had seen a huge increase in this since Covid, especially as a lot of primary schools had taken to having children come to school in their PE kits and then all of a sudden they had to use changing rooms
- Heads of Department contributed shared strategies for common needs to class rationales (e.g., eFSM, EAL, skills support), while individual teachers wrote the ALN and wellbeing sections of the rationale. This split of workload contributed towards balancing personalisation with workload management
- Information from pupil passports was also included. Pupil passports were created by the ALN team and included 'what's important to me' and 'how you can support me' sections. They were reported as

invaluable for quickly building relationships (e.g. hobbies that may form a talking point; informing staff that a learner won't make eye contact). These passports, along with information on provisions accessed, were stored on a shared staff portal. The school prioritised giving teachers time to read and use them as they believed staff needed to have evenings, holidays and weekends kept protected as free time

Class rationales were stored on a shared Google Drive for staff to access. They were used to support learner transition between year groups and teachers. The school had seen improved learner-staff relations due to the improved understanding teachers had of all learners and because the rationales helped to embed appropriate classroom management.

The use of class rationales could generate a lot of work for staff. As well as building this into directed time, space for this and other wellbeing activity was also created by reducing staff workload in other ways, as describe in the next section.

6.8. Support with workload

It is well documented that workload is a key concern in the education sector. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that when understanding staff wellbeing, some schools found that help with workload had the potential to result in large staff wellbeing gains. Some schools felt that addressing workload was the main way that they could support staff wellbeing. The research suggested that when asking staff to take on more work to help ensure delivery of a WSAEMWB, it is necessary to free up time elsewhere. Incorporating wellbeing activity into directed time is covered in area 3. The following examples outline other practices that schools had found helpful, including:

- Book marking replaced by a dynamic, live feedback model
- Reduced reporting for class teachers
- Reduced out-of-hours exam marking
- Weeks where out-of-hours meetings are cancelled
- Making Quality Assurance processes (e.g. lesson observations) less onerous
- Make sure all activity has a purpose (avoid box-ticking)

6.8.1. Practice example: removing book-marking

As described above, school A had implemented the use of class rationales which, along with other wellbeing activity that was being undertaken as part of a WSAEMWB, took up a significant amount of staff time. The school believed that achieving work-life balance was important to staff wellbeing and had reduced the staff assessment workload by introducing a no book-marking policy. Instead, teachers used live feedback in lessons. To support this, staff used a clear and consistent lesson structure, which also provided consistency for learners. Lessons followed the well-established, "I do, we do, you do" model with 20 minutes of silence in the 'you do' session during which staff circulated and gave live feedback. This feedback was more immediate and dynamic and freed up time from book-based marking. SLT felt that it was

important to emphasise that this was not a ‘no feedback’ rule, it is about giving a different form of feedback and only works when the teaching structure is in-place to support it. School A reported that another school had tried to adapt the no book-marking policy without adopting the teaching structure to support it, and it did not work. This demonstrates the importance of reflection and adaptation when adopting activity from other schools.

School A, had also streamlined reporting with departmental reports being generated using grades only. Staff felt that this only worked because it was supported by making regular phone calls home so that families were always in touch with how learners were doing. They had also changed their mock examination procedures, largely in response to concerns over examination anxiety but the new model also reduced out-of-hours exam marking workload for staff, as described in area 1.

6.8.2. Practice example: easing workload

School M conducted a survey with staff about wellbeing. They learned a lot about staff wellbeing from this survey, finding that staff wellbeing was facing some challenges. In response, the school had done several things.

First, they redesigned the calendar. This included introducing Wythnos Aur (Golden Week) which were weeks placed at strategic points in the calendar when staff may be more tired. During this week, meetings normally held before or after school were cancelled and teachers were encouraged to go home on time and not take work with them. This was not compulsory, however, as it was recognised that some teachers would find it stressful to not be able to prepare at home. The initiative had received good feedback and staff welcomed having the choice.

Second, school M had cut down on lesson observations, the number of which was adding too much to workload. Similar approaches were seen in school F where, alongside the use of learning walks by SLT, staff were allowed to record a lesson observation of their choice (although it had to be related to the current school focus) and send it to the SLT to review.

