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## Research Summary:

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

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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## Research Summary:

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

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

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# Glossary

## **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'.

## **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.

## **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.

## **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.

## **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.

## **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 and background

Strategic Research and Insight were commissioned by Welsh Government to create a resource to support schools in delivering a 'whole school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing' (referred to as WSAEMWB). The research identified practices which schools reported had helped them to deliver a WSAEMWB. This research summary outlines the key findings of the full report, Exploring practice to support delivery of the Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing: Good Practice examples from schools in Wales. The full report is designed as a resource for schools delivering a WSAEMWB. Accompanying infographics have also been produced.

In 2021, the Welsh Government published the Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being (the 'Framework') and placed a requirement upon schools to develop and maintain a WSAEMWB. Significant resources have been invested in supporting schools to meet the requirement, including the [Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing](#) and accompanying [self-evaluation tool](#) and [evaluation tool guidance](#). The importance of WSAEMWB has been largely driven by 2 key factors:

- concerns over worsening patterns of mental health and wellbeing among children and young people which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis. This includes indications of a trend in which mental health and wellbeing challenges are being reported at younger primary school ages (e.g. [Einhorn et al, 2024](#); [NHS, 2020](#); [SHRN data dashboard](#); [UNICEF, 2025](#); [Welsh Government, 2022](#));
- schools have long 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](#); [World Health Organization \(WHO\), 2026](#); [Wyn et al, 2000](#)).

Since the 1990s, whole school approaches<sup>1</sup> have been promoted to ensure that the whole school environment is used to help improve mental and physical health of children and young people. Whole school approaches recognise that all aspects of the school (referred to as the whole school environment or the learning environment) influence learner behaviour. This includes, for example, the school curriculum, the social environment, the school ethos, the physical environment, and school policies. Whole school approaches are holistic, working across all these aspects of the school environment to support better health and wellbeing of children, as well as social, emotional and educational outcomes ([Higgins and Booker, 2023](#); [Wyn et al, 2000](#)).

In recognition of the central role of WSAEMWB in supporting the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales, the research was purposefully designed to identify examples of practice and summarise them thematically (both by area of activity and aims of

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<sup>1</sup> While 'WSAEMWB' has been used to refer to the specific Welsh Government statutory approach, the term 'whole school approaches' refers to the theory and practice of whole school approaches more generally.

activity). 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 examples to learn from but, because each school is different, each needs to adapt practice to its own unique context.

## **2. Methodology**

The iterative research method consisted of 5 stages, with each stage informing the stages which followed.

### **2.1. Stage 1 - scoping phase**

This phase focused on desk research and interviews. During desk research, experts helped compile a list of evidence sources around whole school approaches; a thematic analysis of key sources helped inform and shape the research. Sources included work from Wales, the rest of the UK and international examples. The review focused on whole school approaches in general and whole school approaches for mental health and wellbeing in particular. The desk reviewed also considered some related literature for context, such as the healthy schools movement and place effects on health. While most examples included in the final report were from after 2020, some earlier examples were also included. Examples reviewed included: academic publications; systematic reviews; reports; policy; guidance; training resources; consultations; and resources from interest groups and charities.

In addition, 6 semi-structured interviews were conducted online with 8 key stakeholders who had strategic and national perspectives on the delivery of the WSAEMWB framework. Participants received copies of the questions in advance. Interviews were conducted online and lasted up to 1 hour. Interviews were recorded, written up and analysed in line with the research questions. The scoping phase identified 4 areas important for supporting development and delivery of the WSAEMWB; and informed the method for stages 2 to 5.

- 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

### **2.2. Stage 2 - group interviews with coordinators**

Group interviews were conducted online with 36 health board and local authority staff involved in supporting delivery of WSAEMWB across 7 local health board areas. 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'. 7 group interviews were conducted, 1 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. Coordinators also helped identify schools to take part in stage 3.

### **2.3. 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 the senior leadership team (SLT) 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 4 key areas. Workshops were recorded and all areas of practice mentioned were listed and described across the 4 areas of practice.

### **2.4. Stage 4 - case study visits**

Case study visits were conducted in 9 schools that had participated in school workshops. The schools selected expressed an interest in taking part in case studies during the stage 3 workshops and had been undertaking practice which they, and in many cases coordinators, had identified as helpful to delivery of a WSAEMWB. The sampling strategy was designed to capture a diverse range of practice across the 4 areas of activity. Selection also aimed to achieve a range of school types across multiple health boards.

