

# The rationale for establishing an all-age school

Despite support for the establishment of all-age schools, there is no national sector specific guidance available for local authorities and school leaders. Therefore, local authorities have their own, diverse plans to suit their unique circumstances. These are nearly always part of that authority's wider school organisation plans. In addition, there is no commonly recognised term for the sector within 'My local school' and pupil level annual school census (PLASC) referring to them as 'middle' schools and others as 'all-through' schools. Other notable issues include little specific initial teacher education and limited bespoke professional learning for the sector. The Welsh Government normally publishes separate guidance for primary and secondary schools. Measures such as free school meals thresholds and attendance are also calculated for secondary and primary phase separately. This makes it difficult for all-age schools to establish their own position statements and maintain their identity as one school. Separate guidance also has the potential to add additional burden for teachers and school leaders in all-age schools as they need to read multiple documents.

For most local authorities, establishing an all-age school is an integral part of their school reorganisation strategy. This is reflected in the increasing number of reorganisation proposals concerning all-age schools submitted to the Welsh Government that sit beside the strategies linked to 21<sup>st</sup> century funding.

## Models

Across Wales, all-age schools have been formed from various combinations of pre-existing schools to suit the needs of the local community. In a majority of cases, secondary schools amalgamate with primary schools. The number of schools involved varies considerably from three secondary schools with one primary to one secondary school with eight primary schools. Details of models currently in existence can be found in Appendix 2.

Local authorities consider carefully what model to adopt and how it fits in their

reorganisation plans. The amalgamation of several primary schools with the secondary school allows a few local authorities to close schools whose buildings are in a poor state and thus reduce the school's estate and maintenance costs, while looking to provide smooth changeover for pupils.

## **Funding**

A few local authorities secure funding for new buildings to accommodate all pupils. These purpose-built schools, generally planned in conjunction with pupils, parents and the local community, provide much better amenities than those previously available. In general, authorities upgrade existing buildings and, where required, add new buildings on the existing site.

Reducing the number of sites has released some capital funds for local authorities. This has mostly been reinvested into the authority's education service and used to meet with demands of restructuring. Many of the old sites have been returned to the community or made available for local development.

## **Local authorities rationale**

A few local authorities published a position statement regarding the rationale behind establishing an all-age school. These statements or policies indicated the possible benefits of the all-age model. This served the local authorities well for the formal consultation and provided a firm basis for future consideration of all-age schools. One of the main possible benefits indicated is to improve the wellbeing of pupils throughout their school life. They also identified the development of whole school pedagogy as a positive feature of all-age schools that could lead to improved learning and sound progress.

There were various responses from local authorities regarding the rationale for establishing an all-age school in their area. Every case had an individual set of reasons behind the rationale, taking into consideration the needs of the pupils in the school's catchment and the surrounding community.

In three local authorities, it was stated that opening an all-age school would protect education in rural areas. In some cases, this meant closure of small schools and forming one large school serving a wider area. It was also noted that

reorganisation and forming an all-age school protected and developed Welsh medium provision through amalgamating small Welsh medium primary schools with a larger, but still small, secondary school.

A few all-age schools have been established to help to improve standards of previously failing schools. In these instances, local authorities believed that amalgamation of successful schools with poorer performing schools would provide sound leadership, improve teaching and lead to higher standards. At this early stage there is little proof that this has been fully realised. This approach also has the potential of creating discontent amongst school staff and the wider community. In a few cases, all-age schools have been the preferred model in response to falling roles in the area as well as deteriorating buildings.

## **Staffing**

In most cases, the local authority working with the shadow governing body usually deployed staff from the existing schools but did not guarantee jobs. However, in a few instances, pledges made to the school community during the development phase regarding funding and maintaining staffing levels were not always sustainable or realistic.

Middle leadership structures vary according to the school's context and size. Some schools adopt a structure with leaders for each area of learning and experience; these are generally whole school responsibilities across all phases. In other schools, there are structures that relate generally to subjects or disciplines, skills or pastoral roles. In a few schools, regardless of the leadership structure, there is not a continuum of whole school responsibilities outside of the senior leadership team. In addition, in a few schools where middle leaders have responsibility for whole areas of learning and experience, these leaders do not have the knowledge and skills beyond their own subject to support improvements across the whole AoLE. However, schools are continuously reviewing their staffing structures to meet current needs and national and local priorities.

## **Support from local authorities**

Local authorities support school leaders appropriately with matters relating to

personnel and give guidance to schools on matters such as salary protection and redundancies when required. Schools are given strong guidance on legal matters regarding processes to close schools and establish a new school, for example in running consultations and dealing with the community. However, a few schools felt that the local authority did not always see through promises made at the time of consultation such as matters regarding funding, job security and support.

In the early days of considering all-age schools as models in school reorganisation, most challenges grew from lack of communication and engagement and resulted in some fear of the unknown. Governors became concerned that there was no legislation defining constitutions of governing bodies for all-age schools other than generally for maintained schools. They also described how the local authority did not always work closely enough with them to guide them through complex processes.

In a few instances, communication with the school community was not always clear enough. As a result, parents and staff sometimes perceived wrongly what were the intentions of the governing body and local authority. The establishment of a new all-age school was seen as a threat to local communities through the closure of local schools in small communities. Staff report that they felt intimidated by a new school and were concerned for their future employment. Engagement with the local community during consultation was not always meaningful, transparent or helpful to support change to improve the provision for pupils.

In a few cases, the rationale for forming an all-age school did not include a compelling narrative of the educational benefits for learners. There was lack of transparency and communication in bringing more than one school community together, which was a particular problem in more than one area. For example, parents were concerned about young children mixing and sharing the same facilities with much older pupils and about the impact of changes on the length of journeys to schools. The local authority underestimated the strength of feeling regarding ethos and culture of pre-existing schools, and there was strong opposition to a few schools.

Overall, in considering the rationale for establishing an all-age school, local authorities and governing bodies have very little research or expertise to draw upon in Wales. Since the first schools were established, they have developed a strong culture of sharing practice and learnt valuable lessons from previous experience. As a result, the most recent consultations are much sharper in terms

of the benefits of establishing an all-age school. They also pay due attention to the possible effects on communities and set out clearly how the new school would affect pupils, parents, and staff. This has led to successful applications and a smoother transition to an all-age school.