On reflection, SLT in school M felt that other existing QA (Quality Assurance) processes could also be improved to make them less onerous and more productive. As a result, more work scrutiny took place during existing meetings rather than using extra time in the timetable. Senior staff now wrote reports rather than the form teachers. They also gave bespoke support to staff who needed it. Staff reported improved communication and understanding; interviews with staff and senior leaders across the school’s small team strongly suggested that they were on the same page. Staff said that the leadership team were mindful of everybody’s workload and did not do something just for the sake of box-ticking. There was an understanding that senior management and staff would help each other out.

6.9. Provide continual professional development opportunities

When designing their WSAEMWB, it is helpful for schools to think of supporting staff Continual Professional Development (CPD) and training as part of their wellbeing strategy. This is for 3 reasons apparent in the fieldwork:

- Building individual development and staff progression helped build confidence and satisfaction both on a career and personal level
- Staff development was important to create, maintain and develop staff understanding of both the WSAEMWB and activity undertaken within it
- Staff training could be used to develop staff relationships (e.g. sending staff who wouldn't normally work together on the same course)

6.9.1. Practice examples: supporting staff CPD

School A had a strong commitment to staff training and CPD. They had a successful internal coaching programme where they trained certain teachers to become coaches for other teachers (e.g. newer teachers). They made sure that staff had time to do this by providing lesson cover. All internal CPD was led by SLT and included different streams and programs that staff could put themselves forward to do; SLT found that staff interest in this CPS was often a good indicator that a member of staff might be looking for career progression which could be supported. The school also sponsored staff to undertake master's courses and reported that they were keen to do so. They also had a member of staff currently doing a PhD. They sponsored staff to do academic qualifications because they believed it was important to support staff on their own learning journeys. This kind of support helped contribute to staff wellbeing.

School M reported that there were no barriers to staff who wished to explore or experiment in their teaching and that the new curriculum had helped make this possible. They gave the example of a teacher had been supported to attend a residential course to improve their Welsh which had several consequences: it resulted in this staff member feeling valued and the school felt that investing in this member of staff in this way also equipped them to take on more subject responsibility and benefited school capacity and ultimately, the experience of learners.

6.10. Redesign staff rooms to support wellbeing

Staff rooms are important spaces for staff to relax and engage. In this way, they are important both for supporting rest during the day and for helping develop and maintain staff relationships. The research suggested that success of staff rooms in bringing people together might vary depending on the size of the site. For example, a large school may have several staff rooms while a small school may only have one. The size of the staff team, the size of the site and the number of staff rooms may all impact the ability of staff rooms to help create community, which may be easier in smaller schools. In schools with more staff rooms, other means of creating community between staff may be important (e.g. training, working groups, social events).

Some schools had been able to redesign their physical environment to support staff wellbeing. However, schools will have different access to space and funding for this. The examples below highlight different ways in which staff rooms had been redesigned to make them spaces that better supported wellbeing and encouraged interaction between staff.

6.10.1. Practice example: a staff room that focused on rest rather than work

School K recognised that the environment staff had access to throughout the day was crucial to support their wellbeing. They had invested in revamping staff rooms in both the primary and secondary phases. Work-related fittings were removed, with the redesign emphasising comfort and a suitable environment in which to take a break. The space had given staff the chance to more fully step away from their work during their breaks, fostering better relationships and improved wellbeing. School M had also created a new staff room. Again, the aim was to make it a more pleasant place to be able to relax in. This included designated seating areas with comfortable sofas and a kitchen area.

6.10.2. Practice examples: smaller changes to staff rooms

Some schools made small additions to their staff rooms. While they were sometimes part of a wider refurbishment, such smaller changes could also be adopted where schools do not have the resources or appetite for large-scale change. For example, school S had a whiteboard for staff to share messages. The primary phase of school K had a staff 'shout-out board' where staff could provide positive feedback on other staff; staff were reported to buy into this and people tended to get excited when there was a shout out. In several schools the provision of drinks and snacks in staff rooms was also considered a part of wellbeing. Other additions included:

- Plants
- Pictures
- Soft furnishings
- Recycled / reused items like Kilner jars and decorative pieces

6.11. Creating space for Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time

While the purpose of PPA is to create space in staff schedules for non-learner-facing work, it was reported that staff could encounter challenges to making the most of this time including a lack of suitable, quiet space to do their work or find they were interrupted during their PPA time. In response, school K used their budget to create a PPA room, as described below. But not all schools will have the space or budget to do this. Where this is the case, schools could implement a rule that if someone is doing PPA, they must not be disturbed. However, this would need to be continually reiterated and reinforced as a physical delineation of space can be more effective than having a general rule. To help, some schools allowed PPA at home; some staff preferred to come into school for PPA while others preferred to work at home.