Each case study visit consisted of a 1-day visit to the school by 2 researchers involving a mix of interviews, review of school documentation, and informal observations. 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, and other notable and relevant points. Prior to the visit, a planning phone call was held with each school during which the practice to be explored was agreed. Methods for demonstrating practice were also agreed and included: learning walks; observations; interviews and group discussions; and reviewing documentation.

Schools created a timetable of activity to achieve these aims. During visits, observational notes were made by researchers and written up afterwards. Interviews and group discussions were held with different people, depending on availability and included: the headteacher; SLT; wellbeing leads; teaching and support staff; learners; governors and families

### **2.5. 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. All those who had participated in stages 2 to 4 were invited to attend online feedback workshops. 17 people attended, including coordinators and school staff. Emerging findings were presented and participants were invited to provide feedback, clarify points, and discuss the practicality and usefulness of effective practice examples. Feedback was helpful in deepening understanding of the findings.

## **2.6. Steering group**

The project was guided by a Steering Group which consisted of Welsh Government officials, academics and public health researchers, representatives from schools, local authorities, and regional consortia. The group met 3 times during the project: during stage 1 to provide input on existing knowledge and project design; between stages 2 and 3 for a research update and between stages 4 and 5 for feedback on emerging findings. The Steering Group helped inform the objectives and design of the research as well as contextualise some of the findings.

In this report we adopt the following terminology:

- ‘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
- ‘Family Engagement Officers’ (FEOs) to refer to roles which wholly or partly focus on engaging with families and community

## **3. Findings**

This chapter includes findings from all phases of the research. Findings are divided into the 4 areas as follows:

- 3.1 building a positive culture that supports delivery of a WSAEMWB
- 3.2 building relationships within schools and across the whole school community
- 3.3 aligning the WSAEMWB with Curriculum for Wales
- 3.4 supporting staff wellbeing in schools

Findings are presented thematically rather than school-by-school. Differences in school characteristics can raise challenges for adapting practice between schools and as a result, contextual school-level information was presented in the full report to allow schools to assess and reflect on their own context and identify what practice may, or may not, work in their own school.

### **3.1. Area 1: building a positive school culture that supports delivery of a WSAEMWB**

In the scoping phase of this study, it was identified that building a positive school culture which supports the holistic WSAEMWB is crucial. From the fieldwork, it was apparent that this can be challenging, taking time to achieve and gain buy-in from the school community.

A range of practice examples were reported by schools as being helpful for developing and sustaining a positive school culture which was supportive of the WSAEMWB.

### **3.1.1. Taking the lead – Championing WSAEMWB**

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, sustained commitment and help integrate wellbeing and the WSAEMWB into school culture.

It was apparent that putting a leadership team in place to oversee delivery of the WSAEMWB can be helpful; involvement of other staff in leading delivery can be effective as it brings together different ideas and builds capacity and robustness. Ensuring that WSAEMWB leaders have a clear understanding of, and confidence in, the WSAEMWB allows them to communicate its purpose effectively. When leaders model consistent approaches and positive behaviours, they can help embed the approach as part of the school's ethos.

Some schools reported that 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 supporting staff workload to mitigate impacts on staff where WSAEMWB requires more work of them.

It was apparent, from observation and direct comments from some staff, that an evidence-based and reflective approach to introducing and maintaining a WSAEMWB may help develop a stronger approach suited to the school. Leaders drew 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; 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.

Getting buy-in from the whole school community was seen by some to be a key function of leadership and reciprocally, involving the whole school community in development of the WSAEMWB can help buy-in. Clear, strong and consistent messaging and communication around the WSAEMWB was reported as important and consulting on the best communication channels for different members of the whole school community can be helpful.

The Framework and the use of the self-evaluation tool make it clear that schools need to understand the wellbeing needs of staff, learners and families. Practice showed how doing so may help schools respond to local need and deliver approaches that benefit both individual learners, families and staff as well as the school community as a whole. Some schools demonstrated that understanding wellbeing need is not a one-time process; and showed practice in ongoing monitoring to keep on top of changing individual and community needs. Discussion with staff and coordinators and observation of practice showed that SLT

must be prepared to ask questions about the wellbeing of their community, accept what they find and act on it, although willingness to do this varied. Coordinators played an important role in supporting SLT to investigate wellbeing need.

### **3.1.2. Providing mental health and wellbeing support for families and learners**

Schools reported that, that with rising levels of anxiety in learners due to the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis, there are increasing numbers of learners missing school due to anxiety.

