



A Picture of Schools

Report of the Auditor
General for Wales

October 2021



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Mae'r ddogfen hon hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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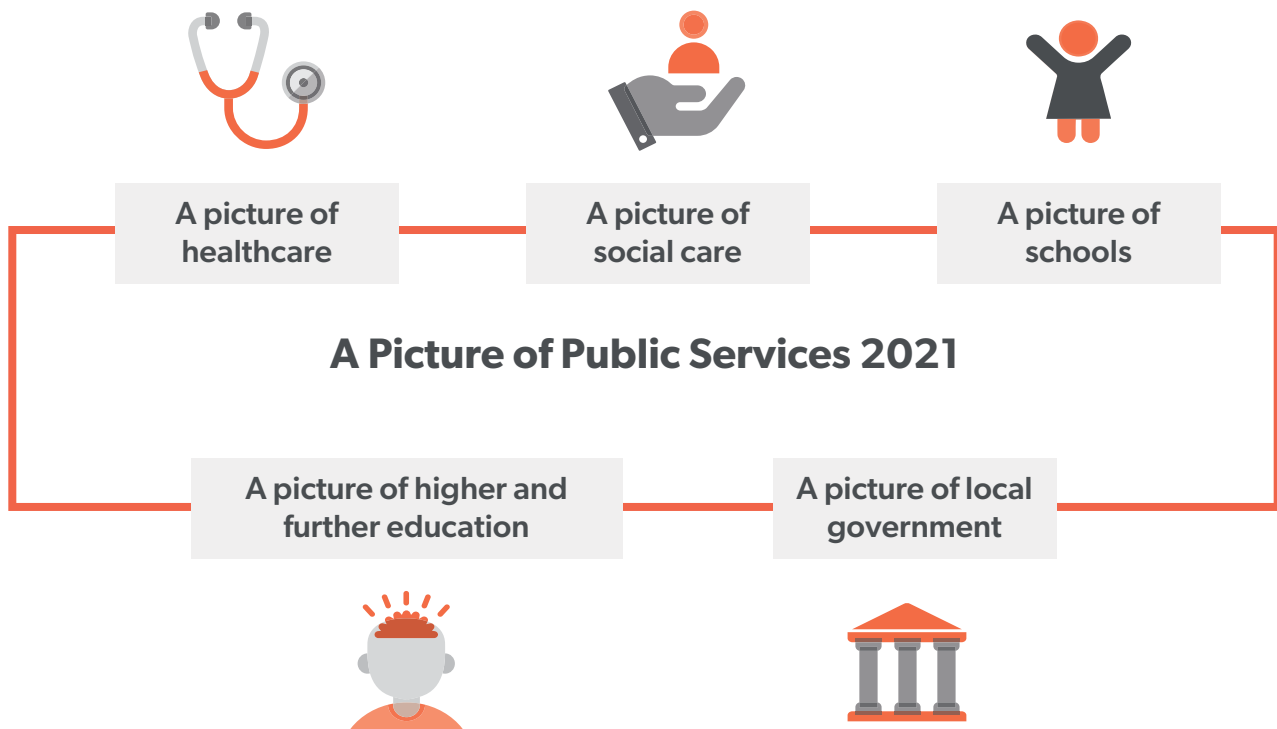
About this report

This report is part of a series of Picture of Public Services 2021 outputs. Our main Picture of Public Services 2021 report summarises some of the key trends in public finances and sets out our perspective on some of the key issues for future service delivery.

This report summarises key information about schools in Wales including the strategic operating context and funding. It explores capacity in the sector, performance, and our view on the key issues or challenges. It does not consider childcare or post-compulsory education other than school sixth forms. We examine higher and further education in our summary sheet of the same name. This report is not intended to be comprehensive. It sets out what we consider to be some of the key issues for the sector, recognising that other review bodies and commentators will have their own perspective on the key issues.

The report is based on a synthesis of our published work as well as research by other organisations.

Exhibit 1: Picture of Public Services outputs



Main report

Schools – context

Delivering learning in challenging times

- 1 The COVID-19 pandemic has presented enormous challenges to public services and the people who deliver them. Schools have faced huge pressures with the challenges of shifting services online while also providing in-person support to children of key workers. Schools then had to adjust their environments for a return to face-to-face learning. All of us at Audit Wales pay tribute to the dedication and extraordinary efforts of public servants during this difficult period.
- 2 As we publish this report, the direct impacts of COVID are still being felt in schools across Wales. Work to understand the indirect impacts of COVID had begun, but it was too early to gauge the scale and extent of these impacts or to estimate how they may affect the provision of school education services in the future.

