

# Beyond COVID: learning in the next phase Analysis of conversations

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## Wavehill: Social and Economic Research

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# Executive Summary

This report provides a summary of the key themes that were raised within and across the *Beyond COVID: learning in the next phase* conversations. The conversations brought together education practitioners from across Wales to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning. They discussed what we can learn from the period of disruption, and how schools, settings, and the broader education system can move forward together.

The conversations were attended by 363 practitioners and other stakeholders. Across 59 small-group discussions, participants represented a diverse range of settings, schools and broader organisations with an interest in education. The objectives of conversations were to give participants time and space to reflect and think about how we move together out of the current disruption. This was in order to share learning and experience.

Participants were invited to give their views across three substantive areas:

1. What worked well over the last year and why it worked well,
2. the challenges and opportunities practitioners may face in supporting learners with their readiness to learn following the disruptions of the last year, and
3. the challenges and opportunities practitioners may encounter in ensuring learner progression in the coming months.

## Key Themes

There were recurring themes that were consistently raised across the three areas of conversation. They were widely held by most participants.

A key theme was the importance of supporting **learner well-being**. Many participants outlined that broader welfare had become a key priority informing engagement with learners and their families. Participants across settings and schools outlined issues such as increased anxiety, stress and social isolation, as well as reduced peer interaction and physical activity as significant challenges facing learners. Reflecting on the last 12 months, a key area of progress highlighted by participants was the strengthening of links between home and school or setting. The situation had enabled practitioners to develop a greater understanding of learners' home lives, for example, which enabled them to better tailor their support.

Another key, overarching theme across conversations included delivering **effective teaching and learning**. The disruption faced by schools and settings required practitioners to pivot towards greater digital and blended learning provision. Underscoring reflections on teaching and learning was the impact of disruption on learner progression. A key factor in responses was the importance of ensuring that practitioners held the necessary skills and confidence to draw on digital teaching tools. Practitioners also drew on pedagogical innovations that digital tools enabled, such as synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning.

Another key theme raised by participants included **parental engagement**. Some participants highlighted the important contribution that parents and carers had made in supporting their children's education over the last 12 months. Many felt that significant progress had been made in setting up more established lines of communications and in developing more positive relationships with parents. This was felt by many to be a significant achievement.

### What Worked Well and Why

A key theme raised by most participants around what had worked well was the greater use of **online teaching and learning tools and platforms**. Providing practitioners with opportunities to upskill provided the basis for effective transitions to online and blended learning. Participants also highlighted the benefits of new ways of working in supporting **greater and more effective communication**. This included seeking feedback from parents in how to better support children online and at a distance.

Some felt new arrangements have allowed for greater flexibility in the way staff work and encouraged **better cooperation and communication** amongst staff to solve problems and find solutions. As a result of new ways of teaching and learning, participants felt that some learners had become **more independent**. These included learners taking greater ownership over their learning, as well as better suiting some learners that had previously struggled to engage in class.

There were also cross-cutting themes highlighting why teaching and learning had been effective. This included the importance of **staff motivation and engagement**. Some respondents felt that staff had been willing to go the extra mile in responding to learner needs and in developing their own skills. Some felt that school staff also **worked effectively together**, driven by a wider sense of solidarity that has emerged across the sector. Overall, the experiences over the last 12 months have resulted in schools developing greater **adaptive capacity**, the ability to adopt new and innovative ways of working.

### Supporting Readiness to Learn

Participants were then asked to explore the emerging challenges and opportunities for practitioners as they seek to support their learners, so they are ready to learn. Participants raised a diverse range of challenges. These included supporting learner **well-being**, including around their mental health. There were specific concerns about the subsequent impact of disrupted teaching on **learning and progression**. This included addressing learner progress towards essential and **basic skills**, including handwriting and literacy. There were also broader concerns around the loss of **routine and social contact**, including the importance of re-establishing learning routines and peer friendships.

Participants offered a range of approaches and opportunities for overcoming these challenges. Some felt, for example, that **greater focus** should be given to well-being and basic skills within the school day in the coming months. A key priority for many respondents for getting learners back into the routine and in reconnecting with peers was through **play and opportunities to socialise**. Staff **engagement and support** was also highlighted as important in shaping responses and ensuring the effectiveness of revised processes and working

arrangements. It was felt for example that sufficient **time and resources** was required to allow practitioners to develop and deliver a broader range of support alongside teaching.

### Supporting Learner Progression

Finally, practitioners discussed how to enable learners to make the progress needed to move their learning forward. Practitioners identified a number of challenges including the importance of creating **positive learning environments** to support learners back to school. A key theme within this conversation was the need to focus on **developing a range of basic skills**. This included reinforcing learning developed during the lockdown, including digital literacy, as well as those skills that may have been negatively affected such as reading and writing. Participants were also concerned about the **sustained pressure on staff**, including high workloads.

To overcome these challenges, key themes included encouraging a **whole school approach** and a need for **overarching vision** driving and directing efforts. They highlighted the importance of sufficient **capacity and resources** to effectively manage different priorities and commitments facing schools and settings. Some expressed the importance of **clarity and certainty** as important for planning and preparation, especially around assessment arrangements.

The new curriculum was a common theme within responses. This included those that felt the experience of the last year has been an important opportunity to develop skills and expertise around curriculum design and pedagogical innovation. From these perspectives, in order to capitalise on the progress made in many areas, and professional learning, creativity and innovation that it has generated over the past 12 months would benefit implementation of the Curriculum for Wales. Conversely, there were concerns regarding the timeline of the rollout. Some felt it was difficult to see how schools could commit the time and resources necessary to develop their new curriculum within the context of the challenges they face.

### Conclusions

In thinking about the future, some practitioners felt that the next 12 months were a balance of trying to retain and entrench the progress that had been made, whilst mitigating the negative impacts of disruption to teaching and learning. The circumstances, the urgency and necessity of the situation, required practitioners and schools to act and innovate, sometimes very rapidly. Some felt that the circumstances provided them with freedom to experiment, and to implement new and innovative ideas, including around teaching and learning.

The last 12 months have brought significant challenges. This included **pre-existing challenges** facing the education community, such as differential engagement and the attainment gap. Practitioners and schools have had to find new ways of addressing these challenges, such as encouraging engagement at a distance. Practitioners also highlighted **novel and emerging** challenges. These tended to focus on the operational challenges of supporting learners, including in providing well-being provision, engaging and communicating with parents, and in providing safe learning environments.

In response to these challenges, many respondents felt that significant progress had been made. This was especially apparent in **bridging the home and school learning environments**, and in developing better lines of **communication with parents**. Increased engagement with online and blended learning were all highlighted as being encouraging.

# 1 Introduction

This report provides a summary of the key themes that were raised within and across the *Beyond COVID: learning in the next phase* conversations. These national conversations brought together education practitioners from across Wales to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning, what we can learn from the period of disruption, and how schools, settings, and the broader education system can move forward together.

The report is intended to provide a practical resource for practitioners, highlighting and sharing experiences, practice, and learning, including thinking about *why* practitioners have had success with certain approaches, and the principles behind them. It also seeks to generate discussion and ideas around effective practice in support of teaching and learning, now and into the future.

## [Beyond COVID: learning in the next phase](#)

Held across three days in March 2021, the conversations were attended by 363 practitioners and other stakeholders. Across 59 small-group discussions, participants represented a diverse range of settings, schools and broader organisations with an interest in education. 11 conversations were conducted in Welsh, and 48 in English.

