Witness Name: Owen Evans,

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: 138

Dated: 31 July 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

Witness Statement of Owen Evans

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales

1. I, Owen Evans of Anchor Court, Keen Road, Cardiff, CF24 5JW will say as follows:

2. I am His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales (HMCI). As such I am responsible for the inspection of education and training in Wales, as well as the management, staffing and organisation of Estyn. I also provide independent advice to Welsh Ministers which contributes to the development and review of policy in Wales.

3. I joined Estyn in January 2022 from my position of Chief Executive of S4C, the Welsh language Broadcaster. Prior to joining S4C, I was Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Welsh Government, responsible for Education and Public Services. Meilyr Rowlands was appointed HMCI in 2015 and led Estyn as HMCI during the COVID-19 pandemic, retiring in August 2021. Claire Morgan, Estyn's strategic director, acted as the interim Chief Inspector until January 2022. This is therefore a corporate statement on behalf of Estyn, it necessarily covers matters that are not within my own personal knowledge or recollection. The contents of this witness statement are true to the best of my knowledge and belief. I make this statement from within my own knowledge, documents held by Estyn and/or information from colleagues.

4. Copies of the documents to which I refer in this witness statement are accompanied by the unique reference number and have been uploaded to the Inquiry's electronic document management system.

5. I make this statement in response to a letter dated 7 April 2025 from the UK COVID-19 Inquiry ('the Inquiry') regarding Module 8 of the Inquiry sent pursuant to Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006. The letter asks that this statement covers (amongst other things) certain matters identified in the letter, which I refer to further below.

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6. Estyn is His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales. We provide an independent, high-quality inspection and advice service to the Welsh Ministers (commonly referred to as the Welsh Government), and Medr (the Commission for (and regulator of) the tertiary education and research sector in Wales and the citizens of Wales. Our goal is simple: to make sure that every learner in Wales gets the best possible education and training. We are here 'For learners, for Wales'. We focus on continuous improvement, collaboration, and innovation to achieve this.

7. In February 1907, following the creation of a Welsh Department of the Board of Education, an education inspectorate for Wales was established to report on primary and secondary education. The inspectorate was given Crown status, thus providing authority and a degree of autonomy. A Chief Inspector was appointed to lead the inspectorate. The inspectorate changed and developed over the next century, its remit extending from primary and secondary education in 1907 and eventually to the wide range of education and training sectors inspected today.

8. The inspectorate was established in its current form in 1992 when the Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector (OHMCI) was created as a non-ministerial government department. As a Crown body, we are independent of Senedd Wales/the Welsh Parliament (commonly referred to as the Senedd) but funded by the Welsh Government under Section 104 of the Government of Wales Act 1998. The HMCI's statutory position as Chief Inspector is set out in this Act.

9. The inspectorate was renamed as Estyn in 1999, as its remit expanded progressively into areas including: local authority education services for children and young people; adult learning in the community; Welsh language immersion arrangements in local authorities; initial teacher education; Welsh for adults; youth work; learning in the justice sector; and apprenticeships. The word Estyn is not an acronym, rather it means 'to reach out' and 'to stretch' in Welsh.

10. Estyn employs both His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) and inspection support staff. In addition, we contract with Registered Inspectors / Registered Nursery Inspectors to lead a proportion of our primary schools and non-maintained nursery settings. We also contract with additional inspectors and deploy peer inspectors and lay inspectors as team members on most inspection teams.

Estyn's roles and responsibilities

Context

11. Estyn is an inspectorate with responsibility for the inspection of the quality and standards of education and training in a range of education settings. These include:

- nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
- primary schools
- secondary schools
- all-age schools
- maintained special schools
- pupil referral units
- independent schools
- further education
- independent specialist colleges
- adult learning in the community
- local government education services
- Welsh language immersion arrangements in local authorities
- youth work
- initial teacher education
- Welsh for adults
- apprenticeships
- learning in the justice sector

12.   Estyn's inspections are grounded in first-hand observed evidence. Inspectors observe teaching and learning, scrutinise learners' work, question learners about their studies, and interview practitioners and staff. Inspection findings are based on the professional judgement of experienced inspectors who have been practitioners.

The role of the Chief Inspector and other senior posts

13.   His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training (HMCI) is responsible for the inspection of education and training within his or her remit. HMCI is responsible for Estyn's overall organisation, management and for procedures in financial and other matters, including conduct and discipline.

14.   Primary legislation (see paragraphs 37 to 39) and associated regulations set out what HMCI may or must inspect and report on, how often providers must be inspected, and details for publishing inspection reports.

15.   If requested to do so by Welsh Ministers, HMCI must provide the Welsh Ministers with information or advice on such matters relating to activities within HMCI's remit as are specified in the requests.

16.   HMCI may at any time provide advice to the Welsh Ministers on any matter connected with activities within his or her remit, including advice relating to a particular establishment, institution or agency.

17.   Estyn's Corporate Governance Framework of Boards, Committees and Groups, including the 'Estyn assurance and scrutiny framework arrangements' on page 7 of that current document, helps us to fulfil our strategic objectives as a well-run and efficient organisation, accountable to our staff, stakeholders and the general public. Both the current document and the November 2019 version of the document that was in place during the pandemic have been made available to the Inquiry alongside this statement. See the Estyn Corporate Framework November 2019 [Exhibit

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OE/001 - INQ000618260] and Estyn Corporate Framework April 2025
[Exhibit OE/002 - INQ000618261].

18.   In the section below, I will refer to the strategic groups in place during the
       pandemic as referenced in the Corporate Governance Framework
       (November 2019).

Executive Board (currently Strategic Management Group)

19.   The Executive Board, comprising of executive members (HMCI and
       directors), supports and assists HMCI in leading and managing Estyn.

Estyn's Strategy Board

20.   The non-statutory Strategy Board, consisting of executive members and non-
       executive members, sets and monitors Estyn's strategic agenda. The
       Strategy Board has two sub-committees; the Estyn Audit and Risk
       Assurance Committee and the Remuneration Committee. These
       arrangements have been developed since 2005-2006 when the first non-
       executive directors were appointed. The Strategy Board at the time was
       chaired by a non-executive director.

21.   Estyn maintains a register of interests for Board members. Declarations are
       also made by all permanent employees, secondees and temporary staff in
       line with our managing potential conflicts of interest policy. No member of the
       Board holds directorship or other significant interests that might conflict with
       their management responsibility.

Inspection and Policy Advice Committee

22.   The Inspection and Policy Advice Committee (IPAC), comprised of executive
       members and assistant directors, supported and assisted HMCI in leading
       and managing our inspection and policy advice work and strategic
       objectives.

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Directors Group

23.   The Directors Group comprised of <mark>strategic</mark> directors and assistant directors providing a bridge between strategic and operational leadership, management and planning.

Estyn/Trade Unions Strategic Forum / Estyn/Trade Unions Operational Forum

24.   The Estyn / Trade Union (TU) Strategic Forum comprised of the executive and union representatives and is a forum for the exchange of strategic information and views on strategic matters that affect employees and the effective management of Estyn's business.

25.   Estyn/Trade Union (TU) Operational Forum comprised of the Corporate Services Director, an assistant director, Human Resources Manager and union representatives and support the work of the Estyn/TU Strategic Forum.

Service Delivery Group

26.   The Service Delivery Group consisted of the Corporate Services Director and senior members of corporate services (HEO and above). The Group provides a forum that facilitates effective information sharing and aligns operational activities to help deliver Estyn objectives.

Implementation working groups

27.   In addition to the above groups as set out in the Corporate Governance Framework (November 2019), a number of 'implementation working groups' were in operation at that time. These included:

Operational business meetings

- Monday Morning Meetings
- Senior Management Team (SMT) meeting
- Corporate Services Management Team
- Corporate Services online update for staff
- Online staff updates

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Project development meetings

- Inspection and Validation project team
- Engagement Visit project team
- Blended Learning Group

Stakeholder meetings

- Meetings with other UK education inspectorates and other relevant non-education inspectorates
- Meetings with external education unions

28. The corporate governance and implementation groups listed continued to operate throughout the pandemic. Estyn also joined Welsh Government on a number of working groups that were set up in response to the pandemic (see **paragraphs 62 to 65).**

Leadership roles

29. Estyn's organisational structure supports a strategic focus on all three strands of our core purpose – public accountability, informing national policy and building capacity. We continue to develop staff and leadership capacity, and support succession planning, through our distributed leadership model, which includes leadership roles (Lead Inspector/Lead Officer roles) for staff. The roles are in seven groups:

- senior HMI roles (new for 2025)
- sector lead roles
- Local Authority link Inspector (LALI) roles
- regional coordinators
- Further Education link Inspector (FELI) roles (includes work-based learning providers)
- education policy lead roles
- corporate policy lead roles

30. HMCI, Strategic Directors, Assistant Directors and Lead Inspector/Lead Officer responsibilities are included in our staff handbook. The Staff Handbook (1 January 2020) has been made available to the Inquiry see, Staff handbook – January 2020 [Exhibit OE/003 – INQ000618262],

Governance

31. In line with legislation, we produce and publish an Annual Plan for approval by the First Minister. The Annual Plan sets out our plans for the next year against each of our strategic objectives and includes our annual remit letter from the Minister. The Annual Plans 2019-2020, 2020-2021, 2021-2022 have been made available to the Inquiry alongside this statement, Annual Plan 2019-20 [Exhibit OE/004 – INQ000618263], Annual Plan 2020-21 [Exhibit OE/005 INQ000618264] and Annual Plan 2021-22 [Exhibit OE/006 INQ000618265].