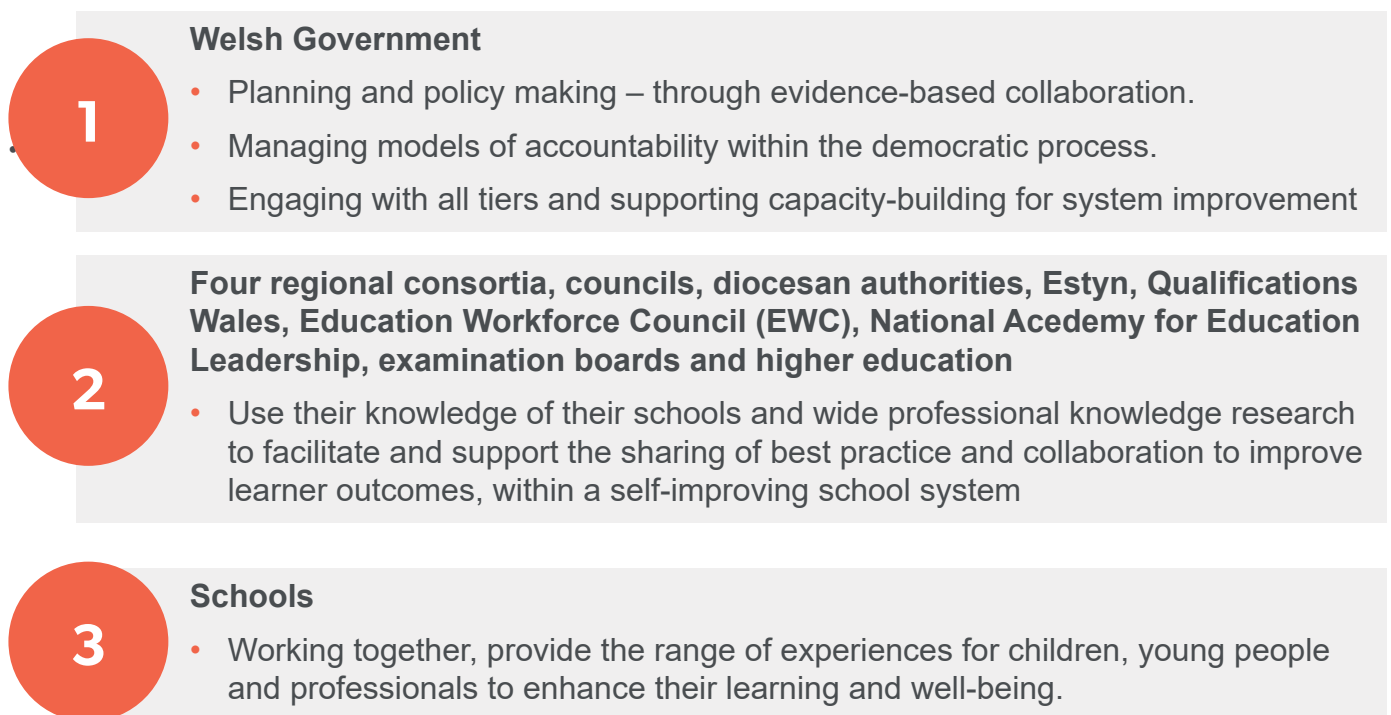
Structures and responsibilities

Compulsory education

- 3 In Wales, education is compulsory from the term after a child turns five. In practice, most start in the Autumn term of the academic year in which they are five. A young person can leave school at the end of June, providing they are 16 by the end of the summer holidays. The Welsh Government has described the education system in Wales as a ‘three-tier model’ (**Exhibit 2**).

- 4 Principal councils¹ have several important legal responsibilities for schools:
- **Funding** – councils decide the schools budget annually, in accordance with the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 and the School Funding (Wales) Regulations 2010;
 - **Planning** – councils must ensure that sufficient primary and secondary education is available to meet local population need; and
 - **Standards** – councils must promote high standards and support pupils to fulfil their potential. In practice, most councils delegate school improvement activity to the four regional education consortia in Wales.

Exhibit 2: the Welsh education system three-tier model



Source: Welsh Government, Education in Wales: Our national mission, Action plan 2017-21, September 2017 (with Audit Wales' amendments)

1 Principal councils are local government authorities in Wales which carry out statutory duties in their area. The term does not include town or community councils. All references to councils in this factsheet refer to principal councils.

Early years education

- 5 All three and four-year olds are entitled to ten hours of early years education from the term after their third birthday. Most funded places (90%) are in nurseries attached to maintained schools². Others are in non-maintained (private, voluntary or independent) providers. The Foundation Phase is currently the statutory curriculum for three to seven-year-olds.
- 6 In the most deprived areas of Wales, the Welsh Government's Flying Start programme provides part-time childcare for two to three-year-olds and other support for families with children under four years of age.

Schools – strategy

Reforming education for 3-19 year olds

- 7 In light of Wales' poor results in the 2009 international PISA tests (**paragraphs 36 to 38**), the Welsh Government embarked upon a wholesale reform programme including reviews of examinations, teacher training and the curriculum. In 2014, it set out its vision for an improved education system³. In 2017, the Welsh Government said how it would implement the reforms in its Education in Wales action plan. The Plan focused on developing:
 - quality, leadership and collaboration in the teaching profession;
 - strong inclusive schools, reforming the additional learning needs system,
 - raising standards – reducing the attainment gap and reforming the curriculum; and
 - robust assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements.
- 8 The reforms required new legislation:
 - **Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018** – laid the foundations for changes in how learners with additional learning needs are assessed and supported. Importantly it extends support from 0 to 25 years, extending into post compulsory education for the first time. Changes will be phased in from September 2021.
 - **Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021** – enabled the Curriculum for Wales. It extended the curriculum to cover special schools and pupil referral units. In July 2021, the new Welsh Government announced a raft of secondary legislation required to support the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales.

2 Sibieta, L and Jerrim, J., A comparison of school institutions and policies across the UK, Education Policy Institute, April 2021. 'Maintained schools' are overseen by the council and must follow the national curriculum and national teacher pay and conditions.

3 Welsh Government, Qualified for life: An education improvement plan for 3 to 19-year-olds in Wales, October 2014

Early years

- 9 Early years has been an area of focus for the Welsh Government for more than a decade. It published a ten-year plan – Building a Brighter Future – to improve early years and childcare in 2013⁴. The plan committed to developing an early years outcomes framework to improve outcomes for children 0 to 7⁵.
- 10 In 2017, the Welsh Government’s national strategy⁶ – Prosperity for All – continued the vision to give children the best start in life and identified early years as one of five cross-cutting priority areas. In October 2019, the Welsh Government announced its intention to establish an integrated early childhood and education approach with the aim of creating a single, child-centred and high quality system of education and care for children under five that will dovetail into the new curriculum⁷.

21st century schools and education programme

- 11 Alongside this reform programme, the Welsh Government has a long-term education capital programme: 21st century schools and education. The programme started in 2014 and requires councils to review plans for school places with the aim of having the right schools in the right places for the future.
- 12 Although the programme’s aims are wider than improving the school estate, the Welsh Government aims that by 2024-25 there will be no ‘bad condition’ schools and the number of ‘poor’ condition schools will have reduced by 25%. Funding is also available for school-based early years facilities and further education colleges through the programme.
- 13 Funding for the first phase of the programme (Band A) was split equally between the Welsh Government and councils. Our 2017 report on the programme⁸ found that the Welsh Government was generally managing well in delivering the £3.6 billion Band A. Our report made some recommendations including more standardisation across the projects to achieve value for money. Since we reported, the Welsh Government has started Band B, which includes a stream of projects funded through the Mutual Investment Model of private financing.

4 Welsh Government, Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan, September 2013

5 Welsh Government, Early Years Outcomes Framework, April 2015

6 Welsh Government, Prosperity for All – the national strategy, September 2017

7 Deputy Minister Health and Social Care, Letter to the Senedd’s Children, Young people and Education Committee, 6 November 2019

8 Auditor General for Wales, The 21st Century Schools and Education Programme, May 2017

Welsh medium education

- 14 The Welsh Government aims to increase the number of pupils learning through the medium of Welsh. This is a major element of its Cymraeg 2050 strategy which includes a target for 30% of learners to be in Welsh medium education by 2031. The number of seven-year-olds assessed through Welsh as a first language rose from 22% in 2016 to 22.8% in 2021, missing the Government's interim target of 24% by 2021.

COVID-19 and beyond

School closures and remote learning

- 15 From 20 March to 27 June 2020, schools were closed to all but the children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils. There were concerns about the wellbeing of the most vulnerable as attendance was low⁹. Schools opened for a short period before the summer break with most pupils attending part-time for their wellbeing and to prepare for the Autumn term. The Welsh Government provided digital equipment and worked with schools to provide remote learning. It provided guidance¹⁰ on its expectations and priorities for schools in July 2020.
- 16 By March 2021, the Welsh Government had funded nearly 11,000 mobile routers for pupils without access to broadband and 10,000 software licences to repurpose existing laptops (not including those loaned through schools). An earlier report by the Education Policy Institute and Nuffield Foundation¹¹ found that the Welsh Government led the UK nations in providing digital equipment, but schools' provision of remote learning was variable. Some children – especially younger pupils and pupils who were more disengaged from school prior to the pandemic – struggled to engage with remote learning. Some lacked family support, broadband or space to study effectively.
- 17 Schools faced more disruption in the Autumn term from national closures¹² and local outbreaks. Only 78% of pupils were attending school in early December 2020. From 4 January 2021, pupils – other than the children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils – were learning remotely. The Welsh Government provided more IT equipment and expanded the group of 'vulnerable' pupils who could attend to include pupils without IT equipment, broadband or space to work and those struggling to engage in remote learning.