Representatives attended conversations from Welsh and English medium nursery settings, primary and secondary schools, as well as from other settings such as Pupil Referral Units and Sixth Form Colleges. Participants included headteachers (n= 189), deputy headteachers (n= 94), and teachers and other practitioners (n= 28). They also included broader education stakeholders such as school improvement partners, challenge advisors, and other staff and organisations supporting settings and schools (n= 52).

The conversations themselves sought to stimulate discussion surrounding teaching and learning across three distinct topics. Led and facilitated by fellow practitioners, discussions drew on appreciative inquiry, an approach that seeks to tease out strengths and effective practice. Participants were asked a range of questions designed to explore their experiences, practices, and suggestions across three areas, including:

1. What worked well over the last year and why it worked well,
2. the challenges and opportunities practitioners may face in supporting learners with their readiness to learn following the disruptions of the last year, and
3. the challenges and opportunities practitioners may encounter in ensuring learner progression in the coming months.

In addition, participants were presented with a video resource for each of these three conversation areas to prompt discussion and spur their thinking. These video resources were developed by academic experts and former practitioners.

The conversations took place in March 2021, when the phased return to schools was beginning. This would have been a transitional time for many schools, including in welcoming back younger learners at primary schools and those entering qualification years. The broader contexts in which conversations were taking place may have informed the nature and focus of discussions within each conversation.

### Objectives of Conversations

The overall objectives of the conversations were to:

1. Give practitioners time and space to reflect and think about how we move together out of the current disruption,
2. Get practitioners to take what they have discussed back to their schools to inform their own local approaches to these issues, and
3. Inform the national policy response to addressing the needs of learners, the challenges practitioners and schools face, and in moving forward towards the new Curriculum for Wales.

Facilitators at each conversation were also asked to collate notes, highlighting the main points raised in discussions. This was in order to collect and share learning generated across conversations. This report presents an analysis of the themes and issues that were raised in those notes. Where possible, the analysis seeks to draw out and reflect the language that were included in the notes.

There are limitations with the analysis that are important to note. Together, those who took part in conversations may not be broadly representative of all schools, settings and other relevant organisations across Wales. Primary schools, for example, make up 79 percent of all schools in Wales. Those from primary schools that took part in conversations made up around 71 percent of all participants from schools. This suggests that, overall, this analysis provides an indication, rather than a definitive account, of the views, perspectives and experiences of the education community as a whole in Wales.

### Navigating this Report

In communicating the findings of this analysis, the report is structured as follows:

- [Section 2](#) provides an overview of the key overarching themes that emerged from conversations, including in discussions on what worked well, challenges and opportunities in supporting learners, and in thinking about the future.
- [Section 3](#) outlines in greater detail the main themes emerging from discussions around what worked well and why.
- [Section 4](#) highlights the views of participants towards challenges and opportunities in supporting learners to be ready to learn.
- [Section 5](#) highlights the views of participants towards challenges and opportunities in supporting learner progression.
- [Conclusions](#) briefly sets out a broad overview of the findings of the analysis.

## 2 Key Themes

This section sets out some of the key themes that recurred throughout the three conversation areas. They were key features of practitioners' discussions regarding what worked well and why; supporting readiness to learn; and supporting learner progression.

These overarching themes highlighted the challenges that settings and schools encountered over the last year. More broadly, they reflect the concerns and priorities of practitioners which ultimately informed and shaped their responses to the pandemic. They also illustrate the important role that practitioners have in supporting learners, and the progress that settings and schools have made under challenging circumstances.

### Summary

There were three key, recurring themes across conversations. These were commonly cited by most participants and were raised across the three conversation areas. These included:

- The importance and focus on supporting **learner well-being**,
- Delivering effective **teaching and learning**, including at a distance, and
- Improving **parental communication and engagement** in their child's learning.

### 2.1 Learner Well-being

A key theme highlighted by many participants across the three conversation areas was the importance of supporting learner well-being. Across the conversation areas, many participants outlined that broader welfare had become a key priority informing engagement with learners and their families. This was driven, in part, by a range of concerns surrounding the adverse impacts of lockdowns and the broader implications of the pandemic itself on health and well-being.

Participants across settings and schools highlighted issues such as increased anxiety, stress and social isolation, as well as reduced peer interaction and physical activity as significant barriers facing learners. There was recognition that learner experiences were diverse, and that some were struggling more than others. There was also variation in the cited challenges and impacts of the pandemic on learners of different ages. Overall, however, there was considerable focus across conversation areas on the importance supporting well-being, now and into the future as learners return more regularly to schools or settings.

Participants also highlighted the challenges of supporting learner well-being at a distance. For some, disruptions to face-to-face teaching and learning reduced often subtle cues that practitioners can rely on in understanding and supporting learner well-being, including in observing general mood. This issue was especially important for those citing effective

safeguarding as becoming a significant challenge over the last year. Remote learning required practitioners to consider new ways of effectively supporting well-being at a distance.

Despite these challenges, participants highlighted significant areas of progress. Many reflected on the importance of supporting well-being, and how the pandemic had demanded greater consideration and a renewed focus on a more holistic approach to teaching and learning. Reflecting on the last 12 months, a key area of progress highlighted by participants was the strengthening of links between home and school or setting. The situation had enabled practitioners to develop a greater understanding of learners' home lives. Greater engagement and communication between practitioners and learners' families, for example, had created space for new ways of engaging with and responding to learner well-being:

*'Regular well-being phone calls home, not academic or attendance focussed, meant relationships with families developed and the more often these calls were made the more the relationship developed'*

Group 10, 23<sup>rd</sup> March, English

Participants highlighted a range of practical examples of supporting well-being at a distance.

### **Well-being Check-in Sessions**

A number of schools and settings have incorporated well-being check-in sessions into their schedules. Participants cited the importance of creating opportunities to discuss broader issues beyond simply teaching and learning. Examples included daily, bi-weekly, or weekly sessions to address learner well-being and allow practitioners to monitor learner welfare. To achieve this schools used a number of different methods to interact with learners and their families, including telephone or online calls. Some highlighted the importance of capturing information from these discussions so that any issues, including concerns around safeguarding, could be effectively monitored over time.

### **Well-being in the School Day**

Participants also cited the importance of devoting time within the school day to well-being. Some set aside time in the afternoon to focus on well-being, whilst others focused on well-being on particular days, such as 'Welfare Wednesdays'. Examples of activities included hosting online well-being tutorials, setting weekly well-being tasks, and providing opportunities for learners to get together and socialise through games and learner led activities. Others highlighted livestreaming well-being events, using video clips especially for younger learners, and utilising resources from a range of sources, including the well-being Hwb.

Coordinating these types of activities did, however, present challenges for schools and settings. These tended to centre on the additional demands placed on practitioners and staff in delivering well-being provision alongside teaching and learning. There were also challenges in finding balance between teaching and learning, and promoting well-being:

*'Finding the balance between the welfare and academic sides is challenging. Schools are fully aware that well-being is their top priority but the great pressure on schools will continue to be there on the academic side e.g. pupil assessment, Curriculum for Wales, Estyn'.*

Group 1, 10<sup>th</sup> March, Cymraeg

Some found ways around the capacity implications of a greater focus on well-being. One participant, for example, sought to build a greater focus on well-being into the curriculum. Another highlighted how they had set aside afternoons for staff to focus on well-being, including in making well-being phone calls. In drawing on peer support, one participant highlighted how they had set learners into welfare rather than ability groups in order to create a positive culture around well-being within the school.