32. We establish a programme of internal audits, which focus on providing added-value advice as well as providing assurance against our key activities and risk areas; the outcomes of reviews are reported within the Governance Statement in our Annual Report and Accounts. The Annual Report and Accounts for 2018-2019, 2019-2020, 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, see Annual Report and Accounts for 2018-19 [Exhibit OE/007 – INQ000618266], Annual Report and Accounts for 2019-20 [Exhibit OE/008 - INQ000618273], Annual Report and Accounts for 2020-21 [Exhibit OE/009 – INQ000618279] and Annual Report and Accounts for 2021-22 [Exhibit OE/010 - INQ000618282].

33. We have a range of systems in place to quality assure our work and seek feedback from the providers we inspect. The four key systems for assuring the quality of inspections are:
    - quality assurance of all inspection reports, including moderation and validation of evaluations, findings and the level of follow-up, if appropriate, prior to publication and the quality assurance of post-visit published letters for interim visits
    - quality assurance of a sample of inspections and interim visits through site visits

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- inspector evaluation forms to record an evaluation of the performance of each additional inspector, peer inspector, lay inspector and school improvement partner, as appropriate
- post-inspection questionnaires for the head of a provider to give feedback on aspects of the inspection process

34. In addition, in 2024, we launched an annual stakeholder perceptions survey. The Stakeholder Perceptions Research December 2024 [Exhibit OE/011 - INQ000618297].

35. We rarely receive complaints about our work but we take these seriously and always use the feedback they provide to enhance our work.

36. We periodically seek external independent reviews of our work. For example, in 2018, Professor Graham Donaldson's review to analyse the implications of the Welsh educational reform agenda on the work of Estyn, with a particular focus on school inspection. The Independent review of Estyn [Exhibit OE/012 – INQ000618308].

The statutory framework within which Estyn operates

37. Primary legislation and associated regulations set out what HMCI may or must inspect and report on, how often providers must be inspected, and details for publishing inspection reports. This legislation defines Estyn's role as an inspectorate and not as a regulatory body. Unlike in England with Ofsted, Care Inspectorate Wales (and not Estyn) is the independent regulator of social care and childcare and also has powers to review the performance of local authorities in the delivery of social services functions.

38. The main primary legislation governing Estyn's inspection of education and training in Wales is:
   - Education Act 2005 (non-maintained settings, maintained schools and PRUs)
   - The Education (School Inspection) (Wales) Regulations 2006

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- Education Act 2002 (independent schools)
- Learning and Skills Act 2000 (post-compulsory education and training and youth support services)
- Education Act 1997 (local authorities)
- Education Act 1994 (teacher training)
- Children Act 2004 (local authorities)
- Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act 2022 (further education colleges, adult community learning partnerships, and apprenticeship providers)
- Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (reforms for supporting learners with additional learning needs)

39. Legislation provides more detailed requirements for some sectors, particularly maintained schools, including provision for additional inspectors and registered inspectors, and for placing providers in categories of concern, such as special measures or significant improvement.

Other legislation and guidance

40. Other legislation and guidance that also impacts upon how Estyn undertakes its inspection duties includes the following:
    - The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)
    - The Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011
    - The Children's Rights Framework
    - Independent Schools Standards (Wales) Regulations 20024
    - Children Act 1989
    - Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006
    - Protection of Freedoms Act 2012
    - Welsh Office Circular 52/95 'Protecting Children from Abuse : the role of the Education Service'
    - National Assembly circular 23/03 'Respecting Others: Anti-bullying guidance'
    - Safeguarding Children: Working together under the Children Act 2004

- 'Respect and resilience: Developing community cohesion – a common understanding for schools and their communities' Welsh Government guidance 2011
- Social services and Well-being Act 2014 and related 'Working together to safeguard people' guidance
- Statutory Guidance Keeping Learners safe 2015 -The role of local authorities, governing bodies and proprietors of independent schools under the Education Act 2002
- Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015
- Wales Safeguarding Procedures 2019 (These replace the All Wales Child Protection Procedures)

Working with Welsh Government and Medr

41. Estyn is independent of but funded directly by the Welsh Government for its statutory responsibilities. Each year, the Cabinet Secretary for Education provides a remit letter which sets out additional pieces of work and independent advice that may be required in addition to our programme of inspection. Estyn provides advice formally through a series of national thematic reports and HMCI's annual report. My team also uses our evidence to respond formally to Welsh Government policy consultations.

42. We have well-established relationships with Welsh Government officials and other key stakeholders. HMCI meets with the Cabinet Secretary for Education on a termly basis. My team also attends key working groups as appropriate.

43. I have the general duty of keeping Welsh Ministers and Medr informed about:
   - the quality of activities within HMCI's remit and (where appropriate) the standards achieved by those for whose benefit such activities are carried out
   - improvements in the quality of such activities and in any such standards

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- the extent to which such activities are being carried out as learner-focused activities
- the efficient and effective use of resources in carrying out such activities and services

44. In addition, we are asked to appear before different Senedd committees including the Children, Young People and Education Committee and the Public Accounts Committee. For example, I am required to publish an annual report on education and training in Wales which is debated in the Plenary session of the Senedd and scrutinised by the Children, Young People and Education Committee.

45. We also produce an Annual Report and Accounts in accordance with Managing Welsh Public Money, the Government Financial Reporting Manual. The annual accounts are produced and laid before the Senedd within a set timescale.

46. External audit review is undertaken by Audit Wales (AW). In addition to auditing the Annual Report and Accounts, AW also has the right to conduct value for money examinations into aspects of any activities as appropriate. Our Annual Report and Accounts is laid before the Senedd by the Auditor General on behalf of Estyn.

Joint working

Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW)

47. Estyn and CIW have a joint inspection framework for the inspection of non-maintained nursery settings and inspect jointly and publish a joint report. The inspection of settings that are eligible for funding to provide education for children before compulsory school age is governed by Schedule 26 of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 as amended by the Education Act 2005. Estyn produce a guidance handbook for inspecting care and

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education in regulated non-school settings eligible for funding for part-time education [Exhibit OE/013 - INQ000618320].

48. Estyn, the Welsh Government and CIW work closely together to co-ordinate our work, supported by a joint inspection protocol [Exhibit OE/014 – INQ000618331].

49. Estyn also works with CIW and other inspectorates to consider how we develop the programme of Joint Inspections of Child Protection Arrangements and joins CIW inspections of the one secure children's home in Wales.

UK inspectorates

50. We work closely with other UK inspectorates. We routinely join inspections of prisons and young offender institutions in Wales at the invitation of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons. We liaise closely with His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation and have previously joined their full joint inspections of youth offending teams in Wales.

51. We work jointly with other education inspectorates. We join Ofsted inspections of independent specialist colleges in England with 10 or more learners who are funded by the Welsh Government. We also work with Ofsted to support, in a quality assurance role, on apprenticeship inspections in England, where requested due to an Ofsted conflict of interest.

The Standing International Conference of Inspectorates (SICI)

52. We actively engage in SICI, fostering the exchange of best practices and learning from other inspectorates, hosting and attending SICI workshops focusing on current themes in education and inspection as well as our involvement in multinational projects in education with partners from across Europe.

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and Education Workforce Council (EWC)

53. Estyn works with QAA to share expertise and bring greater coherence in our inspection and quality review processes across tertiary education providers.

54. Estyn works with the EWC to evaluate the work of initial teacher education partnerships across Wales.

CIW, Audit Wales and Healthcare Inspectorate Wales (HIW)

55. Estyn works closely with CIW, AW and HIW under the Inspection Wales Strategic Agreement. This includes sharing practice and identifying opportunities to work together. For example, in recent years, my team have contributed to shared reports on child protection arrangements and child and adolescent mental health services. Rapid Review of Child Protection Procedures in Wales (September 2023) [Exhibit OE/014a – INQ000647941]. Joint Inspection of Child Protection Arrangements – Overview Report (2019– 2024) (September 2024) [Exhibit OE/014b – INQ000647942]. Summary version [Exhibit OE/014c – INQ000647943]. How are healthcare, education, and children's services supporting the mental health needs of children and young people in Wales? (November 2024) [Exhibit OE/014d – INQ000647944]. Summary version [Exhibit OE/014e – INQ000647945].

