

# Background

The number of all-age schools in Wales is increasing, with more due to open in the next few years. In 2020-2021, local authorities continued to propose the establishment of all-age schools. Four different local authorities submitted four proposals for consultation. In January 2020, there were 22 all-age schools in Wales, so these four proposals would be an increase of almost 20% nationally. (The statistics section below outlines the features of the new all-age schools and how they compare to the previous organisation of schools in that area.)

The growing number of applications prompted the Welsh Government to ask for a study into how successful all-age schools are and whether standards are better in an all-age school compared with separate secondary and primary schools. This report will not be able to evaluate standards in a meaningful way since many of these schools have only been established for a few years and, because of the pandemic, inspectors have not been able to evaluate standards more broadly. Furthermore, Estyn has only inspected around half of the all-age schools that are open thus far.

## Research

Research into all-age schools is limited, due mainly to the relatively low numbers of all-age schools in Wales and in other countries. Research published during the last 20 years focuses mainly on the potential of all-age schools. This includes their potential to improve pedagogy and care, advantages for developing learning, and potential challenges for leadership.

Many local authorities benefited from the 21st Century Schools and Education programme (Welsh Government, 2019) to establish all-age schools. This provided large infrastructure investment in schools and colleges. As a result, many all-age schools are situated in either brand new buildings or newly refurbished and extended sites.

In 2018, the most recent research paper by Reynolds et al. (2018) explores the effects of an all-age model internationally and to examine how it might compare with the Welsh model. The report is based on visits to six all-age schools in south, mid and north Wales, and semi-structured interviews with leaders, teaching staff and pupils. It contains a literature review of international work on all-age schools. The report concludes (Reynolds et al., p.11):

- That ‘emerging benefits of an all-age model on the pedagogy, and an innovative

and synergistic approach to teaching and learning allows for combining of the most effective elements of teaching strategies in different educational phases for the benefit of pupils' learning outcomes'.

- An all-age school model 'appears to stimulate the professional development of staff, enrichment and diversification of their skillset, and with it, increase in their professional competence and confidence to create the best learning environment for their pupils'.
- 'The continuity of the education throughout the key stages within the same environment can allow for greater coherence and reduction in the transition related issues, which in consequence may minimise pupils' stress, enhance their wellbeing and give them a better chance for more favourable educational outcomes and a higher quality of life in the future.'

In England and Scotland, research has focused on the benefit of an all-age school model. A paper by the Department for Education and Skills (2006) identifies potential benefits but with no evidence to prove the fulfilling of that potential. In 2011, the inspectorate of Scotland provided a guide to opening up learning in all-through schools and identified current strengths as being (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Scotland, 2011, p.6):

- climate and ethos, including the quality of relationships
- partnerships with parents and the local community
- meeting the needs of young people with additional support needs

A report by Swidenbank (2007) [on the challenges and opportunities of leading and managing an all-age school](#) for the National College for school leadership highlighted opportunities and challenges for leadership of all-age schools. The opportunities included (Swidenbank, 2007, p.6):

- being part of something new and exciting
- having the ability to change and to develop as a leader, which in turn promotes distributed leadership
- reducing the barriers to learning across the primary and secondary phases
- improving the personal development and wellbeing of students and gaining a greater understanding of the community
- gaining greater value for money through economies of scale

Whilst the challenges highlighted were (Swidenbank, 2007, p.11):

- changing the culture and addressing the context and the history of the school
- changing perceptions and raising awareness about what it means to be a primary or secondary school teacher
- time pressures and facilities

International research in Jamaica (Jamaica All-Age Schools Project, 2003) and Finland (Wilborg, 2004) were only small-scale studies and made generalisations about the

system within their own countries.

## **Facts and figures**

Over the last four years, the number of all-age schools in Wales has risen from 10 schools in 2017 to 23 schools by September 2021. With this, the number of pupils taught in all-age schools has more than doubled.

All-age schools are usually formed from a combination of secondary school(s) and primary school(s). Three all-age schools have evolved from one initial school, these being St Brigid's, Ysgol Caer Elen and Ysgol Llanhari. Since they are so new, there is no all-age school in Wales that has educated pupils throughout their statutory education period (other than St Brigid's that was an independent school prior to changing its status).

To illustrate further the complexity and variance in all-age schools in Wales, the percentages of pupils that transfer to Year 7 from Year 6 range from 80% down to 6%. You can find more detail in Appendix 3.

## **Inspection outcomes**

Inspection outcomes since 2017 show a variable picture across the schools. Of the eight schools inspected under the new arrangements introduced in 2017, four were judged good or better for all or most inspection areas. Four schools required follow-up activity with two of these going into Estyn review and two requiring significant improvement.

The strongest inspection area is wellbeing and attitudes to learning, while provision for care, support and guidance is also strong. Standards is the weakest of the inspection areas, which in nearly all cases reflects the shortcomings in teaching and leadership.