In terms of effectively supporting learner well-being in settings and schools, participants highlighted important factors. Some highlighted the importance of whole school approaches, including fostering and encouraging collaboration in designing and delivering welfare provision. Others highlighted the importance of drawing on the support of other agencies and organisations within effective partnerships. This was raised specifically with reference to supporting particularly vulnerable learners, including Looked After Children and those experiencing safeguarding concerns or particularly acute disadvantage. Participants also highlighted how important it was to support practitioners and other staff that were engaged delivering well-being provision. This included ensuring that workloads were manageable, and that their efforts were recognised by the school or community.

Despite progress, participants were concerned for the future well-being of learners. There were concerns that the negative well-being impacts of disruption would continue and evolve. Learner and parental anxiety, for example, were highlighted as being particularly acute, especially as learners return to school and around assessment. There were concerns around the longer-term well-being impacts of disruption and isolation, including on peer relationships, lower levels of confidence, and the impacts of excessive screen time.

From these perspectives, respondents felt that the focus on well-being would need to continue. Some felt that the new curriculum, with a greater focus on holistic development of learners, would be valuable in ensuring a commitment to well-being:

*'Bringing a sense of hope to children within the school curriculum is closely aligned with the four purposes of education. Even the most confident children appeared less confident after the lockdown. Regaining a sense of community first, before moving forward'*

Group 22, 18<sup>th</sup> March, English

## 2.2 Teaching and Learning

Another key, overarching theme across conversations included delivering effective teaching and learning. The disruption faced by schools and settings required practitioners to pivot towards greater digital and blended learning provision. This presented a number of

challenges, including in developing the infrastructure, skills and processes required to transition to greater online teaching at speed. Participants often spoke of the steep learning curve many practitioners experienced since March 2020.

Underscoring reflections on teaching and learning was the impact of disruption on learner progression. This included maintaining engagement from learners at a distance. Some highlighted that remote engagement with learners required substantially different approaches to teaching and learning. This included in adapting materials and lesson plans, as well as a recalibration of what could be realistically achieved.

There were further substantive concerns surrounding the barriers that some learners faced in accessing learning from home. Access to, and skills around, digital tools was considered to be variable, with some learners and their families unable to effectively draw on them in support of learning. This presented challenges in supporting some learners, and there were concerns that this would exacerbate and entrench inequalities in learning and progression.

Participants highlighted how they had approached the transition to online, digital forms of teaching and learning. A key factor in responses was the importance of ensuring that practitioners held the necessary skills and confidence to draw on digital teaching tools. From these perspectives, providing practitioners with opportunities to upskill provided the basis for effective transitions to online and blended learning:

*‘Through training staff were more confident in blended learning and use of apps/virtual platforms. Staff were equipped to support home learning as well as blended learning in the classroom. Parents were provided with guidance. Blended learning in the autumn term prepared pupils for home learning during lockdown’*

Group 4, 18<sup>th</sup> March, English

The transition to online forms of teaching and learning also presented a number of opportunities. Participants highlighted functionality within online teaching tools that enabled new forms of collaboration, including between learners and their peers, and between learners and their parents or carers. There were also some participants that highlighted opportunities for greater collaboration between practitioners, including in developing materials.

Apparent within notes from conversations was innovation in teaching and learning itself. There were examples of settings and schools mixing synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, with live lessons organised alongside materials, recorded lessons and activities that learners could work through in their own time. This was all possible due to the range of online learning platforms and tools. Within conversations, participants referenced a diverse range of software that supported transitions to online and blended teaching and learning:

*‘A lot of their content was already online and found it easy to progress to COVID era of learning. Trained staff to use Google Classrooms and Jamboard and online white board integrated with Google Meets. Mainly used live lessons Google Meets with Google Classrooms which worked well.’*

*Google Docs and sharing of work from online sessions, sharing their screen (students) worked well’.*

Group 9, 18<sup>th</sup> March, English

### **Online Teaching Tools and Platforms**

Participants drew on a diverse range of tools and functionality in support of teaching and learning, including Hwb, the national platform. This included general communications tools such as Zoom and Teams for live lessons, where breakout rooms provide additional opportunities for smaller group work. They also highlighted more tailored platforms such as Google Classrooms that combine live lessons with other content and materials. Some have drawn on platforms that extend functionality to support greater engagement from parents or carers, such as ClassDojo. Another commonly cited platform was Seesaw, which enables practitioners to draw up lesson plans and provide feedback. These online apps and tools, amongst others, have allowed practitioners to be creative in the ways that they engage learners.

### **Online Resources and Materials**

In addition to platforms and software, practitioners also highlighted drawing on a diverse range of online content, resources and materials. This included greater use of existing videos and other online content.

Reflecting on the last 12 months, participants noted a number of successes surrounding teaching and learning. Some felt an increased freedom and ability to apply novel approaches to teaching and learning, including in shaping the curriculum. This freedom allowed practitioners to refocus on what is important and to strip back the curriculum in the transition to greater online provision. This has been supported by practitioners developing their skills, sharing learning, and reflecting and improving provision.

Some felt that they would continue to use elements of blended learning into the future. From these perspectives, there were benefits to the new approaches to teaching and learning, particularly around blended provision and the opportunities for engaging parents and carers more meaningfully in their children’s learning. This suggested that pandemic may have accelerated the use of digital technology within teaching and learning:

*‘Prior to lockdown, limited use of technology available to a secondary school. No mobile phones were permitted in lessons previously. However, mobile phones are now used in lessons and ‘bring your own device to school’ encouraged’.*

Group 20, 23<sup>rd</sup> March, English

There were, however, concerns for the future. A key theme was supporting learners to navigate and overcome the disruption that they had faced. This was especially the case for learners that had experienced significant barriers to learning over the last 12 months. Some respondents were concerned that learning and progression has been highly variable, and that this would cause significant challenges to practitioners in effectively supporting all learners.

## 2.3 Parental Engagement

Alongside learner well-being and teaching and learning, another key theme raised by participants included parental engagement. Some participants highlighted the important contribution that parents and carers had made in supporting their children's education over the last 12 months. Many felt that significant progress had been made in setting up more established lines of communications and in developing more positive relationships with parents. This was felt by many to be a significant achievement.

This was not without its challenges, however. Some participants felt that parental engagement added further demands on practitioners' already overstretched workloads. Others felt that differential engagement was a significant issue, where some parents were more difficult to engage, and others had unrealistic expectations as to what practitioners could achieve. In some cases, parental expectations had been difficult to judge, and finding balance between the extent and frequency of communications was important. Other participants felt an additional level of scrutiny from parents and carers.

Despite these challenges, the pandemic had provided impetus to find new ways of engaging with parents. Engagement from parents was felt to be particularly good where schools or settings had been proactive in communicating with parents, and where engagement had been co-produced with them. Some participants highlighted engaging parents in conversations about how best to support them, for example. This enabled practitioners to tailor support and establish what works and does not work:

*'Home learning has evolved as it has been influenced by parent feedback asking for more opportunities to speak with other learners in synchronous learning'*

Group 7, 10<sup>th</sup> March, English

Other respondents went further, including in providing parents and carers with tutorials and other forms of support:

### **Peer Learning and Support**

A few participants used the opportunity to bring together parents and carers to share and support each other with home schooling. This has included parents sharing tips for home learning, tutorials to support home learning, and communications focused on upskilling parents, including in drawing on digital resources and tools.

In thinking about the future, some participants highlighted the importance of sustaining and extending improvements in parental engagement. There were concerns about addressing differential engagement from parents, including in effectively reaching out and supporting more disengaged parents and carers. Together, however, it was felt that significant progress had been made in engaging parents in support of their children's learning.

The report now turns to exploring in more depth the substantive content and themes emerging from the each of the three conversation areas.