9 Welsh Government, Integrated Impact Assessment Summary, June 2020

10 Welsh Government, Guidance on Learning in Schools and Settings: Coronavirus, July 2020

11 Education Policy Institute and the Nuffield Foundation, Education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic, October 2020

12 Welsh Government, Timeline of School Closures During the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Pandemic, May 2021

- 18 Pupils began to return to school in March 2021, beginning with the youngest and those in examination years. Pupils in the Foundation Phase (3 to 7) began to return from 22 February with all primary pupils and those in years 11, 12 and 13 back from 15 March. Other pupils returned to school at the beginning of the summer term. However, COVID-19 infections and the requirements to self-isolate mean that many missed some of the term: 84% of pupils were in school during the week of 28 June to 2 July.

Examinations

- 19 Pupils in exam years have faced particular disruption. GCSE and A level exams did not take place as planned in May/June 2020. Despite changes to the assessment system, the process for awarding exam grades hit difficulties in August 2020 when some pupils received lower grades than anticipated. After the Welsh Government intervened, pupils were awarded the best of either the centre assessed grade¹³ or the standardised grade calculated by the WJEC.
- 20 An independent review¹⁴ in October 2020 suggested that Qualifications Wales¹⁵ and the WJEC¹⁶ should have anticipated these problems with exam results. In November 2020, the Welsh Government announced that pupils would receive centre assessed grades based on internal assessments, internal examination and some external examinations. The worsening health crises meant that, in January 2021, it announced that pupils would receive centre-assessed grades based on a range of evidence but without external examinations¹⁷. In July 2022, the WJEC announced changes to GSCE, AS and A level examinations for summer 2022 following consultation.

13 Centre assessed grades were based on the teachers' professional assessment of what the pupil would have achieved if they were able to sit an examination. Teachers could use any criteria they wish when estimating grades including (but not limited to) completed course work, mock exams or previous academic achievement.

14 Louise Casella (Chair), Independent review of the summer 2020 arrangements to award grades, and considerations for summer 2021: Interim report October 2020, October 2020

15 Qualifications Wales was established in 2013 as the independent, statutory body that regulates qualifications other than degrees in Wales.

16 Since 2015, the WJEC has been the sole provider of qualifications for state-funded schools and colleges for most GCSE, AS and A level subjects in Wales.

17 Welsh Government, Examination and assessment guidance: 2020 to 2021, January 2021

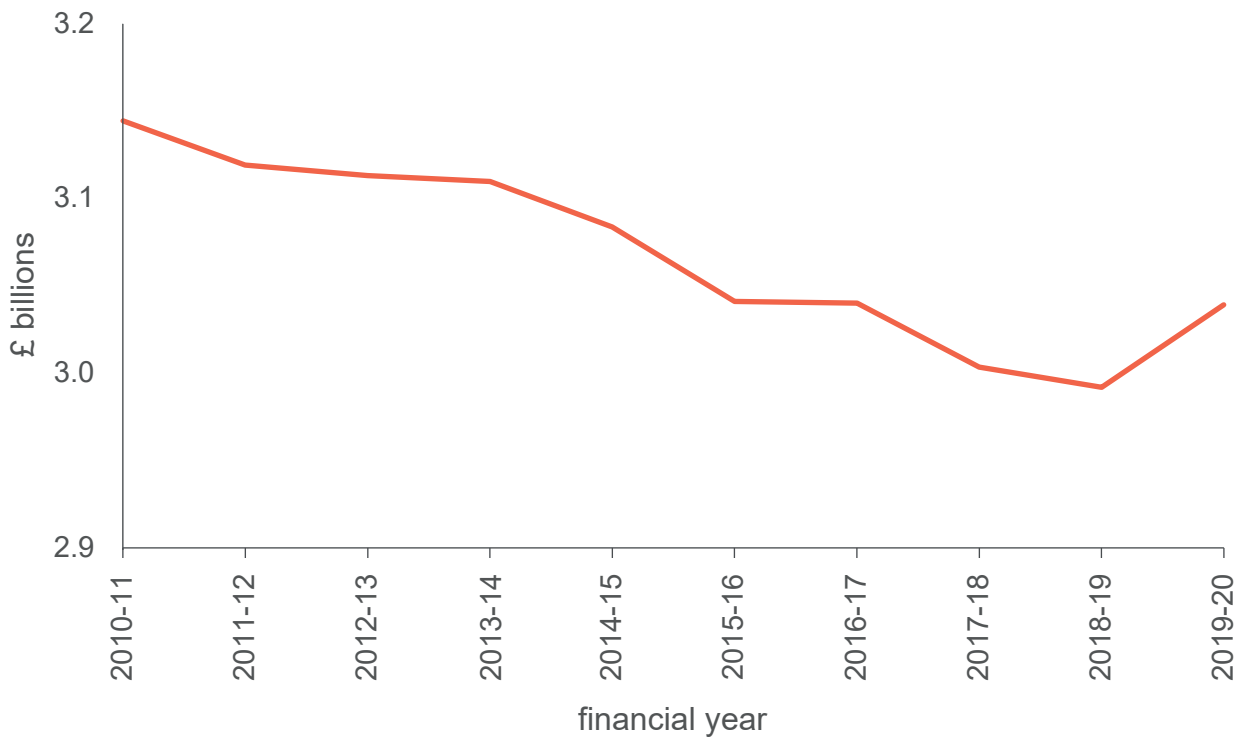
Schools – finances

Trends in school finances

Spending on schools has fallen between 2010-11 and 2019-20 and varies across Wales

21 Spending on schools has fallen over the last decade in Wales, albeit from an historic high in 2010-11 (**Exhibit 3**). In 2019-20, total spending on schools was 3.4% lower in real terms than in 2010-11.

Exhibit 3: total education spending 2010-11 to 2019-20, real terms (2019-20 prices)



Source: Stats Wales Local Government out-turn dataset (Audit Wales analysis)

- 22 Overall, the budgets for schools set by councils across Wales for 2020-21 were 6% higher in real terms than the previous year. They included COVID catch-up support for pupils through the Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards programme¹⁸ as well as funding to enable schools to prepare planned reforms: preparing for the new curriculum for Wales ahead of first implementation in September 2022 and for the additional learning needs reforms being phased in from September 2021.
- 23 Councils' spending per pupil varies considerably across Wales. Comparisons are affected by factors such as whether there are school sixth forms, Welsh medium or bilingual schools as well as rurality and the level of deprivation in the area. In 2020, the Welsh Government commissioned a review of school funding¹⁹. The review adjusted for the different factors and estimated that, in 2018-19, total spending per learner in primary and secondary schools was around £300 above the national average in Ceredigion, Conwy, Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent. It was around £200 or more below the national average in primary and secondary schools in Newport, the Vale of Glamorgan and Flintshire. The report called for more transparency in councils' school spending.

