

Setting up all-age schools

In general, headteachers are appointed in time to prepare for establishing the new school. Preparation time varies from 18 months to a few days. This often depends upon the circumstances surrounding the closure of the existing schools and the length of the consultation period. Where headteachers are appointed in a timely manner, they have opportunities to learn from established all-age schools and to consider how best to apply the learning to their own context. As a result, they are able to plan strategically for policy and practice and develop a clear vision for the new school. These headteachers also play a prominent part in, firstly, appointing senior staff and later appointing all other staff. These headteachers successfully establish a new ethos and culture, for example by rebranding the school, creating a whole school vision and bringing all staff together to establish a shared sense of purpose. It appears that allowing a headteacher adequate time to plan and prepare before opening the school is beneficial. Those appointed less than 12 months beforehand have noted that time for planning and preparing was very tight.

Where headteachers are not afforded enough planning time, too many decisions have to be made quickly and previous policies and procedures are adopted in the short term. They find it difficult to establish a new climate for learning that is different to that in the pre-existing schools. It also makes it difficult to consult fully with parents and staff about key changes.

One of the initial challenges for leaders is to establish a whole school, cross phase culture and ethos. To support this aim, many base leaders in different parts of the school. This approach is essential in multi-site schools. Leaders have to ensure that pupils and staff acclimatise with the new building and become used to having different school communities together. Many decide upon a new school uniform that gives a new identity to the school. In many cases, primary aged pupils' school uniform is different to the secondary aged pupils but carries the same branding through colours and school badge. This gives pupils a sense of belonging to the same new school.

Nearly all schools changed their name, signalling a new era and new beginning. In a few cases, agreeing a name proved difficult with some opposition from the community. Schools who consulted with pupils and parents on naming the school found the transition easier to manage. Only a very few schools retained the old

name of the secondary school.

Establishing a new school is mainly managed by the local authority who guide and support the governing body to appoint leaders and staff. This is in the absence of a specific national strategy or toolkit to support all-age schools' governing bodies. Most schools found that providing stakeholders, including parents, with regular updates was helpful and provided essential information in preparing families to transition to the new school on opening. Many schools appreciated the stability of having nominated local authority officers who managed their arrangements. In a few cases, where there was no designated project manager from the local authority, the schools struggled with the burden of ensuring that correct procedures were followed and that the community were kept informed of developments.

Leadership structures in all-age schools show some similarities and are generally based on a secondary school model. This is often because the number of pupils on roll is much greater. In many cases they were predetermined by the shadow governing body but adjusted as senior leaders were appointed. Many have taken the opportunity to look at whole school staffing structures. It is now common to have a headteacher, one or two deputy headteachers and assistant headteachers. An increasingly common approach to the staffing structure and leadership is to split the school into phases. These are usually nursery to Year 4 (phase 1), Years 5 to 8 (phase 2) and Years 9 to 11 (phase 3). The sixth form, when present, would be the fourth phase. Various combinations of other leaders with roles such as phase leaders, co-ordinators and middle leaders complete the leadership structure. The number and combination of leaders varies notably according to the school's size, location and number of sites, and general complexity.

Responsibilities designated to leaders are increasingly cross phase and whole school. In the first schools to be established, responsibilities mirror those found in the primary and secondary schools. This includes several heads of subjects, key stage leaders and co-ordinators. Over time, schools have moved towards leadership of whole school initiatives, for example the new curriculum areas of learning and experiences and pastoral care across all ages. This has led, for example, to better co-ordination of planning for pupil progression.

In establishing the first all-age schools, most senior leadership roles were filled by staff from secondary school backgrounds. Appointing a headteacher or deputy headteacher from a primary background was the exception. Over time, the

balance of leaders from secondary and primary school backgrounds has slowly been readdressed and, in most schools, there is a mix of senior leaders from the different sector backgrounds.

Many schools regarded their first year of opening as being very difficult. They had to cope with problems with school buildings as well as the emotional side of bringing staff together after amalgamation. In a few cases, the new school found itself overstaffed with insufficient funding and had to reduce the number of staff.

Despite anticipating financial gains from establishing an all-age school, very few all-age schools have provided savings for local authorities. Initially they might have expected savings due to the requirement for fewer staff, selling off assets and rationalising costs but this has not materialised and in many cases local authority costs have increased due to redundancies and salary protection. Many schools have encountered unplanned financial barriers and, in 2021, a minority (22%) held negative reserves. This is high compared with the proportion of secondary schools (17%) and primary schools (4%). This is in stark contrast to the situation before the pandemic when a majority (64%) of all-age schools carried negative reserves with the secondary and primary schools also showing larger proportions with negative reserves (43% and 17% respectively). Any money raised, for example from selling unwanted buildings, has been reinvested in the wider education services of that authority, but has not always specifically benefited the new school.

Support for headteachers during the initial planning and development has varied considerably across Wales. Many headteachers noted that they would have valued more support from their local authority, and the Welsh Government. This was particularly the case for those who had very little time to prepare and plan for the opening of the new school.

Leaders generally believe that an all-age school requires at least five or six years to establish itself and to ensure that staff, parents, and pupils see the benefit of the all-age model on progress and wellbeing in particular.