## 3 What Worked Well and Why

At each conversation, participants were asked to discuss what had worked well in terms of teaching and learning and importantly, why it worked. To add further depth, they were also encouraged to discuss any major challenges they had faced and to reflect on how they overcame these issues.

### Summary

In terms of what has worked well over the last year, amongst other themes participants highlighted:

- Drawing on digital tools to support learning at home. This required practitioners to develop new and innovate pedagogical approaches and curriculum content.
- Improved communication between practitioners, learners and parents.
- Some participants also felt that there has been greater collaboration, innovation and learning between staff.

There were a number of cross cutting themes that participants raised as supporting effective practice. This included:

- Developing supportive and collaborative environments and cultures between staff, as well as the hard work and commitment that they had displayed.
- There was recognition of the importance of giving practitioners and staff the confidence and skills to effectively engage with online and blended learning opportunities.

### Using Online Tools

A key theme raised by most participants around what had worked well was the greater use of online teaching and learning tools and platforms. Transitioning to online provision has uncovered some useful tools to support learner learning at a distance. As previously highlighted, this included a diverse range of platforms and software, including Google Classroom, SeeSaw, Google forms and Zoom. Online approaches and the use of various software was also thought to have improved engagement from some learners.

Key to making best use of existing tools was the importance of developing staff skills and confidence. From these perspectives, providing practitioners with opportunities to upskill provided the basis for effective transitions to online and blended learning. This was felt to be essential in transitioning to new teaching arrangements, and to minimise the impact of disruption on learning.

## Communication

Participants also highlighted the benefits of new ways of working in supporting greater and more effective communication. This included seeking feedback from parents in how to better support children online and at a distance. Listening to parents' feedback has helped schools to develop their offer and improve. New ways of communicating have also resulted in many parents becoming more aware and involved with their child's education. Innovations such as check-ins and well-being calls have brought parents and practitioners closer together, strengthening an important relationship.

In order to make communication more effective, especially with parents, participants highlighted the importance of being proactive in seeking to assess expectations and preferences. This included engaging and co-designing approaches to communication with parents. Participants felt this was effective approach in striking a balance in the frequency and content of communications, and in effectively meeting parents' expectations.

## Skills

Another widely held view was the importance of certain skills and expertise in delivering and accessing learning from home. From these perspectives, practitioners and learners have been required to quickly develop new skills and expertise to effectively support teaching across the learning process. This included digital skills, supporting learners to progress effectively at a distance, supporting differentiated learning online, providing engaging online learning opportunities including synchronous and asynchronous learning, and in providing effective feedback.

Participants highlighted the value and importance of opportunities for practitioners to access CPD and upskilling of staff. One participant outlined the importance of assessing the skills and confidence of staff and providing more tailored support:

*'Up-skilling staff in making best use of ICT – this was overcome by sending out staff questionnaires and responding to needs with specific training'.*

Group 4, 23<sup>rd</sup> March, Cymraeg

The importance of skills extended to learners and parents, providing them with routes into building their own confidence and skills required to effectively engage with online or blended learning.

## Feedback

A more marginal theme included new opportunities and approaches to providing feedback and assessment. Online teaching and learning, for example, have opened new ways of providing feedback. The greater focus on digital communication has made sharing feedback and assessment information on learner progress easier, especially with parents. Participants

highlighted developing new approaches to assessment for learning with a renewed focus on checking understanding and identifying learners' gaps.

In order to provide effective feedback across online and blended learning, a few participants highlighted the importance of striking a balance in the quantity and content of feedback. This was to ensure that providing feedback did not overburden practitioners. Linked to this observation, others felt that implementing efficient processes for sharing feedback was important in limiting the impact on practitioner's workloads. This including fully utilising digital tools that support a more rounded learning experience through functionality that enables feedback, such as SeeSaw and ClassDojo.

### Staff Working

A more widely held view was the positive aspects of new working arrangements for practitioners. New arrangements have allowed for greater flexibility in the way staff work and encouraged better cooperation and communication amongst staff to solve problems and find solutions. Participants felt the necessity and speed of change has fostered a culture of openness and collaboration between staff, encouraging everyone to think outside the box in order to support learners.

In support of effective staff working, some participants highlighted the importance of creating supportive and open working environments. There was general recognition of the challenges facing practitioners and staff, including on their own well-being, of navigating the challenges brought about by the pandemic. This included disruption to their own lives as well as the increased expectations on supporting learners. Concerns around high levels of workload were apparent, and some felt that there was inadequate capacity to respond effectively. Ensuring that staff were supported was felt to be key, including in ensuring their own well-being.

Practically, some participants highlighted giving greater time to staff well-being was important, including in providing opportunities to get together to support each other. Others highlighted the importance of recognising the challenges that practitioners and staff were facing, and the work that they were putting in. There were also practical examples of schools and settings seeking to pool knowledge, share experience and support each other, including through sharing of materials and recorded lessons.

### Learner Engagement

As a result of new ways of teaching and learning, participants felt that some learners had become more independent. These included learners taking greater ownership over their learning, as well as better suiting some learners that had previously struggled to engage in class. The greater reliance on self-direction has also given some learners greater scope to make decisions about their own learning. Examples of online forms of collaboration between learners were also raised, including experimentation with peer teaching.

Conversely, a few felt that the new teaching and learning arrangements had reduced engagement and independence. Some practitioners have indicated that, since the return to school, some learners are more dependent, require more adults time, reassurance, and their

independent learning skills have regressed. This included difficulty in maintaining concentration and attention from some learners whilst teaching online, and subsequently obtaining homework from them. Some felt there was considerable apparent variation in levels of engagement within and across different cohorts and classes, and that this presented additional challenges in providing more tailored support.

In navigating these challenges, participants highlighted that they had been able to put in place processes for identifying and supporting more disengaged learners. This included drawing on new and innovative applications and blended learning tools such as the use of pre-recorded sessions.

### Focus on Well-being

As previously highlighted, a recurring theme included the importance of supporting well-being. The last 12 months had seen greater focus being placed on well-being, including for learners but also for staff. Many participants highlighted that schools had become more attuned to the well-being of learners and staff. Participants felt that well-being became the first priority of schools and at the heart of decision-making, including around teaching and learning.

Against this backdrop, the focus on well-being had enabled practitioners to build stronger partnerships with parents and has encouraged schools to reach out to learners and their families in order to offer support. Examples include well-being catch-ups, a greater focus on well-being in the curriculum, and a focus on staff well-being and work life balance. There were also recommendations surrounding softening some of the language surrounding teaching and learning. This included not referring to disruptions and the challenges facing young people as 'lost learning', which some participants felt increased the pressure and anxiety that learners and their families were under.

### Work Life Balance

A more peripheral theme included the importance of ensuring practitioners and staff have balance between their work and broader commitments beyond school. Some highlighted the benefits of new working arrangements, including reduced commuting time, which had a positive impact on work life balance. Conversely, others highlighted the challenge of not being able to distinguish between home and work as impacting on them negatively, alongside additional expectations on their time, including regular communication with parents well into the evening. Some practitioners also highlighted having to juggle their own home life pressures, including around issues relating to the pandemic such as childcare.

In addressing these issues, participants linked back to the importance of creating supportive and open working environments and cultures.

### Supporting Parents

As previously noted, participants felt many parents have become more involved with learners education. They have become more aware of their children's' learning gaps, targets, and

priorities. New working arrangements have made it easier to provide parents with greater and more regular feedback on learner progress. Participants felt that parents are now better placed to support learners and the relationships between school and parents have improved. Others felt that as a result, parents have more respect and recognition for teachers. Some felt that the additional support provided by some parents has enabled learners to progress quicker.