Wales spends about the same as England per pupil but less than Scotland

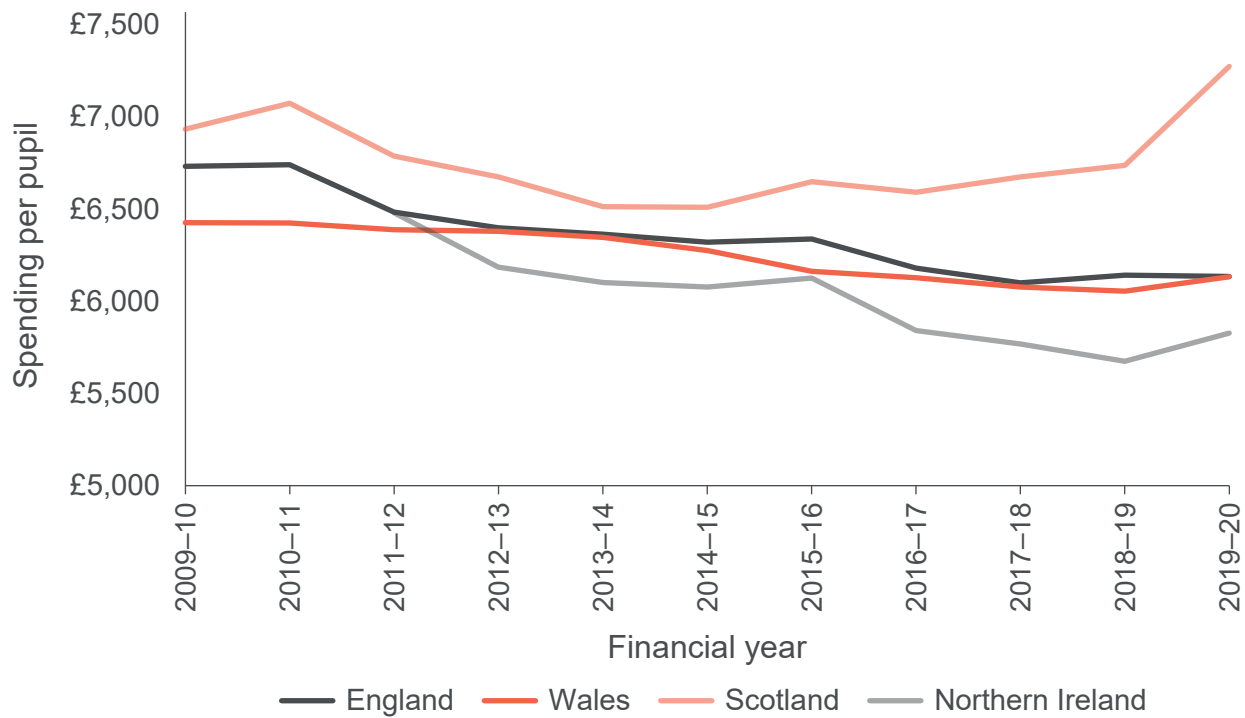
- 24 In 2009-10, spending per pupil in Wales was lower than other UK nations. Research²⁰ has found that, in England, spending per pupil has fallen sharply as a result of spending cuts and rising pupil numbers. In 2019-20, Wales and England spent almost the same per pupil. By contrast, spending in Scotland increased by 5% in real terms and was consistently higher than in the other nations (**Exhibit 4**).

18 The Welsh Government announced its Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards programme in July 2020, aiming to reduce the impact of the pandemic for pupils. Initially, it focused on those in years 11, 12 and 13 with exams, year 7 starting secondary schools and other vulnerable pupils.

19 Sibieta, L., Review of School Spending in Wales, Building in evidence, fairness, transparency and clear expectations, November 2020

20 Institute for Fiscal Studies, Comparing School Spending Per Pupil in England and Wales, July 2018

Exhibit 4: spending per pupil in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, 2009-10 to 2019-20 (real terms, 2018-19 prices)



Source: Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020 Annual report on education spending in England, November 2021

25 The Welsh Government commissioned review of school funding identified two areas where funding in Wales is significantly lower than England:

- **Funding linked to deprivation** – the most deprived primary and secondary schools in England receive 25 to 30% extra funding compared with about 15% extra in Wales.
- **Sixth form funding** – Welsh Government funding per learner in school sixth forms was around £4,200 in 2018-19 compared to £5,000 in England. The review questions if this level of funding in Wales can support schools to provide a balanced post-16 curriculum in future.

So far, the Welsh Government has committed around £370 million to tackle the impact of the pandemic on education

- 26 In 2020-21, the Welsh Government allocated over £220 million to education (including investment in digital and mental health support in schools and colleges). It also plans to provide an additional £150 million in the financial year 2021-22 to support schools, teachers and pupils. Major commitments include:
- £35.6 million to support mentoring and other support for pupils through the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards programme;
 - £33 million to support 16 to 19 learners entering new courses of study in schools, sixth form and further education colleges;
 - £23.2 million for free school meals provision during the holidays;
 - £15 million for educational technology in schools through the Hwb EdTech programme;
 - £13 million to support Foundation Phase provision and non-maintained settings; and
 - £9 million to support wellbeing services in schools.
- 27 The Welsh Government has also provided funding for childcare including:
- £16 million for childcare for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children in registered childcare settings from April to September 2020; and
 - £5 million capital funding for childcare and play services, with £2 million aimed at small scale adaptations to enable COVID-safe operations and £3 million allocated to increasing play opportunities.
- 28 Research in June 2021 suggested that catch-up funding planned at that point equated to £400 per pupil in 2019/20 and 2021/22²¹. This compared to £310 in England (3 to 18 year olds); £230 in Scotland (schools only); and £230 in Northern Ireland (3 to 19 years). It is difficult to compare spending internationally, but other countries have announced ambitious plans: the Netherlands has announced catch-up funding equivalent to £2,100 per pupil and the USA is providing funding worth £1,800 per pupil.

21 Education Policy Institute, Comparing catch-up spending within and outside the UK, June 2021. Funding in England stretches into 2022/23 rather than just 2021/22 for the devolved nations. This probably reflects the budgeting cycle with devolved nations knowing their budgets in the Autumn.

Free school meals funding has been extended to the end of 2021

- 29 The Welsh Government provided funding for councils to provide free school meals for those pupils eligible when schools were closed initially. Most did this in the form of vouchers for families²². Wales was the first UK nation to commit to continuing free school meals during the summer holidays 2020. It subsequently committed to providing free school meals until the end of the Easter holidays 2022.
- 30 The cost increased as more families became eligible for free school meals during the pandemic: 105,000 pupils were eligible for free school meals in January 2021, a rise of more than 20% from January 2020. The Welsh Government provided up to £60.5 million for free school meals including an additional £34 million for free school meals in the school holidays up to Easter 2021.