56. Estyn inspects local authority education services. An AW inspector always joins these inspections and where appropriate we invite a representative from CIW to attend if there are issues of mutual concern. We have a funding arrangement with AW for this work.

Wider stakeholder engagement

57. Estyn has a stakeholder engagement strategy, which means that we regularly engage with groups of stakeholders from across the sectors we inspect. There is also a well-established system of link inspectors, with

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named inspectors linked to and liaising regularly with local authorities, further education colleges, adult learning in the community partnerships and apprenticeship providers.

Response to the pandemic

58. Prior to the pandemic, in November 2019, the Welsh Government had consulted on extending the current inspection period from 7 years to 8 years, which would mean it would finish in 2024 instead of 2023. Schools in Wales were in the middle of a major programme of Curriculum Reform and it was planned that core inspections would be suspended for schools for the academic year from September 2020. Instead, inspectors would carry out supportive engagement visits to all schools with a focus on the new curriculum. Early planning for this work had taken place, with pilot engagement visits happening in early 2020. The regulations to enable this suspension year were laid before the National Assembly for Wales (as the Senedd was known at that time) in January 2020.

59. In effect, this did not change the statutory responsibilities on Estyn, but enabled the agreement with Welsh Government that we would carry out our work differently for an academic year. This meant that we were well placed to adapt our work quickly once education providers reopened. We initiated engagement calls in July 2020, transferring to in person visits over time.

60. We continued to deliver out other statutory responsibilities to produce an annual report and to provide advice and guidance to Ministers through publishing thematic reports. We continued to engage with and monitor providers in follow-up.

61. Throughout the pandemic Estyn continued with the structures as set out in our Corporate Governance Framework, including our existing implementation working groups (see paras 27 to 28 above). During the specified period, Estyn continued with its normal governance framework in terms of executive meetings. During the period 18 March 2020 – 3 April 2020 the senior management team met daily to consider the changing

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impact of the COVID-19 situation on our work. These meetings were reduced to twice per week until 1 May 2020 when our normal frequency of meetings resumed.

62. In addition, there were brief informal weekly keeping in touch meetings with other UK education and training inspectorates from the week commencing 30 March 2020.

63. Estyn also held meetings with Public Health Wales and joined the Welsh Government on a number of working groups:

   - Continuity of Learning (COL) programme meetings with the Welsh Government, local authorities, school improvement services and teacher unions. COL staffing chart (21 groups [Exhibit OE/015 – INQ000618332]
   - Early years meetings with Welsh Government
   - Post-16 meetings with Welsh Government

64. We had regular meetings with the teacher and headteacher unions throughout the pandemic to discuss our work and gather feedback about the impact of the pandemic on schools and other education providers.

65. Although we initially postponed our sector stakeholder fora to reduce pressure on education providers, we resumed these in a remote form from autumn 2020. We also established an additional forum, meeting directly with teachers.

Planning prior to the pandemic

66. Prior to the pandemic, Estyn last updated its Guidance on Estyn inspections during a Pandemic in 2015. It is based on government advice that, wherever possible, business should operate as usual. It sets out that Estyn would remain operational during a pandemic unless staff shortages or other local factors, such as a failure in the transport networks or critical infrastructure,

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would make it impossible to continue operating. Estyn guidance on pandemic [Exhibit OE/016 – INQ000618333].

67. The guidance sits within the context that there would be no suspension of Estyn's wide-ranging statutory inspection and reporting responsibilities and the requirement for providers to continue to operate in compliance with those statutory responsibilities. The guidance identified that Estyn's response to any pandemic would need to be reviewed and, where necessary, changed as a pandemic evolved and further information became available or the impacts were better understood. The Guidance stated that Estyn's response would be guided by the following principles:
     • minimising the harm that a pandemic could cause
     • working together
     • keeping things in proportion
     • flexibility

68. Prior to January 2020, planning focused on operational impact of a pandemic to Estyn's statutory work rather than how we might adapt our work under those circumstances to consider how children and young people's learning was being protected. Estyn's business continuity plan [Exhibit OE/017 – INQ000618334].

69. In terms of the potential for school closures, our guide: 'When will the next school or pupil referral unit (PRU) inspection take place? - 'Guidance on inspecting new schools or PRUs, schools working collaboratively and federated schools, and on the cancellation, deferral and re-scheduling of school or PRU inspections' (2017) applies. However, this guidance considers the decisions we would take at an individual school level, rather than in response to a widespread and prolonged set of school closures. The section on 'cancellation and deferral of school inspections' sets out the following examples of when Estyn may decide to move the start or end date of an inspection: the school is closed to all pupils, or at least three-quarters of the pupils will not be at school, owing to, for example, adverse weather conditions, a school trip or a religious festival, or industrial action. When will

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the next school inspection take place – September 2017 [Exhibit OE/018 – INQ000618335].

70. Estyn did not start to consider the potential impact of the spread of COVID-19 until early March 2020. Managers shared Welsh Government and Public Health Wales advice on keeping healthy and well with Estyn staff. Broadly, the organisation was trying to keep 'working as normal' as far as possible, as there was the strong steer from government to do that so as to help to keep schools open and operating as usual.

71. Senior managers met on the 11th March 2020 to discuss the escalating situation. By the 13th March, it was clear that schools were finding it increasingly difficult to operate due to staff and pupil absences. Estyn staff contacted all providers due to be inspected in the week commencing 16 March to understand their context and all providers (except one who was ambivalent) and lead inspectors were keen for inspections to continue. Senior managers also were in contact with the other home nation education inspectorates (Ofsted, Education Scotland, and Northern Ireland's ETI) and that of the Republic of Ireland. On the afternoon of Friday 13 March, all the other home nations confirmed that inspections for the following week were going ahead. The Republic of Ireland had already closed its schools.

72. On Saturday 14 March, HMCI and the two Strategic Directors were alerted to the announcement that Education Scotland had in fact suspended inspections late on Friday. They informed us of this development on Saturday. This decision suggested that the Scottish Government was taking a slightly different approach to ensuring that schools were kept open as long as possible than the UK Government. This divergence of policy among some of the home nations opened the possibility that the Welsh Government might or could be thinking along similar lines to the English approach.

73. During Saturday 14 March, HMCI and the two Strategic Directors had several virtual meetings to discuss the emerging concerns. Because of the rapidly changing and challenging period facing schools and other education

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and training providers due to COVID-19, we decided, in discussion with the rest of the extended Estyn senior management team (Assistant Directors and the Corporate Services Director), to propose to suspend all Estyn's inspection and other related activities from Monday 16 March 2020, as long as the Welsh Government was in agreement. We also consulted with the schools who had been notified of inspection and our non-executive directors who are members of Estyn's Strategy Board.

74. HMCI exchanged text messages with the Director of the Education Department, Welsh Government and arranged a phone call for the next day (Sunday 15 March). A video-conference meeting for the Estyn senior management team was also arranged for Sunday 15 March.

75. On Sunday 15 March, a draft letter announcing the suspension of inspections was discussed and agreed by SMT. HMCI also discussed the suspension with the Chief Inspector of Care Inspectorate Wales, who agreed that this suspension would also apply to the joint inspections of non-maintained nursery settings.

76. As arranged, HMCI discussed with the Director of the Education ~~Department~~, Welsh Government the proposed suspension. The DofE agreed with the decision and also explained that the Minister and the First Minister were in agreement. Initially, the First Minister expressed a preference for the announcement to be made on Tuesday, but it was explained that the majority of our inspections started on Monday afternoon, so it was crucial for Estyn to make the announcement on the Monday morning. This was accepted.

77. It was agreed that during the period of no inspection, Estyn staff would be deployed to work on a range of activities to support providers and the Welsh education system and well as continuing with work other than inspection, for example thematic writing. We would work closely with the Welsh Government, local authorities and regional consortia to decide on how best to do this. It was also agreed that the suspension would continue until the

current situation has passed or has changed significantly for the better, and that we would continue to review the changing situation and would keep all stakeholders updated as the situation develops. Concomitant communications and actions were discussed and arranged, including emails to internal and external inspectors.

78. To summarise, the decision to suspend inspection was made to help schools (and other education and training providers) to remain open, as this was the policy of both Welsh and Westminster governments at the time, by:

   - allowing leaders and staff in all education and training providers, and those organisations who support them, to focus fully on the well-being of their learners, their staff and their families; and

   - helping to maintain staffing levels by ensuring that peer inspectors (current practitioners) and other inspectors (including Registered Inspectors many of whom are practicing headteachers) are not out of their institutions (as team members on inspection) at this important time.

79. Subsequently, the Welsh Government closed schools (except to provide care for the children of key workers and for vulnerable pupils) from Monday 23 March 2020. So, in practice the period when schools were still fully open but there was no inspection activity was effectively only a week.