### 3.1 Why has it worked?

In responses, there were also cross-cutting themes highlighting why their teaching and learning had been effective. This section details some of the key factors and principles that enabled practitioners to meet the challenges of the past year.

#### Staff Willingness

A key theme highlighted by participants was the importance of staff motivation and engagement. Some respondents felt that staff had been willing to go the extra mile in responding to learner needs and in developing their own skills. Staff had accessed professional development and learnt new skills around digital methods of engagement, for example. Participants felt that they had also taken risks, experimented with new approaches, and been adaptive and responsive to the challenges that they faced. From these perspectives, progress had been made on the back of their commitment and hard work.

#### Staff Working as a Team

School staff have also worked effectively together, driven by a wider sense of solidarity that has emerged across the sector. There is a greater willingness amongst staff to share experiences, discuss challenges, and search for solutions. Through innovations such as sharing events, meetings and training sessions, staff have been encouraged to share learning as well as resources, which has meant less duplication of effort.

#### Improved Communication

Another key theme included improved communication, both between staff and practitioners and parents. New working arrangements have placed greater focus and attention on communication, particularly with parents, including improving its content and frequency. Respondents also highlighted the additional capacity and resources required to keep in regular contact with learners and families to ensure engagement. The necessity of the situation also enhanced communication between teachers and parents that has traditionally been a challenge.

#### Stronger Partnerships

A more peripheral theme included the importance of partnerships in delivering effective and coherent support to learners. Some participants had highlighted the emergence of new and strengthened partnerships between staff, schools and parents, and between schools and

outside agencies. Existing partnerships have been strengthened by the willingness to work together and identify solutions, particularly in support of more vulnerable learners.

### Identifying Vulnerable Children

Another important factor in supporting more vulnerable learners included adapting processes and procedures for identifying potential issues. A key element of support has been the importance of effective processes for identifying potentially vulnerable learners and providing focused, tailored support. Whilst there have been challenges, respondents highlighted that staff have been able to adapt to new ways of working in order to identify potentially vulnerable children to ensure they can access learning.

### Supporting Parents

As previously mentioned, participants highlighted the important role parents have played in supporting teaching and learning. In order to support parents, participants highlighted innovations such as running workshops on how they can engage their children in teaching and learning. In encouraging engagement, some highlighted the importance of ensuring parents voices are included and heard in decision-making.

### Innovative Approaches

The necessity and urgency of the situation required practitioners and schools to adapt and innovate. With an increasing focus on wellbeing, creativity and independence, respondents highlighted the positives of new working arrangements. It required schools to be more willing and engaged with change, especially in testing the boundaries of what is possible with digital tools. It has also encouraged greater engagement and utilisation of existing digital materials and resources, including Hwb and other online sources. The platform Flipgrid, for example, was cited as valuable in providing learners and families with shared, online learning spaces. Overall, the experiences over the last 12 months have resulted in schools developing greater adaptive capacity, the ability to adopt new and innovative ways of working.

### Encouraging Learner Engagement

Allied to innovation, participants highlighted the importance of finding ways of encouraging engagement with teaching and learning amongst learners. Regular contact was often cited as important through morning and afternoon daily check-ins to keep in contact with learners and retain engagement. Others cited closely monitoring remote attendance and classwork progress as essential in ensuring that no learner falls behind and responding quickly when issues emerge.

### Responsive and Proactive

Linked to the observation of the importance of responding to issues as they emerge quickly, participants also felt that practitioners needed to be responsive and proactive. From this perspective, the greater emphasis on self-direction and independence, whilst effective for some learners, others may struggle and fall behind. It was felt important that practitioners

needed to be responsive and proactive in identifying and engaging learners that may have become disengaged or were experiencing significant barriers to learning.

## 4 Supporting Readiness to Learn

Participants were then asked to explore the emerging challenges and opportunities for practitioners as they seek to support their learners so they are ready to learn. Practitioners also explored how to address and overcome any barriers to this.

### Summary

The main challenges identified with getting learners ready to learn included:

- Supporting the broader wellbeing of learners and staff.
- Addressing disruption to teaching and learning, as well as basic skills development, over the last 12 months.
- the importance of re-establishing social connections and routines amongst learners.

To overcome these and other barriers and challenges, key themes included the importance of providing opportunities for learners to reconnect with friends, to maintain the focus on wellbeing, and sustaining improvements in engagement with parents.

### Well-being

Again, a key theme highlighted within responses was the importance of supporting learner Well-being. Almost all groups highlighted wellbeing challenges that presented significant potential barriers for some learners. These included, for example, attachment issues, lack of socialisation, changes in sleeping patterns, anxiety, bereavement and loss, as well as broader emotional and mental health. Disruptions were also felt to have resulted in changes in behaviours for many and a loss of established routines. The impact of significant screen time and lower physical activity levels were also expressed as concerns.

Participants also expressed concerns about their ability to support learner well-being at a distance. This included identifying safeguarding concerns, such as the ability to reliably identify or grasp emotional problems over the screen.

Participants highlighted the importance of training, as well as improving the broader support and specialist services available to learners. Others reflected that they had put in place specific measures, including weekly check-ins which seek to strengthen the relationships with parents and families and support needs have been able to be identified. Participants also felt it important to ensure that support is available for learners who need it and there are effective methods for diagnosing those who need support. Many highlighted that well-being is being actively addressed in many schools through activities or classes.

For some, ensuring that there is not a complete focus on academic learning all the time is key to supporting learner well-being. Long-term support, including funding and guidance, was

also felt to be important in ensuring that schools and settings are able to address increased or more pronounced well-being needs of learners. Others felt there needs to be a continuing focus on well-being. This could be in the form of increasing opportunities for learners to discuss mental health and for them to share their feelings. Support should also include access outside agencies who can offer additional and more specialist support where needed.

Well-being of staff is also of key importance in their ability to provide effective teaching and learning. Some felt it was important to consider the changing and challenging nature of work over the last year, as well as the potential impacts on their mental health and well-being. Staff should be supported in ways that are sensitive to their needs. There needs to be a recognition of the struggles of staff, including those in senior roles.

### Addressing Disruption to Teaching and Learning

Another major concern centred on addressing and overcoming disruptions to teaching and learning over the last 12 months. There were specific concerns surrounding how disruption and the transition to online learning has impacted on the quality of teaching and learning. This included the difficulties experienced by practitioners in effectively monitoring progress, identifying addressing learners' gaps in knowledge, and providing effective feedback for learners.

Closely linked was the subsequent impact of disrupted teaching on learning and progression. There were significant concerns relating to how disruptions had led to slippage in terms of the content being taught. There were concerns as to whether this could realistically and effectively be addressed. There were also concerns about how the terms 'lost learning' and 'catch-up' negatively impact on learners who feel they are behind or have lost out. It was often felt that this would require significant focus and attention over the coming months and years.

Together, there were significant concerns relating to the impact of disruption and variations in experiences of teaching and learning on attainment. Many perceived that the attainment gap between learners has widened as a result. Those children that were behind are now even further behind as a result of barriers to engagement, lack of home support and varying access to ICT equipment. Concerns were particularly targeted at vulnerable or disadvantaged learners and the impact of disruption on younger learners' social and emotional development.

There were disagreements as to how this could be addressed effectively. Some felt that it is important to understand the position learners are in and that learning more, or "cramming", may not be effective. Others felt it was important to address knowledge and skills gaps to ensure generational parity with learner peers, including those that have left school, and those that are about to enter. More broadly, participants also offered cross-cutting themes that together, could work to address barriers to engagement. These are outlined in full below.