6.11.1. Practice example: creating a PPA room

At the same time as altering their staff room, school K had recognised that there was an issue with PPA. In the secondary phase, a lot of PPA ended up being done in the staff room, where people were disturbed. Staff feedback to SLT highlighted that this was an issue and that it would be good to have a space dedicated to PPA, which would also help make the staffroom a work-free space. As a member of staff said,

> “We do a lot of PPA in the staff room, and sometimes there could be a lot of disruption going on there and we just wanted that space where we could just have that time if we needed to [work], having that quiet time. They've put on that action now and they’re building in a room for us so then we've got…that quiet space, we've got that time there. So, it's nice to feel listened to.”

6.12. Staff voice

While listening to staff was important to all aspects of delivering a WSAEMWB, it is included here under staff wellbeing. Some examples of different practice are provided below. As with strategies for listening to parent and pupil voice, successful approaches often contained these elements:

- Allow staff to express their thoughts and concerns using methods appropriate to the school and the individuals involved
- Consider and act on what staff say
- Communicate school response clearly and using methods appropriate to the school and audience. A good method is to use, “you said, we did…” If the response involves pushing back or saying no, explain why

6.12.1. Practice example: ‘I wish my SLT knew…’ forms

Schools F and M both used an “I wish my SLT knew about me” form. This mirrored forms for learners discussed in area 2 and allowed staff to share personal or professional information with SLT. School F discussed how some staff also used this form to identify other staff who were struggling. School M used this form to help staff on a 1:1 basis, although this was a smaller secondary school where it was reported that the staff knew each other well, they appeared to feel comfortable approaching one another.

6.12.2. Practice example: listening in an open forum

School F consulted staff in a difficult, yet open conversation around feelings concerning new processes. In this case, SLT listened to criticism in an open forum without immediately reacting or responding so that staff were given the opportunity to speak freely and knew that their opinions had been fully heard. The conversation was supported by a professional counsellor who was employed by the school and who acted as a mediator. Positive outcomes included the development of mutual understanding, the opportunity to identify any misconceptions, and building trust. Active listening without attaching blame to opinions was reported as hard but important to do.

7. Conclusions

7.1. Schools reported a wide range of practice which they felt supported delivery of a WSAEMWB

Schools reported a wide range of practice which they found to be beneficial to support delivery of the WSAEMWB across the 4 areas of practice. However, all schools are different and what may one in one school may not work in another and so it important to adapt activity to support a WSAEMWB so that it works in each school. Summaries of practice that schools found helpful are presented at the start of areas 1 to 4 but some key, overarching, findings from schools included:

- Leading from the top is essential and the head teacher must be one of the champions in any size school; SLT buy-in is key
- Strong leadership is important; it is reflective and supportive and makes the WSAEMWB a part of school culture and not just an 'add-on'; it considers and responds to staff feelings and concerns and works to get buy-in across the whole school community
- Involve the whole school community in development of the WSAEMWB and use clear, strong and consistent communication of the WSAEMWB and its ethos, using appropriate communication channels
- Understanding the changing wellbeing needs of the community is vital and can feed back into WSAEMWB activity including curriculum development
- Building strong, quality relationships between staff, learners, families and, where possible, the wider community is at the heart of a successful WSAEMWB; this can be hard and involves listening to people and responding to them in a timely and appropriate manner
- Building relationships can be hardest when working with families who feel disengaged and alienated from school, sometimes over multiple generations; it can take time, patience and being a constant presence
- Dedicated FEOs are crucial for community engagement in schools who employ them however, in schools that do not have FEOs, other staff have to take this role on
- Schools need to be clear about the reasons for community engagement and its relationship to the WSAEMWB; being clear of it helps explain it to others
- Aligning the WSAEMWB to the curriculum is required by the WSAEMWB framework and making strong links can help the curriculum respond to local wellbeing need and also help embed the WSAEMWB into school culture rather than being just an 'add-on'
- Staff wellbeing is important both in its own right, and in order to help create an environment where staff feel supported, listened to and have good mental wellbeing meaning they are well placed to support learners and the WSAEMWB

7.2. Barriers and challenges to delivery of a WSAEMWB

A range of barriers, challenges and caveats were evident across the different types of practice described by schools as useful to help deliver a WSAEMWB. Some key, overarching, barriers are outlined in this section.