80. Following this, we started to put into place arrangements for how we would support and carry out our statutory duties to provide advice. During the period between the suspension of core inspections and their reintroduction in February 2022 we carried out the following activities:

   - As all local authorities set up learning hubs for vulnerable children and children of key workers, HMI volunteered to assist with the staffing of these in their locality. However, as local authorities were able to deploy local staff, support from Estyn was not required.
   - We deployed HMI to support the development of Welsh Government continuity of learning strategy including the development of guidance to

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support schools, for example in mobilising remote learning and continuing with school business.

- We seconded a small number of inspectors into Welsh Government to provide direct support for their policy and guidance developments.

- From June 2020, we carried out engagement calls and then visits to providers to start to establish how learners' needs were being met and gather evidence that we shared through the following publications:

Advice and guidance published relating to the pandemic

81. Advice for school and PRU leaders and governors on how to continue with school and PRU business during the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020) [Exhibit OE/019 – INQ000618336].

82. Key principles to support the continuation of school and PRU business (April 2020) [Exhibit OE/020 – INQ000618337].

83. Supporting well-being and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from primary schools (June 2020) [Exhibit OE/021 – INQ000618338].

84. Supporting well-being and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from PRUs (June 2020) [Exhibit OE/022 – INQ000618339].

85. Supporting well-being and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from secondary schools (June 2020) [Exhibit OE/023 – INQ000618340].

86. Supporting well-being and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from special schools (June 2020) [Exhibit OE/024 – INQ000618341].

87. Cameos and ideas for continuity of school business during COVID-19 (July 2020) [Exhibit OE/025 – INQ000618342].

88. Cameos and ideas from schools and PRUs on continuing with school business (July 2020) [Exhibit OE/026 – INQ000618343].

89. Insights into how independent schools and specialist colleges have responded during the COVID-19 pandemic (July 2020) [Exhibit OE/027 – INQ000618344].

90. Supporting well-being and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from adult learning in the community partnerships (July 2020) [Exhibit OE/028 – INQ000618345].

91. Supporting well-being and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from further education colleges (July 2020) [Exhibit OE/029 – INQ000618346].

92. Supporting well-being and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from work-based learning providers (July 2020) [Exhibit OE/030 – INQ000618347].

93. Arrangements for September 2020 Planned approaches across maintained schools and PRUs (September 2020) [Exhibit OE/031 – INQ000618348].

94. Engagement work: Primary sector update – autumn 2020 (December 2020) [Exhibit OE/032 – INQ000618349].

95. Engagement work: Secondary sector update – autumn 2020 (December 2020) [Exhibit OE/033 – INQ000618350].

96. Engagement work: All-age school sector update – autumn 2020 (December 2020) [Exhibit OE/034 – INQ000618351].

97. Engagement work: Maintained special school and pupil referral unit (PRU) sector update – autumn 2020 (December 2020) [Exhibit OE/035 – INQ000618352].

98. Engagement work: Post-16 sector update – autumn 2020 (December 2020) [Exhibit OE/036 – INQ000618353].

99. Secondary sector interim report – January and February 2021 (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/037 – INQ000618354].

100. Engagement work: Primary sector update – Spring Term 2021 (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/038 – INQ000618355].

101. Engagement work: Non-maintained sector update – Spring Term 2021 (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/039 – **INQ000618356**

102. Engagement work: Maintained special school and PRU sector update – Spring Term 2021 (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/040 – INQ000618357].

103. Engagement work: Secondary sector update – Spring Term 2021 (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/041 – INQ000618358].

104. Engagement work: Initial Teacher Education sector update 2020-2021 (June 2021) [Exhibit OE/042 – INQ000618359].

105. Engagement work: Maintained special school and pupil referral unit (PRU) update summer term 2021 (June 2021) [Exhibit OE/043 – INQ000618360].

106. Evolving approaches to blended learning in independent schools (July 2021) [Exhibit OE/044 – INQ000618361].

107. Engagement work: Non-maintained sector update summer term 2021 (June 2021) [Exhibit OE/045 – INQ000618362].

108. Engagement work: Secondary sector update summer term 2021 (June 2021) [Exhibit OE/046 – INQ000618363].

109. Engagement work: Primary sector update Summer term 2021 (June 2021) [Exhibit OE/047 – INQ000618364].

110. Reflections on refining remote learning in maintained special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) (June 2021) [Exhibit OE/048 – INQ000618365] .

111. Summary of engagement calls and visits to independent special schools - Spring and summer terms, 2021 (September 2021) [Exhibit OE/049 – INQ000618366].

112. Summary of engagement calls and visits to schools and PRUs – Autumn 2021 (February 2022) [Exhibit OE/050 – INQ000618367].

113. Engagement work: Non-maintained sector update Autumn term 2021 (February 2022) [Exhibit OE/051 – INQ000618368].

114. Engagement work: Further education and adult learning in the community sectors update – autumn 2021 (March 2022) [Exhibit OE/052 – INQ000618369].

Blog Posts

115. Our support for Welsh education and training in the current climate (June 2020) [Exhibit OE/053 – INQ000618370].

116. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) - how can schools support children and young people who live in difficult circumstances? (September 2020) [Exhibit OE/054 – INQ000618371].

117. Is your school one that puts families and communities at the heart of its work? (September 2020) [Exhibit OE/055 – INQ000647946].

118. Now learners have returned to schools and colleges, what part have we played and how will our role change in the future? (September 2020) [Exhibit OE/056 – INQ000618373].

119. What can schools and PRUs do to strengthen pupils' resilience? (September 2020) [Exhibit OE/057 – INQ000618374].

120. Working together to support teaching and learning during COVID-19 (September 2020) [Exhibit OE/058 – INQ000618375].

121. Inspecting the value of youth work (May 2021) [Exhibit OE/059 – INQ000618376].

122. Building on strengths and removing barriers – preparing for the Curriculum for Wales (July 2021) [Exhibit OE/060 – INQ000647947].

123. Our work on equality and diversity (January 2022) [Exhibit OE/061 – INQ000647948].

124. Trialling and evaluating authentic learning experiences – preparing for the Curriculum for Wales (February 2022) [Exhibit OE/062 – INQ000647949].

125. Establishing a vision and ensuring high quality teaching and learning – preparing for the Curriculum for Wales (February 2022) [Exhibit OE/063 - INQ000647950].

126. Inspecting a school's safeguarding culture (March 2022) [Exhibit OE/064 – INQ000647951].

127. Post-16 education and training – Annual Report 2020-21 insights (March 22) [Exhibit OE/065 – INQ000647952].

128. Making well-being a priority – Annual Report 2020-21 insights (March 2022) [Exhibit OE/066 – INQ000618383].

Publications to which Estyn has contributed

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129. In collaboration with Regional School Improvement Consortia, Central South Consortium, EAS, ERW, GWE Developing integrated approaches to support blended learning for the phased opening of schools (June 2020) [Exhibit OE/067 – INQ000618384].

130. In collaboration with Regional School Improvement Consortia, Central South Consortium, EAS, ERW, GWE Models of Blended Learning (July 2020) [Exhibit OE/068 – INQ000618385].

131. In conjunction with Edge Foundation contributed to Inspection across the UK: how the four nations intend to contribute to school improvement (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/069 – INQ000618386].

Thematic reports published

132. A level Welsh First Language (June 2020) [Exhibit OE/070 – INQ000618387].

133. Learner resilience – building resilience in primary schools, secondary schools and pupil referral units (June 2020) [Exhibit **OE/71 -** INQ000618388].

134. Community schools families and communities at the heart of school life (July 2020) [Exhibit OE/072 – INQ000618389].

135. Insights into how independent schools and specialist colleges have responded during the COVID-19 pandemic (July 2020) [Exhibit OE/027 – INQ000618344].

136. Business and social studies subjects at A level (August 2020) [Exhibit OE/073 – INQ000618391].

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137. Celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion (October 2020) [Exhibit OE/074 – INQ000618392].

138. The Value of Youth Work Training (October 2020) [Exhibit OE/075 – INQ000618393].

139. Preparing for the Curriculum for Wales – case studies and cameos from secondary, all-age and special schools (November 2020) [Exhibit OE/076 – INQ000618394].

140. Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 (January 2021) [Exhibit OE/077 – INQ000618395].

141. Post-16 partnerships (January 2021) [Exhibit OE/078 – **INQ000618396**

142. Welsh language acquisition: How Welsh-medium and bilingual settings and primary schools develop learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/079 – **INQ000618397**

143. English language and literacy in settings and primary schools (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/080 – INQ000618398].

144. Support for learners' mental health and emotional well-being (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/081 – INQ000618399].

145. Developments in remote and blended learning practice (March 2021) [Exhibit OE/082 – INQ000618400].

146. How schools and colleges used the RRRS and catch-up grants for post-16 learners (June 2021) [Exhibit OE/083 – INQ000618401].

147. The teaching of Welsh history including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic history, identity and culture (October 2021) [Exhibit OE/084 – INQ000618402].