## Basic Skills

Linked to disruptions to teaching and learning, many participants were also concerned about learner progress towards essential and basic skills, including handwriting and literacy. This was felt to have profound consequences for future teaching, underscoring many learners' ability to engage and respond to teaching materials. It was also felt important to recognise the challenges of supporting these skills at a distance. Other skills that were felt to potentially be important included collaborative working and broader social and emotional skills.

In response, some participants felt it important to give basic skills greater attention in the coming months and years. There were pockets of concern relating to the time tabling pressures that this would create, especially if broader objectives were in place that seek to address any knowledge gaps that resulted from the disruptions of the last year. From these perspectives, paring back the curriculum to make more room for greater focus on basic skills was considered valuable.

## Routine and Social Relationships

Closely related to basic skills, there were also broader concerns around the loss of routine and social contact, and suggestions as to how this could be addressed. This included establishing learning routines as well as supporting learners to reengage peer friendships and practitioner relationships and address any socialisation issues. It was felt important to recognise that the experiences of learners varied greatly, and that no one size fits all. It was also felt important to consider how ready learners are for learning again, taking time to reconnect, with some using methods such as the Thrive approach. It was also felt important to consider the resilience of learners, and address any concerns or anxieties facing learners in reconnecting with their peers.

A key priority for many respondents for getting learners back into the routine and in reconnecting with peers was through play. This included participants from both primary and secondary schools. From these perspectives, learners should be provided opportunities to be outdoors and to play with their friends. This would serve to school communities, and gently and positively reintroduce routine into learners' lives.

## Space

Closely linked to the importance of play, some felt that outside space is currently very important and at premium within schools and settings. Due to contact groups and staggered breaks, some considered it important for learners to have safe access to outside learning environments. There has also been an increased focus on outdoor learning from a few participants. Schools and settings have been repurposing space to use for learning, especially those with good ventilation.

## Learner Engagement

Respondents highlighted a number of challenges with regard to promoting and supporting learner engagement. This has included addressing apparent disengagement with learning.

Closely linked to this were challenges and barriers facing some learners, including access and skills to digital technology, which negatively impact on engagement. A few participants were also concerned with certain attitudes and perceptions towards teaching and learning:

*'Older learners see there's no point in learning, what kind of jobs are there for them? Is there a point in going to University?'*

Group 2, 23<sup>rd</sup> March, Cymraeg

Practitioners discussed how they have been addressing these challenges, including the altering of curriculum by scaling back academic learning and the additional provision of well-being activities. As a way of addressing learner engagement some schools have taken a more flexible approach to content by employing creative and focussed style to learning. This has included the trimming back of course content to focus on key areas. This has allowed schools to respond to learner needs and has helped the learner voice to be further incorporated into content and to assist with engagement.

*'Planning and teaching had to be much more efficient, creative, focussed and so very different to the routine/habits that would've happened in the classroom so enabled staff to take calculated risks and approach teaching and learning and planning differently – subsequently experiences that will be taken into the future'.*

Group 10, 23<sup>rd</sup> March, English

Participants also felt that practitioners and schools should seek to focus their attention on reengaging learners, especially those that have struggled over the last 12 months. More broadly, this included re-establishing the important relationships between practitioners and learners.

### Parental Support

As mentioned previously, parental engagement was considered as key to effectively supporting learning from home. There have been challenges, including in differing levels of expectation and engagement. Households will have had different experiences of learning from home. Addressing differential engagement, including effectively supporting parents or carers that may experience significant barriers to supporting learning, was considered important by many. Some felt that open dialogue between school and home was effective in creating positive and coherent learning experiences, as well as in addressing the challenges that remained ahead. Participants felt that schools will need to build and reinforce progress made in engaging parents. It was felt important to build on the progress made in engaging parents, which was considered important especially in getting learners ready for school and addressing any concerns. This included maintaining communication so that parents were up to date regarding teaching and learning and broader developments within the school or setting.

## Access and Skills Surrounding Digital Technology

Another, more minor concern centred on the inequitable distribution of access to, and confidence with, information communications technologies (ICT). Participants highlighted that there was significant apparent variation in the resources and skills at home, amongst both learners and their parents or carers. This presented significant barriers to learning for some. This included connectivity, access to hardware including suitable devices and printers, as well as the skills and confidence to effectively utilise them. From these perspectives, lack of access and skills in some households served to shape and exacerbate other differences, including learner and parent engagement, and the subsequent effectiveness of teaching and learning.

There was focus from participants on the importance of investment in technology and skills to address continuing barriers to engagement presented by this issue.

## Deprivation and Disadvantage

Closely linked, the disruption of the past year has also highlighted the deprivation and disadvantage faced by some learners across communities in Wales. Participants felt that these learners faced additional challenges and barriers to teaching and learning, such as access to ICT, which often result in lower levels of engagement. This was exacerbated by the perception that Hubs were set up for key workers and vulnerable children, but did not cover all learners that could benefit from greater support, including those receiving Free School Meals. There were also focused concerns on the support offered to learners with Additional Learning Needs. It was felt that there were additional challenges and barriers to support them effectively at a distance, and that this needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Again, some participants highlighted the importance of funding and resources to support those most in need.

## Staffing

Staff were considered as key to successful transitions back into school, and to ensure teaching and learning is effective. Staff engagement was highlighted as important in shaping responses and ensuring the effectiveness of revised processes and working arrangements. This could include co-production as a means of moving schools forward together. Providing opportunities to sharing learning and producing materials or content together, including within and across schools was also considered valuable by some.

Participants also cited the importance of time and resources to enable their learners to be ready to learn. Some felt that there was a lack of capacity to deliver effective and sustainable support to learners, including those at a disadvantage or with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). This included a limited number of Teaching Assistants to support teaching and learning. Respondents highlighted the negative impact of increased workloads and reduced capacity on staff well-being, and the need to ensure that existing staff are well supported.

## Transitions

Participants also highlighted the increased challenges facing learners in making transitions into, between and out of schools and settings. This included the social and emotional challenges of missing out on key events in young adults' lives, as well as the lack of social and emotional developmental opportunities experienced by younger learners.

## Guidance and Support

There were concerns surrounding the extent and consistency of existing guidance to support practitioners and schools. This included guidance in helping practitioners and schools to navigate the challenges of disruption, and in framing and informing their responses. There were also concerns that guidance was not distributed in a timely manner. Together, this presented operational challenges for schools in effectively responding to events. It was felt as important in helping practitioners to develop an understanding as to what constitutes as success outside of just academic attainment. Some felt further timely guidance and financial support would be needed for schools in order to progress and provide more comprehensive and coherent support to learners. This included but was not limited to working towards addressing knowledge and skills gaps, and in preparing for assessments.

## Assessment

There were also concerns from many surrounding the impact of disruption on assessment preparation. This included uncertainty on the future of assessments, including how they will be incorporated into the new curriculum. Some felt that greater clarity and guidance is needed for practitioners to prepare learners for assessments to take place.

## Terminology

Some questioned some of the terminology surrounding the challenges facing learners and schools. 'Catch up', 'lost learning', and 'recovery', for example, were felt as potentially exacerbating anxiety amongst learners and parents. This would require a softening of the language used to communicate with communities across Wales, including by settings and schools, but also more broadly in public debates and in the media.

## Similar Challenges

A few participants felt that the substantive issues and challenges facing settings and schools had not changed substantially. From these perspectives, many schools are facing the similar challenges prior to COVID-19, including for example disengagement, disadvantage and addressing the attainment gap. Whilst the pandemic had exacerbated and changed the dynamics of these challenges, as they were familiar, schools were well equipped to navigate them.