Managing cost pressures facing the education system

- 31 Schools' finances were under strain before the pandemic. Overall, schools held reserves of £31 million on 31 March 2020, equivalent to £69 per pupil. Reserves had fallen by 33% compared to the previous year. Most secondary schools either had negative reserves (43%) or reserves less than 5% of their annual budget (46%). It is likely that schools' reserves will show an increase in 2020-21 as a result of carrying forward COVID funding that they were unable to spend within the financial year. We expect that this will be temporary, reflecting the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic.
- 32 Our work and that of the 2020 School Funding Review have identified cost pressures facing the education system in the short, medium and long term. In addition to questions about the adequacy of schools' funding linked to deprivation and for sixth-forms (paragraph 25), schools face increases in teachers' pay and pensions. Pay represents more than half of school spending. The previous Welsh Government stated that pay would not fall below that of teachers in England. The School Funding Review estimated that school costs per learner would increase by between 6.4% and 8.4% if the Welsh Government adopted a similar approach to the UK government's 2019 proposal to increase starting salaries for teachers in England to £30,000 by 2022-23. The UK government has reaffirmed its commitment to this goal but stated that achieving it will take longer than previously announced.

- 33 There are other specific areas of potential cost pressures on schools. Increases in the number of pupils eligible for free school meals (paragraph 30) mean that more funding will probably be needed for grants and schemes that support those pupils from poorer households. The Welsh Government has stated that the reform of services for pupils with additional learning needs will be cost neutral. However, based on experience in England, we believe there is at least a risk of extra costs²³.
- 34 Generally, the cost of education in Wales is increased by the number of small primaries (less than 100 pupils) and secondaries (less than 700). Wales has lots of small schools partly due to rurality and partly because it operates a split system with Welsh, bilingual and English medium schools. In November 2017, the Welsh Government introduced a grant of £2.5 million each year for the Senedd term to support small and rural schools. It also launched its Rural Education Plan²⁴ and strengthened the School Organisation Code²⁵ so that councils and others consider all viable alternatives before deciding to close a rural school.
- 35 There is a tension between the duty of councils to provide an efficient school estate and communities' support for their local schools. The challenges seem set to continue as projections suggest pupil numbers in rural areas will fall in the medium and long term along with numbers in some urban areas.

23 National Audit Office, Support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England, September 2019

24 Welsh Government, Rural Education Plan, October 2018

25 The School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 requires Welsh Ministers to issue a School Organisation Code. Amongst other things, the Code sets out the policy context, general principles and factors that should be considered by those bringing forward proposals to reconfigure school provision and by those responsible for making the decision.

Schools – performance

Performance in the international PISA tests

- 36 It is difficult to judge the performance of the education sector in the round, in part because of changes in performance measures over time and because of increasing differences in education across the UK. In recent years, attention has been paid to Welsh pupils' performance in the OECD's international PISA tests that assess the skills and performance of pupils aged 15 in reading, mathematics and science (**Exhibit 5**)²⁶.

Exhibit 5: PISA results for Wales 2006, 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018



Source: Audit Wales analysis

- 37 PISA results in 2009, 2012 and 2015 were disappointing. In 2015, Wales ranked lower than other countries in the UK on all measures. The OECD said that results could not be explained by higher levels of disadvantage: only 6% of the variation in performance in Wales could be attributed to socio-economic status. In England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, 11% of the variation was explained in this way.

26 The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a study of educational achievement organised by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). PISA aims to provide governments with a benchmark for education policy and performance, to make evidence-based decisions and to learn from one another.

- 38 Results in 2018 showed improvement: for the first time, Wales' results were not significantly below the OECD average. Wales' results in maths continued to show improvement; science improved on 2015 and reading had the highest average score since 2006. Wales' performance was still behind the other UK nations in all areas. The 2020 PISA tests, which the OECD planned to report on in 2021, were postponed because of the pandemic. The next snapshot of performance will be available in 2022. Very recent research based on the UK millennium cohort study found that most cognitive outcomes in Wales are very similar to England other than for reading, particularly at age seven²⁷.

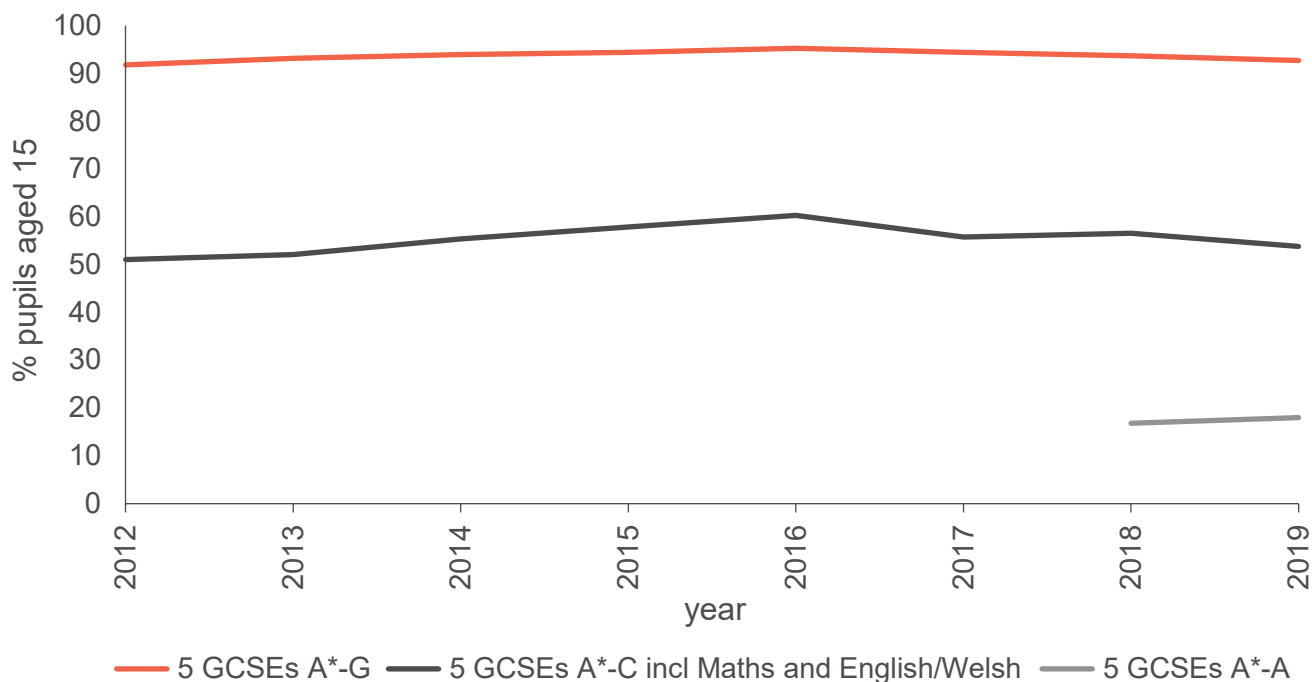
Other measures of performance

GCSE and A-level results

- 39 Looking at performance in GCSE, the proportion of pupils achieving five GCSEs (A*-C) increased before falling back. In 2019, 54% of pupils achieved this level compared to 51% in 2012 (**Exhibit 6**).