148. Initial teacher education in the post-compulsory education and training sectors (October 2021) [Exhibit OE/085 – INQ000618403].

149. "We don't tell our teachers": Experiences of peer-on-peer sexual harassment among secondary school pupils in Wales (December 2021) [Exhibit OE/086 – INQ000618404].

150. All-age schools in Wales – A report on the challenges and successes of establishing all-age schools (January 2022) [Exhibit OE/087 – INQ000618405].

151. Welsh Immersion Education – Strategies and approaches to support 3 to 11-year-old learners (February 2022) [Exhibit OE/088 – INQ000618406].

152. The Curriculum for Wales – How are regional consortia and local authorities supporting schools? (March 2022) [Exhibit OE/089 – INQ000618407].

The impact of the pandemic on children and young people's education

Estyn's work as an inspectorate in the education sector (excluding nursery)

153. Estyn carry out inspections with the aim of improving the quality of education and training for all learners in Wales. The key reasons for inspection are:
   - To evaluate the quality and standards of education and training
   - To identify strengths and areas for improvement
   - To support providers in their journey towards excellence
   - To inform parents, carers, and the wider community about the quality of education provided

154. Our work as an inspectorate is governed by certain statutory powers that are set out in our Corporate Governance Framework and inspection guidance tailored to each education sector.

155. The published guidance handbooks for the inspection of schools during the pandemic have been made available to the Inquiry alongside this statement. See Guidance handbook for the inspection of primary schools [Exhibit OE/090 – INQ000618408]. Guidance handbook for the inspection of secondary schools [Exhibit OE/091 – INQ000618409]. Guidance handbook for the inspection of maintained special schools [Exhibit OE/092 – INQ000618410]. Guidance handbook for the inspection of independent schools [Exhibit OE/093 – INQ000618411]. Guidance handbook for the inspection of independent specialist colleges [Exhibit OE/094 – INQ000618412].

156. In the last typical academic year, 2018-2019 we carried out around 240 inspections of schools, with the bulk being primary (188) and secondary (29), with the remaining being all age schools (3), special schools (3), PRUs (4) and independent schools (13). We published a report following each inspection. Where we found significant shortcomings, we placed a school into a category of follow-up. There are two statutory categories of follow-up for maintained schools and PRUs – 'special measures' and 'requiring significant improvement'. During this time we also had non-statutory follow-up called 'Estyn review'. When a school was placed into a follow-up category, we would monitor their progress until there was sufficient evidence to remove them from follow-up. For independent schools, we placed them in follow-up where they did not meet the Independent School Standards and monitored their progress until we were satisfied that they did.

157. Prior to the pandemic we had started consulting on making changes to our inspection arrangements for schools and PRUs. This included consulting on the removal of summative judgments from our reports. Prior to March 2020, we still used summative judgements in reports. An example of a report

carried out under the arrangements at the time of the pandemic [Exhibit OE/095 – INQ000618413].

158. Estyn had already agreed with the Welsh Government that it would pause the usual programme of core inspections during the academic year 2020-2021 ('transition year') to support schools' preparation for curriculum reform through engagement visits.

159. In addition to our core inspection and follow-up work with schools, we also carry out a number of national thematic reviews each year which are based on visits to schools. For example, in 2018-2019, we published 14 thematic reports across all our work. Our annual report and accounts for 2018-2019 list all these reports if needed.

160. An important part of our inspection approach since 2010 has been the use of peer inspectors on every inspection. These are senior leaders from the providers we inspect who pass an assessed training course and join our inspection teams as a member of the team.

161. Each year we use the evidence from all the work we carry out to publish the HMCI's Annual Report, which sets out our findings about the quality of education and training in Wales.

Learning and education prior to the pandemic

162. Paragraphs 70 to 80 identified the initial decisions to suspend inspection and our initial work in April and May to support the Welsh Government and local authorities to develop guidance and support for schools.

163. In early June, Estyn began making contact with providers to establish how they were coping with the crisis, discussing staff and pupil well-being, and practical aspects of school organisation as well as understanding the challenges of reopening to learners. The main findings were published [Exhibit OE/019 – INQ000618336] and [Exhibit OE/031 – INQ000618348] and shared with Welsh Government to help inform policy decisions. The

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findings were shared with Welsh Government through the range of meetings, please see Continuity of Learning meetings during COVID period [Exhibit OE/095a – INQ000647953] . On 3 June 2020, HMCI Meilyr Rowlands shared details of Estyn's role in the current climate in his blog, please see [Exhibit OE/053 – INQ000618370] particularly in providing the government with independent and objective evidence and advice. The overall messages from our engagement with schools and other providers during the summer term 2020 were captured in our annual report 2019-2020 [Exhibit OE/097 – INQ000618415].

164. In summary, our evidence showed that on the positive side schools, colleges, and training providers prioritised well-being, maintaining contact and preserving a sense of community, which meant that learners on the whole were positive about returning to in person learning. There was strong support for vulnerable learners through regular contact and supported attendance in person in settings. Learners and teachers significantly improved their digital skills. Schools that invested early in digital training were better prepared, enabling them to transition to remote learning more quickly and effectively. Many schools reviewed and improved how they engaged with families—using apps, video messages, and newsletters. However, a minority of learners lacked adequate digital devices or internet connectivity. We also highlighted other shortcomings. Non-maintained nursery settings struggled financially and operationally and the national strategy for early years continuity was less clear compared to schools. The cancellation of exams and reliance on alternative grading methods created anxiety and fairness concerns and raised questions about assessment outside of formal examinations. There were gaps in engagement for certain learner groups – for example apprentices who were furloughed or learners with more complex additional learning needs. Overall, schools and other providers were at different levels of preparedness in terms of digital capabilities and parent-school relationships, which led to inconsistent experiences in remote learning quality. Please see paragraphs 81 to 152 above for details of the relevant advice and guidance published relating to the pandemic.

165. The 2020-2021 academic year was used as a transition year towards new inspection arrangements with engagement visits replacing formal inspections for maintained schools and PRUs. Using video and telephone calls and online surveys, Estyn engaged with providers across all the education and training sectors. The main focus was the well-being of learners, staff and the provider's community. Estyn also learnt about how providers were approaching particular challenges of engaging and supporting their learners and their communities during the pandemic. The information was used to provide published evidence and to advise the Welsh Government at a national level to support their decision-making. The aim of these engagement phone calls and visits focused on the response to the impact of the pandemic. During the summer term of 2020, 48 pilot calls were made to primary schools with a further 371 and 578 calls made during autumn 2020 and spring 2021, respectively. In spring 2021, 39 calls and a very few visits were made to special schools and PRUS. Between September and October 2020, 114 engagement calls were made to secondary schools and 19 calls made to all-age schools. Between autumn 2020 and spring 2021 a further 150 calls were made to secondary schools. Inspectors also continued to engage with providers across the full range of sectors we inspect.

166. During the initial period of school and college closures, Estyn did not routinely observe online teaching sessions, either live or recorded. Estyn chose not to observe online teaching sessions in schools to avoid breaching privacy, data protection laws, and safeguarding protocols. Observing such lessons could expose sensitive personal environments and require complex consent procedures. Instead, Estyn initially relied on alternative methods, including interviews and policy reviews to assess the quality of online learning while maintaining ethical and legal standards. The evaluation of effectiveness of provision relied primarily on discussion with schools, feedback from learners and families and examples of practice collected for thematic analysis.

167. As COVID-19 restrictions lifted, Estyn carried out a small number of inspection activities, including three focused inspections in independent

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schools. These inspections were carried out at the request of the Welsh Government in respect of non-compliance with the Independent School Standards and Regulations, which raised significant safeguarding concerns. We also inspected the National Centre for Learning Welsh, which was conducted solely online and carried out an inspection of Cardiff local government education services using a hybrid model of inspection in November 2021. Estyn also visited a small number of schools to see first-hand the challenges of the pandemic and returning to school and met with leaders, staff and pupils. Estyn also met regularly with leaders from initial teacher education to understand the challenges the periods of school closure presented and seek alternative ways to support and train students.

168. Estyn kept in regular contact with providers that had been identified as causing concern before the pandemic, for example schools in statutory categories. An allocated pastoral inspector was linked to each of these providers to offer regular pastoral support and guidance throughout the year. We tailored our approach in response to the providers' specific needs.

169. On 23 June 2021, Estyn published information explaining the new approach to inspection arrangements for schools and PRUs. This included clarification that summative gradings would be removed to shift the emphasis to the evaluations within the narrative of the report and have a deeper focus on professional dialogue and exploring the school's/PRU's strengths and areas for improvement. It confirmed that these new arrangements would be trialed with a small sample of volunteer schools and PRUs during the autumn of 2021 but this date was moved to spring 2022, due to ongoing challenges presented by the pandemic.