Providing support to families and learners can help deliver the WSAEMWB in schools by address the day-to-day challenges which impacts mental health and wellbeing. For example, by implementing practices such as “circle time”, or creating a calming environment, schools have been able to address issues such as examination anxiety.

## **3.2. Area 2: building relationships across the whole school community**

### **3.2.1. Making connections with learners and families**

Building strong, quality relationships across the whole school community was often at the heart of a successful WSAEMWB. This included building relationships between staff, learners, families and where possible, the wider community. Schools reported that strong relationships were important 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. Schools reported how building relationships can be challenging, and explained it can take time, kindness and patience. They said it involved listening and engaging with learners, families, staff and others. Some schools reported different practice they had developed to reach families who were less engaged, for example, where the provision of food for learners can provide an opportunity to develop connections.

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 people were also important to a sense of learner belonging. Schools undertake various practices to maintain connections with learners. For example, the presence of staff welcoming learners into school and the classroom creates a daily point of contact and allows staff to check in with learners and proactively look for signs that a learner may need support.

Some schools had one or more full-time or part-time Family Engagement Officers (FEOs). Schools who employed FEOs felt that they were crucial as they could be more available than other staff, and engage and respond to families in more considered, informed and timely ways. It was noted that where schools do not have FEOs, other staff have to take on this role. It seemed helpful for schools to reflect on the reasons for community engagement as part of the WSAEMWB as a clear understanding of these reasons appeared to help schools to explain them to others.

When discussing relationship-building, schools focused on building school-learner relationships and school-home relationships. The wider community can be thought of as those people schools engage with, or who they could helpfully engage with, but who are not learners, staff or families. Service providers such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) can be thought of as part of the wider school community. Although it was common for schools to have some connections with the wider community (including with service providers), in schools where these connections were widest, for example including businesses, local residents and local charities, there was greater potential to support WSAEMWB.

### **3.3. Area 3: aligning the WSAEMWB with Curriculum for Wales**

#### **3.3.1. Making clear links between WSAEMWB and curriculum**

Embedding a WSAEMWB should complement the school curriculum, including the Health and Well-being Area of Learning and Experience (AoLE). Findings from the recently published qualitative study on the implementation of the Health and Well-being AoLE in Curriculum for Wales, although different in scope to this research, echo several of the same themes. This study also noted that giving learners access to unfamiliar environments, positive role models and clear progression routes can widen their horizons and reinforce the 4 purposes of Curriculum for Wales. Both pieces of work emphasise the importance of strong leadership, holistic and relationship-centred approaches, meaningful learner voice, and the use of evidence such as SHRN data, alongside acknowledging the varying quality of collaboration within clusters. Together, the two studies offer complementary insight into the conditions that nurture wellbeing across the school and how these conditions are enacted through curriculum practice.

Schools showed how building wellbeing into directed time could strongly emphasise its importance to staff, highlighting wellbeing activity not as an 'add-on' but as expected activity and a key part of curriculum and school culture. Some schools said that 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 were explored further in area 4.

[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; a holistic approach understands how these all impact one another in different ways. Therefore, offering learners opportunities and experiences designed to help fulfil the [4 purposes of the curriculum](#) can be valuable and help create links between the WSAEMWB and Curriculum for Wales. Several schools talked about the importance of creating and exposing learners to meaningful opportunities and experiences with some schools focussing on the idea that, "if you don't see it, you can't be it". For example, schools offered learners and their families the chance to visit universities while others offered a range of clubs where learners could be exposed to new skills and experiences.

Other reported examples of practice which may help schools make links between the WSAEMWB and the curriculum included those which ensured that affordability did not exclude learners from taking part in lessons or extra-curricular activity. This is particularly important as Curriculum for Wales guidance makes it clear that the school curriculum must be inclusive to all learners. Discussions with learners suggested that it may also be helpful to think about the progression of how learner understanding of wellbeing changes as they develop.

Collaboration is essential to Curriculum for Wales. [Curriculum design guidance](#) shows how working through clusters and networks, schools and practitioners can share and learn from each other's understanding of progression and collaborate to develop shared approaches to curriculum design.

Collaboration between schools can also 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. First, collaboration between primary and secondary schools was already common and was seen as increasingly important (e.g. translating practice between primary and secondary schools; transition); this may be 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. Second, cluster working is also increasingly important for school improvement, especially in light of the move towards curriculum development at a cluster rather than a school level and practice examples demonstrated different ways in which cluster working can support delivery of a WSAEMWB.