Governing body

It has been normal practice to establish a shadow governing body to oversee the transition from pre-existing schools to the all-age school. This governing body

usually includes representation from all pre-existing schools including chairs of governors and current headteachers. In a few instances, members with hidden or personal agendas have been a barrier to a smooth transition. Very few members have previous experience of establishing an all-age school. Many found that they had to work to adapt their mindset, to consider the school as a single new entity and to plan strategically as one school. Governors recognised the importance of making crucial staff appointments at an early stage. They also have a key role in working with and in the community to allay fears and misconceptions. To this end, the quality of governors is key to driving and supporting the establishment phase.

Governors appreciated a clear vision and well-focused approach by local authorities to establishing and providing strategic direction for the new school.

Cameo - Governing body of Idris Davies School 3-18

Context

Idris Davies School 3-18 is an English medium school for pupils aged 3-18 maintained by Caerphilly local authority. The school was opened as Idris Davies School in January 2018 following the amalgamation of Rhymney Comprehensive School, Abertysswg Primary School and Pontlottyn Primary School.

There are currently 898 pupils in the school.

Actions

The governing bodies of the three amalgamated schools initially established the full governing body. Due to the 'contentious amalgamation' it was felt that there had to be a mindset change. After six months the governing body was totally restructured as an all-age school governing body. Committees focus on inspection areas and the responsibilities of the governors were altered amicably with all governors given responsibility. None of the members had any prior experience of all-age schools.

Outcomes

The governing body feel that a consistency in their actions is a strength of the school. Setting up of the school was a lengthy process. They had many meetings with the local authority and amalgamated schools. Parents and the community were consulted 12 months before the school opened.

Governors believe that they did not appoint a headteacher early enough, which left the governors with a large amount of work that they felt unqualified to do, for example consulting on the changes to the school day.

Despite the initial challenges, the governing body feel that the following are factors that have contributed to the success of the school:

- Setting common goals across the whole school
- Catering for all pupils' needs in each phase
- The sharing of ideas and strategies between and within phases, including cross-phase development groups
- Seamless transition between key stages for pupils within the school
- Shared facilities, for example 3G facilities and specialist teaching facilities
- Consistent approaches across all ages

Partner primary schools (that account for 75% of Year 7 intake) are included in provision by Idris Davies School with respect to facilities, strategies, lesson materials, and physical resources.

Working with the community

Working with the community is crucial in ensuring the successful establishment

an all-age school. In the most successful examples, governors and local authorities worked with clusters of schools affected to outline their rationale and the benefits of an all-age model. It has been important to inform and consult staff, parents, and other members of the community about the process and how it will benefit the community as a whole, both now and for future generations.

In many cases, the community benefits from the use of high-quality facilities after school hours. These include sports facilities, large spaces for events, theatres, and cinema. The schools often provide a 'hub' for the community where parents can access specialist services from multiple agencies.

Cameos - facilities for community use

In Ysgol Bae Baglan a new building provides pupils with modern facilities for sport and creative arts. The building is open to the community each evening and they can make full use of facilities such as a recording studio, drama studio, the school hall, fully equipped theatre, sports hall, fitness studio and floodlit 4G all-weather pitches.

In Ysgol Godre'r Berwyn the old school buildings were refurbished and extended to accommodate primary pupils. The old school hall has been transformed into a fully equipped community theatre and cinema. The school reception area acts as a foyer for the evening performances.

Initially in many cases, members of the community have had reservations around amalgamation and have been resistant to change. As the school becomes successfully established, reservations have eased significantly. Many schools have succeeded in creating a brand-new culture and ethos befitting of one all-age school.

The establishment of all-age schools has also been received better in some local authorities than in others. For example, Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion and Rhondda Cynon Taf experienced less resistance to their reorganisation and have multiple all-age schools in their authority. They engaged and communicated effectively with the local community at most stages of the schools' formation. As a result, communities believe that all-age schools benefit their children. Success in

establishing the first all-age school in an authority also contributed to the acceptance of other new schools in other communities.

In a few local authorities, all-age schools have had a positive effect on Welsh medium provision with an increase in pupils attending Welsh medium schools.

Lessons learnt

There were some early successes in establishing all-age schools, but leaders have also identified areas that they would want to improve. Lessons learnt have been shared within and between schools and local authorities. This has meant that the most recently established schools have benefited from hindsight and avoided certain pitfalls. The main lessons learnt include the following:

- Ensure that leadership structures are not too complicated and costly
- Establish common systems and timetabling
- Provide enough planning and preparation time for leaders and plan for enough time to see the process through
- Ensure that local authorities guard against making unrealistic or unsustainable promises, for example regarding job protection or funding
- Provide buildings that are fit for purpose and ready for occupancy when the school opens to pupils
- Be aware that loyalties to previous schools can lead to resistance from well-established staff; work on building an inclusive ethos by providing support to staff throughout the transition
- Consider carefully the make-up of a shadow governing body, to avoid those solely advocating their own agendas
- Consult meaningfully and thoroughly with all stakeholders; avoid a feeling of being 'done to' rather than 'done with' – provide regular information updates
- Be prepared for opposition from the community; parents will be concerned about issues such as losing the 'familial' ethos of primary schools and young children mixing with much older pupils
- Ensure transparency when a reorganisation proposal is linked to other educational reform processes, for example reorganising post-16 provision