170. During autumn 2021, Estyn made engagement visits and phone calls to 79 primary schools, 20 secondary schools, two all-age schools, two maintained special schools and two PRUs. Inspectors visited a further 38 primary schools, 57 secondary schools, six special schools and one PRU as part of the thematic work. The report – Summary of engagement calls and visits to schools and PRUs (autumn 2021) [Exhibit OE/050 – INQ000618367] -

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presents the findings from these engagement visits. Key messages were identified for schools to consider as they continued with their work to support recovery and reform. Estyn also visited 28 schools/PRUs which were in follow-up.

171. Estyn also continued to engage with independent schools throughout the specific period. During summer term 2020, we contacted all independent schools and we engaged with them all at least once during the academic year 2020-2021. We didn't carry out engagement work with independent schools during the 2021-2022 academic year but carried out focused visits and material change visits before returning to routine inspection and monitoring from Spring 2022.

172. For schools and pupil referral units (PRUs), there are two statutory categories of follow-up, namely requiring special measures (SM) or in need of significant improvement (SI), as well as a non-statutory category of Estyn review (ER). Other sectors have different arrangements, but all have levels of follow-up.

173. In March 2020 we paused our on-site monitoring arrangements for schools in follow-up but continued to engage regularly with schools in a statutory follow-up category. We allocated a pastoral HMI (named HMI with experience of school improvement) to each school or pupil referral unit (PRU). The pastoral HMI had experience of working directly with the provider and knew their context well. We allocated a lead inspector to maintain contact with non-school settings for pupils under 5 in focused improvement. Generally, contact was half termly for providers in special measures, and termly for providers in significant improvement and focused improvement. However, for a minority of providers, contact was more frequent in response to the providers' specific needs.

174. For the few providers placed in special measures or significant improvement early in 2019-2020 before the pandemic, we reviewed the school's post-inspection action plan and the local authority's statement of support during

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virtual meetings with leaders and supported leaders to strengthen their plans where necessary. Where appropriate, inspectors supported providers to review and adapt their action plans to account for changes in timescales, new challenges and modes of operation due to the pandemic. In addition, where appropriate, we established discussions with the local authority regarding relevant issues raised by the provider

175. As the pandemic eased during the 2020-2021 academic year, inspectors made short, pastoral visits to nearly all providers in special measures and many providers in significant improvement. These supportive visits helped us to understand the school's context and served to set the scene for resuming formal, statutory monitoring, most likely in the autumn term 2021. We also developed guidance that was available to schools and local authorities to help them to understand how we would evaluate their progress when we resumed monitoring activity. In nearly all schools and PRUs, leaders were proud to welcome inspectors back to their provision and to explain at first hand the work undertaken since March 2020.

176. During the second half of the summer term 2021, inspectors resumed formal on-site monitoring activity in a small number of schools in statutory follow-up. One primary school visited was removed from special measures and one secondary school was removed from significant improvement following their monitoring visits, because they had made enough progress in addressing the recommendations from the core inspection and had developed their leadership capacity well. During the spring term 2021, working jointly with Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), we removed two of the four non-maintained settings from focused improvement. During the second half of the summer term 2021, we were able to resume formal focused improvement monitoring and removed one setting from focused improvement.

177. Twenty-seven providers in statutory categories were removed from follow-up in the 2021-2022 academic year. In addition, 39 providers across all sectors were removed from non-statutory follow-up (Estyn Review).

178. FAQS COVID-19 is relevant [Exhibit OE/096 – INQ000618414].

179. As outlined in paragraph 80, a small number of our staff were seconded into Welsh Government initially. Our staff initially supported the development guidance and support for education providers during April and May 2020. Following that, they started undertaking regular engagement work with providers to gather evidence of their approaches to supporting learning.

180. A substantial proportion of our inspection work is undertaken by external inspectors. For example, these may be current or retired headteachers. During the period when we did not conduct our routine core inspections, we did not contract with or deploy these external inspectors to undertake work.

Proportion of schools which had been judged to fall into each inspection grade over that period

181. The 10-year period preceding the pandemic is covered by two inspection cycles. Firstly between 2010-2017 and then 2017-2024. This witness statement will include the period 2010 to 2020.

2010-2017 inspection cycle

182. Excluding pilot inspections, Estyn carried out 1,484 core inspections of primary schools, 238 inspections in secondary schools, 4 inspections in all-age schools and 47 inspections in special schools and 36 in PRUs.

    Judgements focused on 3 key questions:

    - How good are outcomes? (standards & well-being)
    - How good is provision? (teaching and learning and care, support & guidance)
    - How good are leadership & management?

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Four-point scale to show inspection judgements:

Excellent	Many strengths, including significant examples of sector leading practice
Good	Many strengths and no important areas requiring significant improvement
Adequate	Strengths outweigh areas for improvement
Unsatisfactory	Important areas for improvement outweigh strengths

Summary of overall quality of schools during the period

Standards

183. Over the inspection cycle, standards were good or better in around seven-in-ten primary schools and just under half of secondary schools. Standards were excellent in a very few primary schools (4%) and just over one in ten secondary schools. Standards were judged to be adequate in 28% of primary schools and unsatisfactory in very few schools (1%). Standards were adequate in around 36% of secondary schools and unsatisfactory in just over 10% of secondary schools. The range of judgements remained about the same throughout the period.

184. Between 2010 and 2017, in primary schools there were improvements in performance, particularly of boys and pupils eligible for free school meals. In most primary schools and the majority of secondary schools, pupils with additional learning needs and those with English as an additional language made good progress. In around a third of schools, more able pupils did not achieve what they are capable of or use their skills at a high level.

185. Between 2010 and 2017, the performance of pupils eligible for free school meals improved well in the level 1 and 2 thresholds and the gap between the performance of those eligible for free school meals and other pupils reduced.

The performance of pupils eligible for free school meals also improved in the indicators that include English or Welsh and mathematics, but to a lesser extent.

186. During the period, there was a gradual improvement in pupils' literacy skills and their ability to apply these across the curriculum. Pupils' basic number skills also improved during the inspection cycle, though pupils did not apply these well enough. Despite advancements in technology, there were important shortcomings in standards of ICT.

187. In secondary schools, pupils' ability to apply their numeracy skills across the curriculum was weak at the end of the last inspection cycle, and remained an area for improvement in many schools at the end of 2017, as did pupils' ability to apply their numeracy skills to real-life situations. Despite significant advancements in technology over the course of the 2010-2017 cycle, pupils did not apply their ICT skills well across the curriculum and their ICT skills were usually limited to a narrow range of applications.

188. Standards of Welsh in English-medium schools did not improve significantly over the inspection cycle although there was an improvement in the proportion of secondary school pupils entered for the full-course examination in Key Stage 4. Around a third of primary schools received recommendations to improve standards of Welsh.

189. Attendance improved in most schools. In 2010-2011, pupils' average attendance was 93.3% and this rose to 94.9% in 2016-2017.

Provision

190. Across the inspection cycle, provision was judged as good or better in eight-in-ten primary schools and around two-thirds of secondary schools. In around seven-in-ten primary schools, teachers planned purposeful activities that focused on developing literacy, numeracy and ICT skills across the curriculum. In secondary schools, provision to develop pupils' literacy skills

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improved although the curriculum offer for learners narrowed during this time. In secondary schools, while there were improvements in the provision to develop pupils' numeracy skills, in the majority of schools this provision was less well developed than that for literacy.

191. In around three-quarters of primary schools, delivery of the Foundation Phase was inconsistent and often becoming too formal, especially in Year 1 and Year 2. This limits pupils' ability to work independently and to make choices about their learning. In around six-in-ten English-medium schools, there was not enough focus on developing pupils' Welsh oracy skills.

Leadership

192. Over the inspection cycle, leadership was good or better in almost three-quarters of primary schools (6% excellent) and nearly six-in-ten secondary schools (14% excellent). In secondary schools, over the course of the cycle, the quality of leadership is the most significant factor in determining a school's effectiveness.

193. School governance has improved over the inspection cycle. Nearly all school governors now have at least a basic level of training that helps them to undertake their duties with growing confidence. Most have a suitable understanding of their school's strengths and priorities for improvement.

194. In too many instances, primary school leaders did not ensure that their school implements Foundation Phase pedagogy well enough. There was also a lack of understanding among many leaders of effective Foundation Phase practice.

195. On average, just over two-thirds of primary schools had good or better arrangements to evaluate and improve their own work. Around a third of primary schools were not good at driving their own improvement. In a few instances, leaders did not identify the most important priorities for improvement.

196. Throughout the cycle of inspection, improving quality was one of the weakest aspects of secondary schools' work. The proportion of schools where improving quality was unsatisfactory increased over the cycle of inspection and accounted for one-in-ten schools.

Table 1. Inspection Outcomes for Primary Schools 2010-2017.