7.2.1. Funding and resource challenges

It was clear that, at a time where school, local authority and government budgets are stretched across the board, Welsh Government has invested significantly in the WSAEMWB. However, a challenge to a lot of practice that supported WSAEMWB remained the variability in the ability of schools to prioritise and access funding and additional resources to support their whole-school approach wellbeing activities. A head teacher in one of the feedback workshops said, "*it comes down to funding and capacity…and at the moment funding is not nearly good enough for schools in Wales, across the board*." The funding challenge facing many schools were evident across all stages of the research and also in several areas of practice. For example:

- Schools had varying access to funding to support FEOs
- Schools had varying access to support from local retailers, particularly national chains including potential differences between urban and rural schools

  Varying access to space and grants to convert to PPA rooms or community rooms

If WSAEMWB remains a policy priority, especially as its importance to help deliver other policy and strategy areas increases, it is crucial to continue to support it with funding that is effectively distributed.

7.2.2. Differences in understanding between different stakeholders

It was clear that policy makers, public health officials and school practitioners sometimes spoke in different terms, with different frames of reference. Three examples of this included: the use of evidence; understanding of 'aspiration'; and understanding that wellbeing does not involve continual, linear improvement.

First, policy makers and health professionals emphasised the importance of evidence (e.g. Public Health Wales have provided schools with a What Works Toolkit providing evidence-reviews for a range or practice). However, it was reported that schools often did not engage with this evidence.

A second example was difference in understanding and the use of the term 'aspiration'. The way that some schools spoke of aspiration suggested that they saw it as an individual-level characteristic that some learners lacked and that it was the school's job to give them this aspiration. Curriculum for Wales guidance also states that, "a school's curriculum should raise the aspirations for all learners". However, health professionals emphasised that levels of aspiration are created by the contexts in which learners live, including their exposure to opportunities. It is, therefore, helpful to use the language of 'opportunity' and schools can foster aspiration through creating and exposing learners to meaningful experiences and opportunities.

Finally, there seemed to be important differences around the way some schools thought about wellbeing and the way that some health professionals thought about it. When some participants talked about wellbeing, it appeared as though there was an expectation of linear improvement in wellbeing across a learner's time in school. In this way, it felt like discussion of curriculum progression. However, there is evidence of global patterns of decline in mental wellbeing among young people beginning from younger ages. Also, health professional input into the project was keen to emphasise that wellbeing is created through a combination of individual and societal factors and does not improve, in a linear fashion, across the life course. Rather, wellbeing fluctuates for everyone. Therefore, schools are not going to be the entire solution to what is substantially a societal problem. It is unrealistic for schools to expect themselves to be able to improve mental wellbeing for all learners in a linear fashion. Wellbeing cannot be thought of in terms of progression in this way. Understanding this would help schools be realistic in the expectations that they set for themselves and others. In turn, this would reduce the likelihood of disappointment from outcomes being measured against unachievable and unrealistic targets.

Among those working on the WSAEMWB initiative, there should be an awareness of potential gaps between school, policy and public health understandings which may need to be addressed.

7.2.3. Lack of support for head teachers

The importance of supporting staff wellbeing emerged from the research as important, however, discussion of the WSAEMWB seemed to miss enough consideration of support for head teachers. Given the importance of head teachers as champions, schools should consider supporting head teacher wellbeing as a vital part of the WSAEMWB. The governing body and cluster head meetings may play an important role here as well as external support. Coordinators also have a role to play in supporting head teachers and ensuring support for head teachers is built into a WSAEMWB.

7.3. Cross-sector and cluster working are valuable to the WSAEMWB

Collaboration between schools can clearly be helpful to delivery of a WSAEMWB in many ways. School collaboration shares experience and practice in delivery of a WSAEMWB as well as resources, skills and knowledge. Two types of collaboration were seen in this research: collaboration between primary and secondary schools, and cluster working.