## 4.1 How do we overcome these?

Again, participants offered some overarching, cross cutting themes on how to address the challenges and barriers to effective learning.

### Learner Voice

A key element that was felt to be important was to ensure that learners had a voice in decisions concerning them, including in how they want to progress and learn. This could include giving learners greater opportunities to feedback on decisions concerning teaching and learning, but also more broadly on issues relating to well-being.

### Monitoring

A more minor cross cutting theme was the importance of closely monitoring the return to school to identify any potential problems early. This could include Schools Health Research Network (SHRN) monitoring and the monitoring of learner attainment through homework. This could help in identifying learners who need more support or assistance in the transition back to school.

### Time

It was felt that time was required to allow practitioners to develop and deliver a broader range of support alongside teaching. It was recognised that this would require more long-term thinking and that there are no quick fixes. Inadequate preparation and planning, some felt, could exacerbate the challenges facing schools rather than addressing them.

### External Support

There was also recognition from some of the important role external organisations would have in supporting settings and schools address barriers to learning and meet unmet need. This included working with organisations from the third sector, Local Authorities, and other bodies with an interest in education and the well-being of learners.

## 5 Supporting Learner Progression

Finally, practitioners discussed how to enable learners to make the progress needed to move their learning forward. It encouraged participants to reflect on opportunities and challenges involved in ensuring learner progress and how any of these challenges can be overcome.

### Summary

The main themes within this conversation were focussed around skills and assessment. Practitioners identified a number of challenges and opportunities to ensuring learner progression, including:

- The importance of a positive learning environment to support learners back to school,
- the balance required between a need for assessing learners, against their well-being
- developing learners' skills such as literacy and social skills as well as supporting the new skills learnt during lockdown i.e. digital skills.

To overcome these challenges to encouraging progress the main themes identified focussed on:

- Allowing a school led approach and vision to be developed to best address any issues
- The need for assessments and clarity surrounding how they are to take place moving forward
- The importance of retaining new skills developed over the last 12 months by integrating them into ongoing school practices, such as using online meetings as an effective method of communication.

### Basic Skills Development

A key theme within this conversation was the need to focus on developing a range of basic skills. This included reinforcing learning developed during the lockdown, including digital literacy, as well as those skills that may have been negatively affected such as reading and writing. Frequently cited skills that required focus included literacy and reading skills as well as social and emotional skills. Practitioners referenced the fact that this was not a one size fits all and some learners have thrived during lockdown and made good progress. However, there were numerous examples of where practitioners had raised concerns that learners had returned to school with less competency in some areas.

This point is illustrated by comments relating to independent learning skills. Some learners had developed their independence during the lockdown and were now able to take more ownership and responsibility for their learning. On the other hand, some had become dependent on the one-to-one support they received at home and this presented challenges to practitioners in the classroom.

Practitioners indicated that this challenge could be overcome by a renewed focus on identifying and addressing the range of skills that had been affected by the lockdown. Both the academic skills and wider social and emotional skills. They also felt it was important to utilise and build on the skills that had been developed throughout lockdown. For example, retaining aspects of digital and blended learning to complement and improve more traditional teaching practices. This included the use of digital platforms and providing opportunity for synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, perhaps through homework tasks.

It was also suggested that opportunity should be given for learners to develop their social and emotional skills. This was particularly relevant where participants could be identified as primary practitioners. This included through ensuring that schools provided opportunities for learners to develop resilience, communication skills, confidence and collaboration skills.

### Assessment

Another major theme highlighted by practitioners was the role of assessment. The shift away from older models of summative assessment necessitated by the pandemic has led some to question the future direction of testing. There was a sense that current forms of assessment resulted in some schools becoming overly focussed on and driven by examination results. The pandemic has enabled practitioners to experiment with more creative styles of assessment. This has implication for the future implementation of the Curriculum for Wales as practitioners felt it presented an opportunity to revisit the role of assessment to ensure it compliments teaching and learning as opposed to driving teaching and learning.

Whilst assessment was identified as a challenge, it was also identified as a part of the solution. Practitioners highlighted the importance of ongoing assessment in identifying gaps in learning created by the disruptions of the last 12 months and using this to inform planning. Assessment is a key tool in gauging the needs of learners and practitioners referred to the importance of assessment in contributing towards learners' progress. In this regard, there was concern that language and terminology used more widely should focus on 'identifying gaps' as opposed to 'catch-up' or 'lost learning' which was seen as a source of negativity and anxiety amongst some parents and learners.

*'Children learn best when their learning is connected, knowledge without application is pointless. When talking about autonomy we need to be careful as a profession as you only know what you know. Children need to understand and have scaffolds in order to self-assess. We need to better understand how and why we use assessment for learning'.*

Group 24, 18<sup>th</sup> March, English

Another frequently cited challenge around assessments included the belief that there had been a lack of clarity and timely guidance. Practitioners felt that this had implications on learners' anxiety and stress levels.

*'Schools need to know how they are going to be measured. Schools need to have the confidence about how this is going to happen. The Descriptions of learning are high level. What does progress look like? Schools are confident that they can look at the progress of an individual but what does it look like on a school level?'*

Group 14, 23<sup>rd</sup> March, English

There have been some successes and challenges associated with assessments and qualifications over the last 12 months. The move away from older models and views of assessment has paved the way for more creative styles of monitoring progress within learners. However, as a result of changes, particularly in formal assessments, there has been a knock-on impact to uncertainty and anxiety of the learners.

### Re-engaging Learners

Another challenge identified within the notes was the need to ensure schools created a positive atmosphere that helped to re-engage learners. Practitioners felt this was important to aid the transition for learners back into school and to ensure learners were motivated and engaged. Some felt the renewed focus on well-being was an important aspect to retain moving forwards and that there was a need to rebuild the school environment to provide for all needs within the school environment, including providing balance between academic, emotional and social development.

Various suggestions were made which align with this challenge. For example, practitioners highlighted the importance of schools providing a broad range of opportunities within the curriculum. They suggested that enrichment opportunities were also important in re-engaging learners and developing motivation after the lockdown. Some referred to learners missing out on opportunities as a result of the pandemic and that schools were well placed to address this issue.

Learner voice was also identified as a key part of helping to re-engage learners following the lockdown. This includes learners being involved with the decision making around what topics they want to learn and to lead their own learning. Learner voice was also indicated as an important aspect for schools as they look towards developing and refining their curricula. It was seen as important for learner engagement and motivation.

*Find out from students where they think they are at with their learning, and also need to give them choices with their learning to help foster ownership. This will help to motivate them and engage them. Get the love of learning back.*

Group 4, 10<sup>th</sup> March, English

## Curriculum for Wales

The new curriculum was a common theme within responses. This included those that felt the experience of the last year has been an important opportunity to develop thinking about the new curriculum. It has presented opportunities for practitioners to experiment and innovate, both in terms of curriculum and pedagogy. Some felt that aspects of how schools have adapted to teaching and learning in the face of disruption can be transferred into the new curriculum. From these perspectives, in order to capitalise on the progress made in many areas, and professional learning, creativity and innovation that it has generated over the past 12 months would benefit implementation of the Curriculum for Wales.

*'Schools feel that we should proceed with the curriculum based on current timescales, else we risk losing momentum'.*

Group 18, 18<sup>th</sup> March, English

Conversely, there were concerns regarding the timeline of the rollout. Some felt it was difficult to see how schools could commit the time and resources necessary to develop their new curriculum within the context of the challenges they face.