Year	Number of Inspections	KQ1 – Outcomes (%)				KQ2 – Provision (%)				KQ3 – Leadership (%)			
2016-17	186	4	60	35	1	3	66	26	5	8	59	24	9
2015-16	178	4	68	26	1	3	75	20	1	8	65	24	3
2014-15	227	2	65	32	1	4	71	24	1	6	63	24	7
2013-14	229	4	59	35	2	4	68	26	2	7	62	28	3
2012-13	208	3	69	28	0	1	77	22	0	5	72	20	3
2011-12	218	3	70	26	1	2	83	15	0	6	73	17	4
2010-11	238	5	76	18	2	3	80	16	1	6	71	20	3
Average		4	67	28	1	3	74	21	2	6	66	23	5

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Table 2. Inspection Outcomes for Secondary Schools 2010-2017.

Year	Number of Inspections	KQ1 – Outcomes (%)				KQ2 – Provision (%)				KQ3 – Leadership (%)			
2016-17	26	14	31	24	31	7	45	41	7	17	31	31	21
2015-16	33	6	33	48	12	12	55	30	3	9	45	33	12
2014-15	37	16	24	46	14	11	38	49	3	24	19	41	16
2013-14	36	6	47	47	0	3	69	28	0	3	56	42	0
2012-13	40	15	30	33	23	13	48	28	13	15	40	30	15
2011-12	35	14	31	40	14	11	54	34	0	20	40	37	3
2010-11	31	13	48	35	3	10	77	13	0	10	74	16	0
Average		12	35	39	14	10	55	32	4	14	43	33	10

Excellent practice and follow-up

197. Over the cycle, 16% of primary schools were judged to have excellent practice.

198. The proportion of primary schools requiring follow-up after their core inspection remained broadly stable over the cycle, although there were a few fluctuations in individual years. A total of 35 schools required special measures, representing 2% of the schools inspected. The number requiring significant improvement was 57 (4% of inspections).

199. Between 2010 and 2017, 27% of secondary schools were judged to have excellent practice. Due to the relatively small number of inspections each year, the number of schools requiring follow-up fluctuated across the cycle. Between 2010 and 2017, Estyn placed 24 secondary schools in special measures. Six of these schools had previously been monitored by Estyn or had been identified as requiring significant improvement; the remainder were placed in this category following a core inspection.

200. Between 2010 and 2017, 25 secondary schools were identified as requiring significant improvement following a core inspection. Estyn monitored these schools by carrying out a monitoring visit around a year to 18 months after the core inspection. In the majority of cases, these schools made sufficient

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progress for them to be removed from this category. However, the pace of improvement in three was too slow, and they were placed in special measures.

2017-2020 inspection cycle

201. Estyn carried out 496 core inspections of primary schools and 81 secondary schools.

   Judgements focused on five inspection areas:
   - Standards
   - Well-being and attitudes to learning
   - Teaching and learning experiences
   - Care, support and guidance
   - Leadership and management

   Four-point scale:

Excellent	Very strong, sustained performance and practice
Good	Strong features, although minor aspects may require improvement
Adequate and needs improvement	Strengths outweigh weaknesses, but important aspects require improvement
Unsatisfactory and needs urgent improvement	Important weaknesses outweigh strengths

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Summary of overall quality of schools during the period

Standards

202. Over the 2017-2020 period, standards were good or better in around eight-in-ten primary schools, slightly higher than in the previous cycle. Around half of secondary schools were judged to have good or better standards. This was a similar proportion to the previous cycle. The proportion of primary schools with excellent standards also increased, with one-in-ten schools receiving the highest judgement in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. In secondary schools, the average proportion of schools receiving an excellent judgement was similar to the previous cycle.

203. In primary schools where standards were good or better, most pupils, including those with special educational needs and those eligible for free school meals, made at least good progress during their time at the school. In weaker schools, too many pupils, particularly the more able, did not make enough progress over time.

204. In around half of secondary schools, standards were good or better. In these schools, many pupils made strong progress in developing their understanding, knowledge and skills. In around six-in-ten schools, pupils eligible for free school meals made good progress from their starting points. However, this group of pupils continued to perform below other pupils.

205. Standards of reading, punctuation, spelling and grammar were good in around eight-in-ten primary schools. Pupils' ability to write well at length was an area for improvement in around a fifth of schools. In many English-medium schools, pupils showed positive attitudes to learning Welsh and made good early progress. This progress was not sustained across key stage 2 so that, by the end of the period, around three-in-ten schools did not develop pupils' independent use of Welsh to a high enough level.

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206. In secondary schools, girls continued to outperform boys and the gap between the two increased slightly in most indicators in 2019. The difference between the two genders was especially stark in developing literacy skills, particularly writing. Fewer boys than girls develop an interest in reading for pleasure. In a majority of schools, pupils wrote suitable extended pieces for a variety of audiences and purposes across subjects. A majority of pupils organised their writing into paragraphs systematically and communicate their ideas clearly. A few wrote with increasing sophistication and produce creative and engaging pieces of writing. A minority of pupils, particularly boys, were unable to communicate their ideas coherently. These pupils did not understand how to structure their writing. They made frequent errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation and did not check their writing to ensure that it made sense.

207. In around seven-in-ten schools, standards in mathematics were good or better, although pupils' capacity to apply numeracy skills independently and competently across the curriculum remained an area for improvement. Pupils' use of ICT skills improved across the period and were strong in many schools by 2019-2020.

208. In secondary schools we noted some positive improvements to numeracy provision but, in a minority of schools, pupils did not use their problem-solving skills frequently enough, including in mathematics lessons.

Well-being and attitudes to learning

209. Standards of pupils' well-being continued to be a strength of primary schools across Wales and were good or better in nearly all schools and excellent in around one-in-five schools. Where standards of well-being were high, many pupils enjoyed learning and approached their work with interest and enthusiasm. Pupils' behaviour was consistently good in most primary schools. Most pupils attended school regularly. Pupils eligible for free school meals had lower rates of attendance than other pupils, and the data showed a worsening trend over recent years. In around one-in-five secondary

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schools, pupils' well-being and attitudes to learning are excellent. In these schools, nearly all pupils enjoy coming to school and attendance rates are very high. In many schools, pupils display positive attitudes to their work, they are well motivated and show high levels of resilience when tackling difficult tasks. In many schools, pupils understand well the importance of good attendance. However, in a few schools, poor attendance contributes to poor outcomes in learning and well-being.

Teaching and learning experiences

210. By the end of the period, the overall quality of teaching and learning experiences were good or better in about three-quarters of primary schools and excellent in around one-in-ten. In around eight-in-ten primary schools, teachers planned and delivered a broad and stimulating curriculum that engaged the interests of most pupils.

211. In seven-in-ten schools, staff had a good understanding of foundation phase principles and practice. This is an improvement from previously. Where foundation phase practice remained weaker, schools provided too few opportunities for pupils to develop key physical, creative, social and independent learning skills that they need for the rest of their education. By 2019-2020, teachers in around eight-in-ten schools planned well for the development of pupils' literacy, numeracy and ICT skills, although arrangements for the application of these skills in other subject areas was variable. In around a third of schools, teachers did not promote the use of Welsh.

212. Teaching in secondary schools was good or better in around half of secondary schools.

213. In schools where teaching is at least good, most teachers secure positive working relationships and have good subject knowledge. They plan their lessons carefully to capture pupils' interest and include a variety of

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approaches over time. There is an appropriate level of challenge for all pupils, including the more able and those with additional learning needs.

214. In schools where there are significant areas for improvement in teaching, many of the shortcomings are the result of poor planning. These shortcomings include a lack of challenge, particularly for the more able teachers offering pupils too much help or 'scaffolding' that limits their independence:

- an inappropriate pace to learning activities
- poorly structured or contrived literacy or numeracy activities
- poor support for pupils with additional learning needs
- teachers persisting with strategies that are not working because they feel that they need to use them to comply with school policy

215. While there were strengths in the curriculum of a majority of schools, only a few secondary schools build well on the curriculum in the primary phase. A few schools placed little emphasis on key stage 3 and have reduced the curriculum time allocated to two years, starting the key stage 4 curriculum in Year 9.

Care, support and guidance

216. The standard of care, support and guidance of pupils was at least good in nine-in-ten primary schools. It was excellent in almost two-in-ten schools. This was often a particular strength in schools serving disadvantaged communities.

217. Around eight-in-ten primary schools tracked pupils' social, emotional and academic progress carefully. They used this information to identify and to provide for pupils with special educational needs and those that require additional help to learn. Nine-in-ten schools work effectively with partners, including parents, to enhance the care, support and guidance of pupils.

218. In around two-in-ten schools, the work of pupil voice groups was highly influential. In a minority of schools, these groups did not have sufficient autonomy, and schools did not attach enough importance to enabling learners to influence school life.

