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Process Evaluation of Community Focused Schools Funding

Executive summary

1. Research aims and methodology

Background

This paper reports on the main findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the process evaluation of Community Focused Schools (CFS) funding. The CFS strategy was developed with the aim of reducing educational inequality by strengthening the links between schools, families, communities, and statutory agencies. The approach recognises that schools play a pivotal role in tackling the effects of poverty on educational outcomes and empowers local areas to tailor approaches with flexibility to meet local needs. It relies on holistic collaboration to improve attendance, wellbeing, and inclusion for all learners. Building on early initiatives dating from the early 2000s, recent CFS investment aims to increase the number of Family Engagement Officers (FEOs) and CFS Managers (CFSMs), as well as broadening the remit of roles, alongside increasing capital funding to enhance infrastructure.

Aims and objectives

The evaluation focused on family and community engagement, FEO and CFSM roles, and how CFS contributed to key outcome areas. Its objectives were to

understand CFS funding allocation, examine how CFS tackles poverty and other barriers to education, explore early impacts, identify enablers, barriers, and areas for improvement, and develop recommendations to support future development of the strategy.

Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach. This involved:

- surveys with CFSMs (18 respondents in 15 local authorities), FEOs (37 respondents in 15 local authorities), local authority representatives (12 respondents in 12 local authorities), and schools (91 respondents in 18 local authorities for the short survey; 22 respondents in 7 local authorities for the detailed survey)
- semi-structured interviews with CFSMs (6 participants in 6 local authorities) and FEOs (5 participants in 4 local authorities)
- 5 case studies conducted in diverse locations and schools across Wales

In each case study, interviews, focus groups, informal discussions, and observations were conducted with a total of 96 participants, including CFSMs, FEOs, local authority representatives, parents/carers, school leaders and staff, governors, and community partners. An additional short survey was conducted with parents/carers in the 5 case study areas (114 respondents).

2. Main findings

CFS funding distribution

Models of funding distribution ranged from full local authority control to partial or full delegation to schools. Local authorities usually retained some funding, often to employ key roles such as CFSMs. Schools accessed funding by applying or through targeted allocation based on indicators like FSM eligibility or WIMD. In schools, CFS funding was often supplemented through the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) or core budgets to employ FEOs, and CFS teams often supported access to additional grants.

There was widespread lack of clarity about the amount, purpose, and accessibility of CFS funding. Many were unclear about distinctions between capital funding and funding for roles, and over half of schools responding to the detailed survey were unaware that CFS capital funding existed. In some areas, delays or limited communication from local authorities about allocations and criteria were perceived as a lack of transparency, contributing to frustration and, in some cases, disengagement from schools not currently involved in CFS.

Fidelity and adaptation in CFS delivery

There is significant variation in how CFS is delivered across Wales, reflecting the strategy's intentional flexibility. CFS funding has supported a wide range of activities, with delivery particularly targeting learners and families experiencing barriers to education, using local and school-level data to target support. CFS was reported to enable access to opportunities and holistic support that would not otherwise have been available, including adult learning, extracurricular activities, and practical one-to-one support. Activities aligned well with parents' priorities around communication, trust, and practical support. Variation was shaped by local needs and assets, local authority structures, and the backgrounds of key staff. Approaches were inconsistent, with a substantial minority of local authorities reporting no formal monitoring.

Enablers and barriers to implementation

Strong relationships, leadership buy-in, and a clear strategic vision emerged as critical enablers of effective CFS implementation. Where CFS aligned with existing school priorities and values, it reduced staff workload and supported culture change. However, generating buy-in was more challenging in some contexts, particularly in secondary schools.

Short-term funding, temporary contracts, and previous discontinued initiatives undermined confidence and sustainability, and could compromise buy-in from resource-constrained schools who perceived CFS as a short-term initiative. Conversely, long-term local authority commitment, alignment with Estyn inspection frameworks, and integration into school development planning supported engagement. Participants also highlighted the need for stronger national promotion of CFS beyond the education sector.

Implementation success often depended on a small number of highly committed individuals, creating risks to sustainability. While FEO and CFMS roles were widely valued, inconsistent training, supervision, and professional development posed challenges for recruitment and retention. Structural barriers, including limited school space, geographical factors, and historic distrust between schools and communities, further constrained delivery in some settings.