*'Coming out of this pandemic will take much longer than 1 year and we need to revise our timelines accordingly... Expectations on schools for CfW need to be clear'.*

Group 14, 18<sup>th</sup> March, English

## Accountability

There was uncertainty with regards to the role and nature of accountability mechanisms. Some participants would welcome further clarity from the Welsh Government and Estyn on the expectations of schools. Over the last 12 months schools have been allowed freedom and agency to develop a tailored response to their specific needs, which some felt was a positive. However, there was concern raised over Estyn inspections and a hope that they would be delayed to remove judgement in 2022 in light of current priorities schools and settings schools have set themselves:

*'Expecting the 'call' from Estyn from September 2021 puts great pressure on staff to move straight to the academic side of the pupils rather than investing time on the welfare and social side. Fear and anxiety that this can have a big impact on individuals as they try to cope and accept what has happened during the pandemic'.*

Group 1, 10<sup>th</sup> March, Cymraeg

## Sustained High Workloads

Closely linked to accountability, some respondents highlighted concerns surrounding the sustained pressure that some staff were under. There were concerns around sustained

pressure on staff, including in meeting academic targets and continued reforms to the curriculum.

### Resources

Participants also highlighted the importance of sufficient resources to effectively manage different priorities and commitments facing schools and settings. Addressing and supporting well-being, reengaging learners, addressing knowledge and skills gaps, removing barriers to learning and supporting the most vulnerable were all considered important priorities that together would require time and attention. For some, this also included the time and attention required to integrate the new curriculum. From these perspectives, schools need the funding, time and space to effectively manage these competing claims on schools and settings.

### Confidence in the Education Workforce

A peripheral theme also included concerns around the pervasive narrative or perpetual crisis and decline in education. This was felt to be a barrier to creating more positive and empowering narratives surrounding the role and potential of the education workforce. There were concerns, for example, over the use of future assessment data, including to support narratives around practitioners not being trusted to deliver fair results.

### Common Purpose

Participants felt that there is a need for overarching vision driving and directing change. Some felt there is a need to consider what we want learning to look like, and to stimulate conversations on how we want children to be and how we want them to develop. The new curriculum was felt as valuable in this endeavour. Some cited the four purposes, for example, as providing guiding principles that should inform discussions and decision-making surrounding teaching and learning into the future. Another significant priority for participants was the importance of discussing and agreeing whole school approaches to the challenges that they face.

### Clarity and Certainty

Some highlighted the importance of clarity and certainty to ensure long-term, sustainable change to teaching and learning. Assessment arrangements, for example, were cited as a key area for improved clarity around the nature and direction of arrangements. Others felt that there was considerable uncertainty in the system, including around the potential changes with upcoming elections across Wales. From these perspectives, where possible, greater clarity and certainty would support more effective planning and preparation.

### Dialogue and Collaboration

Maintaining and promoting dialogue and collaboration, was also felt important by many. There is opportunity for dialogue between schools, professional, agencies and consortia in order to share learning and develop approaches to maximise learner progress. Many

respondents reported that they valued the opportunity to discuss the issues they faced with colleagues through these conversations.

## 6 Conclusions

The conversations provided valuable opportunities for practitioners to reflect on the last 12 months. Many practitioners were positive about what they had achieved collectively and the progress they had made. The circumstances, the urgency and necessity of the situation, required practitioners and schools to act and innovate, sometimes very rapidly. Some felt that the circumstances provided them with freedom to experiment, and to implement new and innovative ideas, including around teaching and learning. For some this was exciting and reflected the general sentiment of the new curriculum with its emphasis on greater practitioner agency to shape teaching and learning.

The last 12 months were not without their challenges, however. Most of the substantive challenges around teaching and learning raised by participants do not themselves have roots in the pandemic. Issues such as differential engagement, the attainment gap, and inequalities within education community precede 2020. However, participants felt that COVID-19 had amplified and changed the parameters of these challenges. The digital divide has always been a persistent issue, however the greater emphasis on online or blended learning has increased its significance. Practitioners and schools have had to find new ways of addressing these challenges, such as encouraging engagement at a distance. Practitioners offered a diverse range of practical suggestions on how these could be addressed.

Practitioners also highlighted novel and emerging challenges. These tended to focus on the operational challenges of supporting learners, including in providing well-being provision, engaging and communicating with parents, and in providing safe learning environments. There were also significant efforts in building the confidence and skills of practitioners, especially around digital skills and online teaching pedagogies. Schools and settings also sought to reframe and pivot existing processes and practices, including around safeguarding. Respondents highlighted the resourcing challenges that schools faced in responding to these priorities.

A clear finding across conversations was the importance practitioners placed on well-being. Many respondents felt that significant progress had been made in bridging home and school, including in developing better lines of communication with parents. Increased engagement with online and blended learning were all highlighted as being encouraging. There was the general caveat of challenges around addressing differential engagement by both parents and learners and its potential, long-term consequences.

In thinking about the future, some practitioners felt that the next 12 months were a balance of trying to retain and entrench the progress that had been made, whilst mitigating the negative impacts of disruption to teaching and learning. Many participants felt that resource challenges would remain, including in supporting well-being, addressing skills and knowledge gaps, and in preparing learners for assessments. Whilst some felt that they needed additional time and space to prepare for the new curriculum, others saw the prospect of the new curriculum as positive, reinforcing the agency practitioners had enjoyed. From these perspectives, the new curriculum would serve to reinforce some of the progress made.

## Appendix: Discussion Guide

Facilitators in the conversations drew on a standardised discussion guide to inform the nature and focus of conversations. The guide was also used to capture notes from the discussions that were used as the basis of this analysis.

<b><u>Worry wall:</u></b>	
<b><i>What is the worry?</i></b>	<b><i>(if not clear) Why does this sit out of your control?</i></b>

<b><u>Conversation 1:</u></b>	
<i>In the last year, what has worked well in terms of teaching and learning and why? How did you overcome the major challenges you faced?</i>	
<i>Prompts:</i>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>1. Is there an example of something that worked particularly well in your teaching and learning in the last year?</i></li> <li><i>2. What new approaches to teaching and learning have you tried this year? How did they work for you?</i></li> <li><i>3. What were the obstacles you faced? How did you overcome them?</i></li> <li><i>4. What have you learned about your own practice, or your colleagues? What do you want to keep doing?</i></li> <li><i>5. If this disruption happened again, what would you want to do again, and why? Is there anything you would do differently?</i></li> </ol>	
<b><i>What has worked well?</i></b>	<b><i>Why has it worked?</i></b>

**Conversation 2:**

*Looking forward, how do we enable all learners so they are ready to learn? What are the opportunities and challenges to getting learners ready and able to learn? How do we overcome those challenges?*

*Prompts:*

- 1. What are the opportunities and challenges for learner well-being and how could these affect their readiness to learn?*
- 2. What are the opportunities and challenges for staff-well-being, and how might these affect our ability to get learners learning again?*
- 3. How can learners develop skills and understanding, and address learning time which they have missed? What learning is important to focus on, and why?*
- 4. How will we know whether learners have been able to recover their learning?*
- 5. How can the wider education system help address those opportunities and challenges?*

**What are the challenges?**

**How do we overcome these?**

**Conversation 3:**

*Looking forward, **how do we enable all learners to make the progress they need?** What are the opportunities and challenges to ensuring learners make progress? How do we overcome those challenges?*

*Prompts:*

- 1. Where do you want your learners to be in six months' time?*
- 2. What are the challenges and opportunities in helping your learners get to where you want them to be?*
- 3. What can you do in your school to make your vision for your learners happen?*
- 4. How can the wider education system support you to address the opportunities and challenges?*

**What are the challenges?**

*Key points, themes, and conclusions*

**How do we overcome these?**

*Key points, themes, and conclusions*

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.  
This document is also available in Welsh.