### **3.4. Area 4: supporting staff wellbeing**

At the start of the project, desk research found a range of existing evidence suggesting that improving staff wellbeing as part of a whole school approach also helps improve learner wellbeing (e.g. [Cavanagh et al, 2024](#); [PHW, 2023](#)). For this reason, it was identified as a key area of practice which would be helpful to explore. Across the research, a range of research participants shared views that endorsed this finding; staff wellbeing was seen as important both for the benefit of staff themselves and because an environment where staff felt supported, listened to and had good mental wellbeing themselves meant they were well-placed to support the WSAEMWB and learner mental health and wellbeing.

A wide range of examples of practice to support staff wellbeing were reported by schools. Some examples of practice to support staff wellbeing were potentially quicker to implement than others and included, for example: staff wellbeing activity; one-to-one personal support for staff (e.g. from SLT or independent counsellors); signposting wellbeing information; and where possible, allowing staff flexibility to balance family responsibilities. While some staff thought of some of these 'quick wins' as helpful, others felt that staff wellbeing could only be improved by providing a professional, supportive and appropriate environment for teaching and learning. Examples of such wider, cultural changes to support staff wellbeing were also outlined and included: employing strong classroom management and teaching and learning

models; providing support with workload; providing continual professional learning and development opportunities; and redesigning physical space to support workload and wellbeing. However, the research suggested that it could be helpful to use a combination of different types of practice as part of a holistic approach to staff wellbeing. The importance of using appropriate methods to listen to staff voice then considering and responding to what has been said and communicating a response in an appropriate manner (e.g. “you said, we did...”) was also evident from practice examples.

For some, it was important to communicate to families and the wider school community that the purpose of supporting staff wellbeing is to enable more effective support for learners.

### **3.5. Barriers school face when implementing a WSAEMWB**

There were barriers and challenges to delivery of a WSAEMWB within schools, which included: uneven distribution of funding and resources; policy makers, public health officials and school practitioners sometimes spoke in different terms, with different frames of reference. In addition, not all staff responded positively to the same approaches, creating a barrier to universal implementation

## **4. Conclusions**

The research indicates that, according to schools that participated, delivering a Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing (WSAEMWB) is perceived as complex, developmental and strongly relational. Schools across Wales described themselves as being at different stages of this journey, yet a common set of themes were reported across contexts.

### **4.1. Area 1: Building a positive school culture that supports the delivery of WSAEMWB**

- Schools reported that delivering a WSAEMWB is a multifaceted process that, in their experience, depends on strong leadership, an understanding of community needs and ongoing engagement from the whole school community. Senior leaders were described as playing a key role by championing wellbeing, modelling consistent behaviours and embedding wellbeing into everyday practice.
- Many schools explained that approaches which involve staff early, acknowledge workload pressures, support staff and provide opportunities for staff to contribute help build a workforce that feels more confident and committed to the values of WSAEMWB.

- Schools also reported that engaging learners and families through consistent messaging, positive relationships and accessible support structures helps strengthen trust and reinforces shared responsibility for wellbeing.
- This area highlighted, from the perspective of schools, the importance of flexibility, adaptation and continual learning as wellbeing needs change over time.

#### **4.2. Area 2: Building relationships across the whole community**

- Schools described meaningful connection as requiring sustained visibility, consistent communication and deliberate opportunities for interaction between learners, staff, families and the wider community.
- Strong relationships with families were frequently identified as central to the success of a WSAEMWB. Schools reported that effective practice is grounded in patience, consistency and clear communication, with tailored approaches helping them engage families who may be less involved or face multiple barriers.

#### **4.3. Area 3: Aligning the WSAEMWB with curriculum for Wales**

- According to schools, aligning the WSAEMWB with Curriculum for Wales is most effective when wellbeing is treated as an integral and strategic component of curriculum design, school culture and daily practice.
- Schools also reported that exposing learners to opportunities and experiences can strengthen their wellbeing and build confidence and readiness for fulfilling lives—particularly in communities with limited access to enrichment activities. They reported that exposure to new environments, role models and progression pathways helps broaden aspirations and supports the 4 purposes of Curriculum for Wales.
- Schools noted that alignment between the WSAEMWB and Curriculum for Wales is most successful when wellbeing is intentionally embedded and supported by strong leadership.

#### **4.4. Area 4: Supporting staff wellbeing**

- Across all settings, staff reported that feeling listened to, supported and being treated fairly had a significant positive impact on their wellbeing.
- Schools suggested that investing in staff wellbeing is both necessary and beneficial for the wider school community. According to staff, when they feel valued, supported and understood, they are better placed to deliver high-quality teaching, build positive relationships with learners and contribute to a sustainable and effective WSAEMWB.