The first was collaboration between primary and secondary schools. This was already common and was seen as increasingly important. An example was where practice traditionally seen in primary schools was being adapted to secondary schools (e.g. circle time) and vice versa. This was particularly important given the Curriculum for Wales focus on 'stage not age' and the fact that lower levels of mental wellbeing are being seen in younger learners. Collaboration between sectors was also seen as important to support transition which was identified as a key time for mental health and wellbeing of learners.

Cluster working is also increasingly important for school improvement, as well as the move towards curriculum development at a cluster rather than a school level (which also supports transition by creating more common experiences between learners from feeder schools to the same secondary school). Suggestions from participants as to how cluster working could help delivery of a WSAEMWB included:

- Finding funding sources (e.g. this could help spread the cost of funding a staff member role to include finding and applying for funding sources)
- Developing links between wellbeing and curriculum (strengthened by the move to cluster working for curriculum development)
- Supporting head teacher wellbeing
- Understanding community wellbeing needs
- Sharing experience, ideas, skills and practice around WSAEMWB
- Developing community relationships (e.g. potential for FEOs to work across clusters)

7.4. Schools reported that implementing a WSAEMWB was beneficial

Finally, schools who were successfully developing and maintaining a WSAEMWB, reported that they found it beneficial. Report benefits included: improved attendance; reduced anxiety; greater resilience; calmer environments; improved relationships across the whole school community; better engagement with learners, families and to a lesser extent the wider community; improved 'feel' of the school; increased opportunity for learners; learners identifying pathways of interest beyond school; improved staff wellbeing; more staff development and progression. This must be caveated with the fact that the research engaged with schools who were selected because they were well progressed with WSAEMWB and seeing the benefits of activity in this space. However, these schools, and the coordinators supporting them, felt that the benefits were worth the investment because most importantly, these all combine to deliver the safe, inclusive environment with a clear ethos and sense of wellbeing in schools, delivering improved support for all learners' mental health and wellbeing.

Annex A: School contextual information

School	Participation	School type	Number of learners	Language of delivery	FSM band	ALN band	Rural/urban classification
School A	Case study School	Secondary	1000+	English medium	3	1	Urban city and town
School B	Case study School	Secondary	1000+	English medium	1	3	Urban city and town
School C	Workshop only	Primary	0 to 249	English medium	3	3	Urban city and town
School D	Workshop only	Middle	750 to 999	Welsh Medium	4	4	Rural village in a sparse setting
School E	Workshop only	Primary	0 to 249	English medium	1	2	Urban city and town
School F	Case study School	Special	0 to 249	English medium	1	1	Urban city and town
School G	Case study School	Secondary	250 to 499	Welsh Medium	3	1	Rural town and fringe in a sparse setting
School H	Workshop only	Primary	0 to 249	English medium	1	1	Rural town and fringe
School I	Workshop only	Secondary	1000+	English medium	3	3	Urban city and town
School J	Workshop only	Secondary	1000+	English medium	3	3	Urban city and town
School K	Case study School	Middle	750 to 999	English medium	1	1	Rural town and fringe
School L	Case study School	Primary	250 to 499	English medium	1	2	Urban city and town
School M	Case study School	Secondary	250 to 499	Bilingual	3	1	Rural town and fringe in a sparse setting
School N	Workshop only	Primary	250 to 499	English medium	2	2	Urban city and town
School P	Workshop only	Primary	250 to 499	English medium	1	1	Rural town and fringe in a sparse setting
School Q	Workshop only	Primary	0 to 249	Welsh Medium	4	2	Rural village in a sparse setting
School R	Workshop only	Primary	0 to 249	English medium	1	4	Urban city and town
School S	Case study School	Primary	250 to 499	Welsh Medium	4	2	Urban city and town
School T	Case study School	Primary	250 to 499	English medium	2	3	Urban city and town
School U	Workshop only	Primary	250 to 499	English medium	2	2	Urban city and town
School V	Workshop only	Primary	250 to 499	Welsh Medium	3	4	Urban city and town
School W	Workshop only	Primary	0 to 249	English medium	3	1	Urban city and town
School X	Workshop only	Primary	250 to 499	English medium	1	1	Urban city and town

Sources: Welsh Government Address List School Wales database (2025); Welsh Government Schools By Rural Urban Classification database (2022)