27 Sibieta L, and Fullard J, Education Policy Institute, The evolution of cognitive skills during childhood across the UK, July 2021

Exhibit 6: performance at GCSE, Wales 2012 to 2019

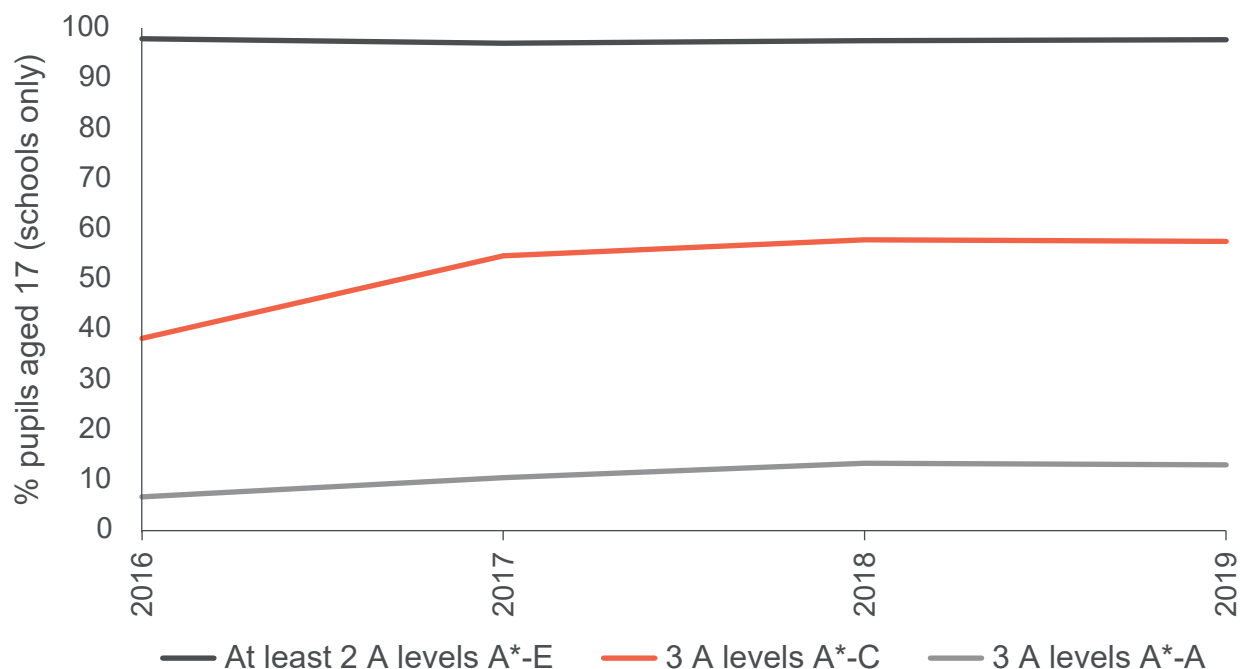


Notes:

- 1 Data is for pupils aged 15 at the start of the academic year.
- 2 The Welsh Government did not to publish these measures for 2020.
- 3 The percentage achieving at least 5 GCSEs A* to A was first published for 2017/18.

Source: Statistics for Wales, Examination results in schools in Wales, 2018/19 (provisional) – Revised SFR 93/2019(R), October 2019

40 The proportion of pupils taking A levels in schools who achieve at least two passes grade A*-G has increased (**Exhibit 7**). There has also been increase in the percentage achieving three A levels at A* or A.

Exhibit 7: performance at A level in Wales 2016 to 2019, schools only

Notes:

- 1 This data is for pupils aged 17 at the start of the academic year.
- 2 Results for 2020 were on the basis of centre assessed grades and so the Welsh Government did not publish the performance measures for 2020.

Source: Statistics for Wales, Examination results in schools in Wales, 2018/19 (provisional) – Revised SFR 93/2019(R), October 2019

- 41 Pupils taking exams in 2020 and 2021 worked in unprecedented circumstances with qualifications awarded on the basis of centre assessed grades. In 2021, 30% of GCSEs awarded to pupils aged 15 were at A*-A, 3.5% more than in 2020 and 10.9% more than in 2019²⁸. This pattern was the same for A levels: in 2021, 48.3% of A level grades were A* or A grades, 6.5 percentage points more than in 2020 and 21.3 percentage points more than 2019²⁹.

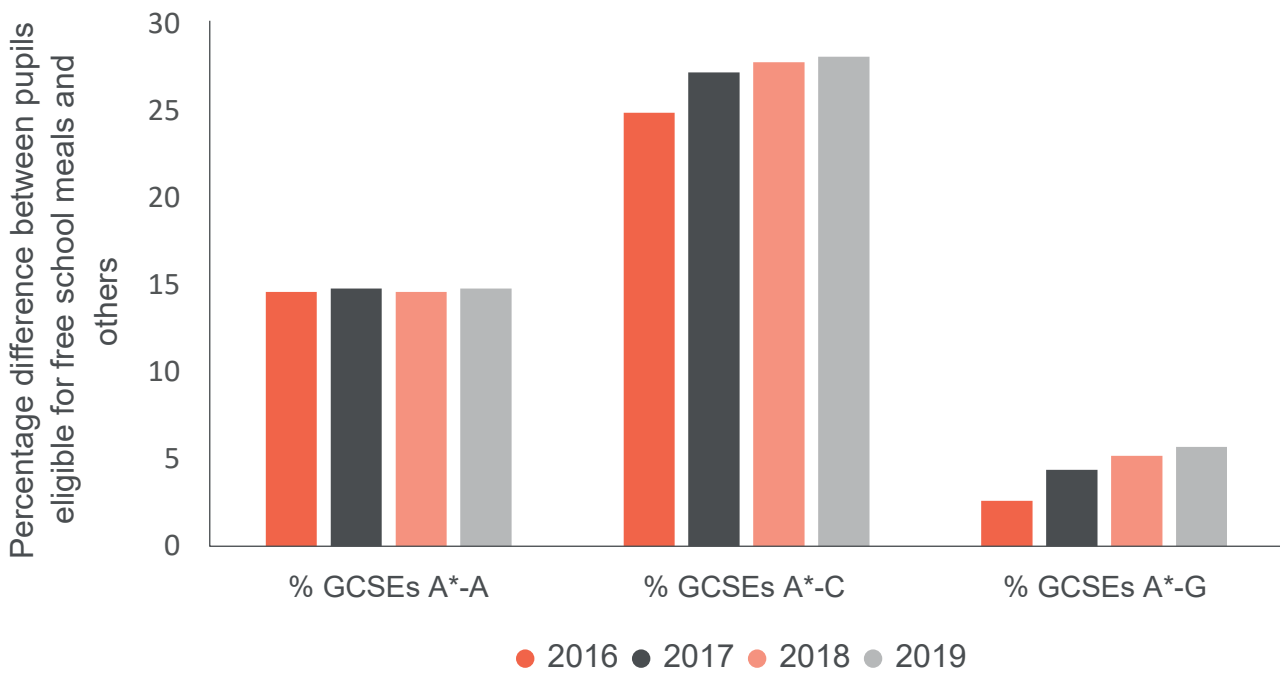
28 Qualifications Wales, Summary of provisional results for GCSE, Key Stage 4 Skills Challenge Certificate and selected level 1/2 and level 2 vocational qualifications in Wales (provisional), August 2021

29 Qualifications Wales, Summary of provisional results for A level, AS, Advanced SCC, and selected level 3 vocational qualifications in Wales (provisional), August 2021

Reducing the attainment gap

42 The Welsh Government has prioritised the aim of reducing the gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and the rest. This includes in early years where children from disadvantaged backgrounds can be behind others by the age of three³⁰. Measuring performance in this area is complex. At GCSE, the attainment gap in the percentages of GCSEs at grades A*-G and A*-C increased between pupils eligible for free school meals and others between 2016 and 2019. There was little change in the attainment gap at the highest GCSE grades during that period (**Exhibit 8**).