Emerging outcomes

While most participants felt it was too early to evidence measurable outcomes, there were strong indications of emerging positive impacts where CFS was established. Early indications also suggest improved attendance in some settings, alongside greater learner confidence and wellbeing. Positive impacts included improved relationships between schools, families, and communities, increased parental engagement and confidence, better attendance and participation among learners facing barriers, and strengthened community

connections and cohesion. Importantly, where CFS was embedded, schools reported reduced burden through partnership structures and shared responsibility for addressing complex needs.

Case study findings

The **Cardiff Eastern Community Partnership (ECP)** brings together schools, statutory agencies, and local organisations in a coordinated network. Enablers include a clear CFS vision, strong local knowledge, and the CFSM's role as a system 'connector,' while barriers include initial school hesitancy, particularly from secondary schools. The ECP demonstrates the value of a coherent CFS offer that avoids duplication, builds on local assets, and reduces school burden.

In **Ysgol Gynradd Maesincla, Gwynedd**, CFS is implemented through an FEO-led model that combines practical family support (e.g., home visits, form-filling, signposting) with extensive community engagement. Enablers include the FEO's local relationships, strong staff buy-in, and emphasis on community connection; barriers include the FEO's limited time on site, funding insecurity, and difficulty with transitions to secondary schools not engaged with CFS. This case study shows how CFS can build trust and engagement through relationship-based activity, but also demonstrates the challenges of funding and capacity.

Neath Port Talbot illustrates a well-established, local authority-wide approach, with progress towards FEO access for all schools and a focus on evidence-informed practice. Enablers include strategic leadership, phased implementation, and strong networking, but there remain issues with short-term funding and infrastructure. NPT shows that system-wide approaches can support consistent practice and impact, but sustainability depends on longer-term resourcing.

The **Pembrokeshire Learning Centre (PLC)** Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) has used CFS to strengthen a family-focused ethos, with an FEO delivering family engagement, community events, and multi-agency work. Enablers include leadership and governor buy-in, FEO autonomy, and networking. Barriers reflect PRU-specific constraints (e.g., limited school gate contact and stigma), as well as short-term funding and infrastructure limitations. The PLC highlights that CFS approaches can support engagement in specialist settings, but funding challenges can limit sustainability.

Wrexham is implementing CFS in 2 secondary schools in special measures, focusing on strengths-based attendance work and community opportunities. Enablers include a youth work ethos, local authority-led funding approaches that support effective targeting, and close collaboration between the CFSM and school leadership. Barriers include gaining initial buy-in and family engagement challenges linked to geography and mistrust. Wrexham's experience shows CFS can reduce burden and support school improvement in challenging contexts.

3. Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Commit to CFS as a long-term strategy, with sustained funding arrangements. Longer-term investment would strengthen school buy-in, enable recruitment and retention of skilled staff, and allow time for systems and measurable outcomes to develop.

Recommendation 2: Establish consistent national guidance for monitoring and evaluation, while recognising local flexibility. Standardised yet flexible tools would help track implementation, demonstrate impact, and support longer-term assessment of the CFS strategy.

Recommendation 3: Ensure timely provision of clear and practical guidance for future initiatives. Clear role descriptions, M&E frameworks, and examples of implementation should support consistency, while retaining flexibility for local adaptation.

Recommendation 4: Strengthen cross-sector infrastructure and national visibility to embed CFS more widely. Embedding CFS principles across wider policy areas, such as business, would reduce the burden on schools and foster community-wide engagement. National visibility of CFS remains limited, despite engagement efforts, highlighting the need for Welsh Government-level promotion to ensure consistent awareness beyond the education sector.

Recommendation 5: Future iterations of the strategy should include specific guidance to promote and develop the Welsh language within CFS. Findings indicate CFS could do more to promote and develop the Welsh language. This could encompass guidance and funding to promote language use and engagement across both school and family learning to support the Cymraeg 2050 strategy.

Recommendation 6: Strengthen equitable access to FEO support across all school clusters. This would allow more schools to access support and strengthen engagement when moving from one stage of schooling to another.

Recommendation 7: Ringfence CFS funding within local authorities to protect its strategic purpose and ensure fair, transparent allocation. Findings show that schools often lacked clear information about how CFS funding was allocated, suggesting that ringfencing could help ensure a more consistent and transparent approach.

Recommendation 8: Ensure structured supervision and wellbeing support for CFS Managers and FEOs. Clear structures are needed to ensure professional development and protect staff wellbeing in demanding roles.

Recommendation 9: Develop a national framework for the FEO role description. This would reduce inequities in pay and expectations while offering flexibility for local adaptation and clear progression pathways.

Recommendation 10: Networking and sharing opportunities should continue to develop and be encouraged. Regular national and local forums enable learning, consistency, and collaboration across Wales.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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