Exhibit 8: percentage point difference of GCSE entries by grade range by free school meal status (not eligible for free school meals – eligible for free school meals) 2016 to 2019



Source: Statistics for Wales, Examination results in schools in Wales, 2019/20 SFR 218/2020, December 2020

30 Welsh Government, Written Statement – Launch of Early Childhood Education and Care Approach, October 2019

- 43 Significant attainment gaps also exist for other learners:
- **For girls and boys** – Girls generally outperform boys at GCSE: at grades A*-C, the gap increased from 8.9% in 2015/16 to 10.2% in 2019. For the highest grades the gap remained almost the same: 7.7% in 2016 and 7.4% in 2019. In 2020 the gap between boys and girls increased over the previous year at grades A*-A but decreased at grades A*-C and A*-G. A similar pattern is seen at AS and A level.
 - **For learners with special educational needs** – grades tended to be higher where pupils do not have special educational needs. In 2019, 22% of GCSEs awarded to pupils without special educational needs were at grades A*-A compared to 5.4% of GCSEs awarded to pupils with special educational needs, a gap of 16.8% percentage points³¹.
- 44 In 2020 and 2021 centre assessed grades saw attainment gaps increase. In 2020, 21.8% of GCSEs awarded to pupils not eligible for free school meals were at A* or A compared to 7.1% of GCSEs awarded to pupils eligible for free school meals. This is an attainment gap of 14.7 percentage points compared to 11.5 percentage points in 2019. Provisional results for 2021 suggest that the attainment gap has increased again. The attainment gap between pupils with special educational needs and others and between boys and girls also widened in 2020 and 2021³².

31 Qualifications Wales, Summer 2020 Equalities Impact Analysis: GCSE, AS, and A level, October 2020, Data Tables.

32 Qualifications Wales, Summary of provisional results for GCSE, Key Stage 4 Skills Challenge Certificate and selected level 1/2 and level 2 vocational qualifications in Wales (provisional), August 2021.

Schools – demand and capacity

School places and class sizes

- 45 In 2019/20, there were 1,480 schools in Wales compared to 1,723 in 2009/10. This is mainly as a result of mergers. Surplus places in primary schools fell from 21% in 2010 to 12.6% in 2018. This figure is closer to the Welsh Government's target of 10% surplus places to allow for changes within the year and some parental choice. Surplus places in secondary schools rose from 16% to 19.7% over the same period, but this picture is likely to change as the current cohort of primary school children move through to secondary school.
- 46 In part the changes in surplus places are a result of an increase in the birth rate around 2010 to 2012, with those children now making their way through the system. However, more recently the birth rate in Wales has dropped significantly, which means there is likely to be a rise in surplus places in the coming years. Generally, this picture highlights how the volatility of the birth rate projections makes it difficult for councils and the Welsh Government to plan school places in the medium and long term.
- 47 In 2017, the Welsh Government announced its aim of reducing infant class sizes. It supported schools through a £36 million grant over four years for teaching staff and/or accommodation. Further funding for teaching staff for the earliest years was announced for 2021/22 in May 2021. The latest figures show that, in January 2020, the average infant class size was 25.4, the same as 2019 and a slight reduction on 2018 (25.6). However, the size of junior classes (Years 3 to 6) has increased (from 25.9 in 2018 to 26.3 in 2020). 7.4% of pupils were in infant classes of over 30 pupils, up from 7.2% (7,581) in January 2019 but less than 8.4% in 2018³³.

- 48 Estyn's most recent annual report³⁴ indicates that the number of non-school settings for children under five offering part-time education has reduced. In January 2020, there were around³⁵ 546 providers of education in non-school settings for three or four-year-olds. The number has been falling since 2010, when it was over 700. Some councils do not fund any non-school settings and the funding available varies between areas. In 2018, all paid less than the Welsh Government planned to offer for the childcare element of its childcare and education offer³⁶. The Welsh Government has undertaken work to better understand how non-maintained settings can be supported to provide Foundation Phase provision. It included additional funding in its 2021-22 budget to harmonise funding for education places across settings.

Workforce

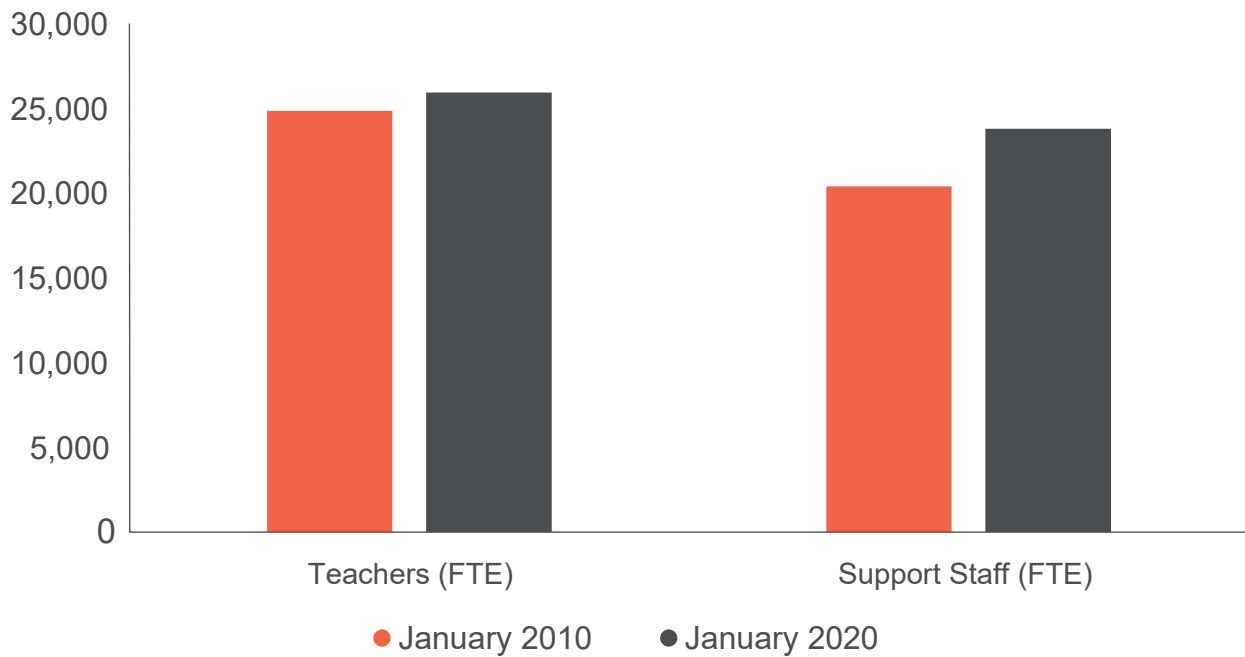
- 49 The number of teachers employed in schools has risen slightly since 2010. The number of support staff employed has increased more substantially (**Exhibit 9**).

34 Estyn, The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales 2019-2020, December 2020

35 The number of non-maintained settings registered with local partnerships to provide education fluctuates, often according to whether children aged three and over attend the setting and on arrangements to fund the provision locally.

36 National Assembly for Wales Children, Young People and Education Committee, Childcare Funding (Wales) Bill Committee Stage 1 Report, July 2018

Exhibit 9: number of staff employed in schools in Wales (Full Time Equivalent (FTE))



Source: Statistics Wales, School Census

50 Schools face a number of workforce challenges, including:

- Welsh medium teachers** – There are shortages of teachers for Welsh medium schools in some areas and subjects. Our 2020 report found that there is a lack of supply teachers for Welsh medium schools³⁷. The number of recruits to initial teacher education for Welsh medium has consistently been below target. The new curriculum will change the approach to teaching and assessing Welsh and will increase the demands for Welsh teachers in English-medium schools further.

37 Auditor General for Wales, Covering Teachers’ absence – follow-up, November 2020

- **Staff for the Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards programme** – We expressed concern about the ability to appoint staff for the programme in September 2020³⁸. Appointing high quality additional staff at short notice was difficult, especially in rural areas, Welsh-medium or bilingual schools and areas of high deprivation³⁹. Instead, schools and colleges have extended hours for part-time staff, paid current staff overtime, or retained staff about to retire.
- **Newly-qualified teachers** – The Welsh Government determines the number of teacher training places available based on expectations about the required workforce. However, for the sixth year in a row, the number of new secondary school trainee teachers was lower than required (54% lower) in 2019/20. The number of new primary school trainees was less than required for the fifth year in a row (12% lower in 2019/20)⁴⁰.
- **Supply teachers** – In 2013 and 2020, we reported on Covering Teachers' Absence and made some recommendations about the management of absence and supply cover staff. The Welsh Government has taken action to improve the training of supply teachers and their pay and conditions. However, our work also identified increasing pay as a further cost pressure for schools and highlights the risk that schools save money by employ teaching assistants rather than qualified teachers in some situations.

38 Auditor General for Wales, Evidence submitted to the Children, Young People and Education Committee for Stage 1 scrutiny of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill, September 2020

39 Estyn, How Schools and Colleges Used the RRRS and Catch-up Grants for Post-16 Learners, June 2021

40 Statistics for Wales, Initial Teacher Education Wales, 2019/20 SFR 18/2021 18 May 2021

Schools – key issues

51 When the pandemic hit, schools and the education system were already showing signs of strain. A major reform programme was part-way through, there were substantial workforce challenges and school finances were under pressure. The Welsh Government had commissioned a review of school funding. The pandemic has disrupted the education of a generation of pupils; its impact varying for pupils of different ages and being particularly difficult for vulnerable children. Going forward, schools face the challenge of supporting pupils' wellbeing and working within the restriction of social distancing and other measures to reduce transmission, which affects their ability to deliver some elements of the curriculum and extra-curricular activities.

Mitigating the impact of COVID on pupils

- 52 The impact on individual pupils will have varied but all have experienced substantial disruption. There is worrying evidence of lost learning and that the pandemic has increased inequality – for example, widening the gap in attainment between those eligible for free school meals and others. The Welsh Government has committed around £370 million to date for schools and early years to recover from the pandemic and prepare for reforms. However, the Education Policy Institute has estimated that £600 million to £900 million could be needed over three years to support education recovery in Wales⁴¹.
- 53 The response to the pandemic has brought some beneficial changes. For example, Estyn⁴² reports that communication between parents and schools has improved. Digital learning and skills have accelerated as schools and pupils have had to meet the challenges of remote learning⁴³.
- 54 As well the impact of the pandemic on education, the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee reported growing concern about the impact of the pandemic on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing⁴⁴ more widely. The Welsh Government provided £1.2 million additional funding for school counselling services in April 2020. In February 2021, the Welsh Government announced an additional £4 million to improve access to mental health and wellbeing services in schools in 2021-22 as well as an extra £5.4 million for children and adolescent mental health services.

41 Education Policy Institute, Analysis Paper: Preliminary Research Findings on Education Recovery, April 2021

42 Estyn, Engagement work – Primary sector update Summer Term 2021, July 2021

43 Estyn, Engagement work – Secondary sector update Summer Term 2021, July 2021

44 Welsh Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee, Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people: final report, March 2021

Following through the reform programme

- 55 Schools have been stretched over the past year adjusting to remote learning, monitoring vulnerable pupils and supporting the return to face-to-face teaching. Schools will need support to introduce these reforms successfully. In January 2021, the Welsh Government published A Journey to 2022, a roadmap showing what schools needed to do before the start of the Curriculum for Wales. In July 2021, Estyn reported that primary schools needed a period of undisturbed time to be ready to implement the curriculum in September 2022. It found that preparations in secondary schools varied.
- 56 In June and July 2021, the Minister for Education announced changes with the aim of creating more time for schools to prepare and engage with Qualifications Wales on assessment and qualification methods. These included suspending again the requirement for end of stage assessments in primary schools. He also announced that the Curriculum for Wales will not be mandatory for secondary schools until 2023.
- 57 The cost of curriculum reform – both to date and in the future – is not yet clear. The Welsh Government has commissioned an evaluation programme which includes collecting cost information – but without this information, we cannot be sure that sufficient resources are available. We will be looking at costs further in our ongoing work on the curriculum reform programme.

Addressing the workforce challenges

- 58 We have documented some of the workforce challenges facing schools, councils and the Welsh Government. Some of these have been present for a long time. The numbers of recruits for initial teacher training have been a challenge for several years. We understand that the number of applicants has increased for 2021/22, but it is not clear if this will be sustained or is a result of there being fewer alternative opportunities for graduates during the pandemic.
- 59 The challenge of developing a sufficient Welsh speaking workforce is considerable. However, it is vital for schools to help to meet the Welsh Government's vision of one million Welsh speakers by 2050 outlined in its Cymraeg 2050 strategy. There have long been shortages of Welsh medium teachers generally and these are acute for specific subjects such as physics and maths. There is also a shortage of teachers of Welsh for English-medium schools currently, which is likely to be more pressing in the future because of the Curriculum for Wales has a new approach and greater emphasis on learning and assessing the Welsh language.



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