219. In around half of schools, staff supported pupils to develop well as independent and confident learners.

220. Across the period, with very few exceptions, safeguarding arrangements in primary schools met requirements and gave no cause for concern. In secondary schools, care support and guidance was a strength in many schools. In the best examples, schools offered high quality care, support and guidance for their pupils. In these schools, there is an extremely caring and supportive ethos that promotes pupils' well-being and attitudes to learning effectively. Staff support pupils' personal development in the classroom and beyond to help them achieve their full potential. Many schools had high expectations of pupils with additional learning needs and supported their learning well. In the best examples, teachers worked closely with learning support assistants to plan the most appropriate learning strategies for these pupils. However, in a few cases, learning plans are too generic, did not offer enough challenge to pupils and do not give useful guidance to teachers.

Leadership and management

221. By the end of the period, leadership was good or better in three quarters of primary schools. It was excellent in nearly two-in-ten schools, substantially higher than in 2010-2011. The traits of effective leadership and management in schools that receive good or better judgements have remained the same over recent years.

222. In around a quarter of primary schools, leadership required some degree of improvement. Common weaknesses included insufficient strategic focus on improving teaching, and evaluation and improvement processes that lacked focus and rigor.

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223. In a majority of schools, governors used their knowledge of the school appropriately to challenge the work of senior leaders. They showed sound knowledge about the school's strengths and priorities for improvement.

224. Leadership was good or better in just under half of secondary schools and excellent in around one-in-ten. Where leadership was good or better, leaders were supportive, caring and encouraging but also challenging when necessary. Leaders understood positive aspects well as well as those needing improvement. Where there was a strong culture of objective evaluation and planning for improvement, leaders appraised the impact of the school's work continuously and responded swiftly to any aspects that required improvement. They understood how well pupils performed in relation to other similar schools and set ambitious goals. Governors were well informed and had a secure understanding of the school's strengths and weaknesses.

225. Where there were shortcomings, these were mostly because leaders were unable to identify areas for improvement in teaching across the school. In a few cases, leaders focused so much on improving examination outcomes that they did not place enough importance of securing pupils' broad education or their social and personal development. In a very few schools inspected, poor behaviour and bullying was tackled by leaders.

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Table 3. Inspection Outcomes for Primary Schools 2017-2020.

Year	Number of Inspections	IA1 – Standards (%)				IA2 – Well-being (%)				IA3 – Teaching (%)			
2019-20	108	10	70	19	2	21	72	6	1	10	65	24	1
2018-19	188	10	71	18	1	19	72	9	0	11	66	21	1
2017-18	200	8	76	16	1	18	75	7	0	7	68	23	3
Average		9	73	17	1	19	73	7	0	9	67	22	1

Year	Number of Inspections	IA4 – CSG (%)				IA5 – Leadership (%)			
2019-20	108	20	72	5	2	17	56	22	5
2018-19	188	18	76	5	2	18	63	16	3
2017-18	200	18	72	10	1	12	69	16	4
Average		18	73	7	1	15	64	18	3

Table 4. Inspection Outcomes for Secondary Schools 2017-2020.

Year	Number of Inspections	IA1 – Standards (%)				IA2 – Well-being (%)				IA3 – Teaching (%)			
2019-20	29	0	52	36	12	28	44	24	4	0	52	40	8
2018-19	25	14	31	41	14	14	41	41	3	10	34	44	7
2017-18	27	15	37	41	7	26	41	22	11	15	33	44	7
Average		10	40	40	11	22	42	30	6	9	40	44	7

Year	Number of Inspections	IA4 – CSG (%)				IA5 – Leadership (%)			
2019-20	29	28	48	24	0	4	52	32	12
2018-19	25	17	45	34	3	10	28	52	10
2017-18	27	26	48	22	4	11	41	41	7
Average		23	47	27	2	9	40	42	10

Effective practice and follow-up

226. Over the period, 30% of schools were invited to share their work through effective practice case studies.

227. The proportion of primary schools placed in statutory categories after their core inspection remained low. A total of 10 schools required special measures, representing 2% of the schools inspected. The number requiring significant improvement was 10 (2% of inspections).

228. The proportion of secondary schools in follow-up remained similar to the previous cycle. A total of 6 schools required special measures, representing 7% of the schools inspected. The number requiring significant improvement was 7 (9% of inspections).

Trends which Estyn identified in the trajectory of those judgments

Note: changes to the inspection framework in 2017 altered the way in which findings were reported, meaning that direct comparisons across indicators are not always possible. However, the following broad trends were observed.

Primary

229. In the period 2010-2017, outcomes were good or better in around seven-in ten primary schools and provision was good or better in around eight-in-ten schools. By the end of the period 2017-2020, standards were good or better in eight-in-ten. During 2010-2017, 4% of schools were judged as excellent for outcomes and 3% for provision. By the end of 2017-2020, the proportion of schools judged excellent for standards was 9%. Over the period, leadership was good or better in around three quarters of schools. The proportion of primary schools where leadership was excellent increased from 6% to 15%. The quality of teaching during the 2017-2020 period was generally good or

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better in three quarters of primary schools, and excellent in around one-in-ten. In the 2017-2020 period, standards of well-being remained consistent over the years, with nine-in-ten schools scoring good or better. The quality of care, support and guidance remained consistently high across the period 2017-2020, with around nine-in-ten schools judged to be good or better. In 2019-2020, care, support and guidance was excellent in 20% of schools.

Secondary

230. In the period 2010-2017, outcomes were good or better in around six-in ten secondary schools and provision was good or better in around seven-in-ten schools. By the end of the period 2017-2020, standards were good or better in half of schools. During 2010-2017, 12% of schools were judged as excellent for outcomes and 10% for provision. By the end of 2017-2020, no schools scored excellent for standards. Leadership was good or better in around six-in-ten secondary schools in 2010-2017, and around half of schools in 2017-2020. The quality of teaching during the 2017-2020 period was generally good or better in half of secondary schools. Standards of well-being were good or better in around six-in-ten schools during 2017-2020. The quality of care, support and guidance was good or better in seven-in-ten schools. By the end of the cycle, 28% of schools were judged as excellent for care, support and guidance.

Maintained Special Schools

231. Over the ten years preceding the pandemic, maintained special schools in Wales demonstrated consistently high performance. During the 2010-2017 inspection cycle, nearly all schools in this sector were judged to be good or better, with a notable number achieving excellent outcomes. Estyn's subsequent annual reports in 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2019-2020 reaffirmed this positive picture. Maintained special schools continued to perform strongly, with minimal variability and sustained excellence in key areas such as leadership, teaching quality, and pupil outcomes. A clear trend throughout the period was the enduring stability and high standards within

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the sector. Estyn highlighted that these schools not only maintained high performance over time but also played a crucial role in sharing expertise across the system.

Pupil Referral Units (PRUs)

232. The performance of PRUs improved gradually over the course of the ten years preceding the pandemic. In the inspection period from 2010-2016, many PRUs were rated as adequate or needing improvement. However, by 2018-2019, we did begin to identify emerging excellent practice within the sectors – with 2 out of the 4 PRUs having excellent practice.

233. The general trajectory of this sector was one of improvement. While initially an area of concern, PRUs steadily enhanced the quality of their provision, with noticeable progress in learner support, curriculum breadth and flexibility, and pastoral care. Estyn recognised that these improvements stemmed from more tailored approaches to individual pupil needs and a commitment to inclusive education practices.

Independent Mainstream Schools

234. Independent mainstream schools presented a mixed picture. Throughout the ten-year period, many schools within the sector consistently achieved good or excellent inspection judgements. However, a few others exhibited a lack of consistency, with issues relating to leadership effectiveness, teaching quality, and curriculum planning. This inconsistency meant that the sector, as a whole, did not show a clear trend of improvement or decline.

235. Although certain providers demonstrated high standards, Estyn's findings frequently highlighted the need for stronger self-evaluation and better alignment between school practices and the needs of pupils. The variability in outcomes across the sector reflected differing levels of investment in staff development and school governance.

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Independent Special Schools

236. Independent special schools also saw significant change over the decade. Earlier in the period, the sector was marked by inconsistent performance and concerns about the quality of education. However, by the latter part of the 2010s, there were clear signs of improvement. In 2018-2019, Estyn reported instances of excellence for the first time in many years within this sector. By 2019-2020, further progress was noted in areas such as curriculum tailoring and learner well-being.

237. The overall trend in independent special schools was of improvement. Schools that made substantial efforts to personalise learning experiences and to engage directly with families and pupils tended to perform more effectively. Estyn acknowledged that the most successful providers were those able to deliver a holistic approach that addressed both educational and emotional needs, especially for pupils with highly complex requirements.

Note: Estyn's data sets used in this section are explained at the end of the statement (see para 672).

Attainment

Maintained primary and secondary schools

238. Children in various sectors generally made strong progress, particularly in non-maintained nursery settings and primary schools, where improvements in literacy and numeracy were most notable. However, the outcomes of children and young people in secondary schools and independent schools were more variable. In general, children and young people who attended specialist provision made strong progress, relative to their individual starting points, targets and needs. Overall, young people accessing the range of post-16 provision attained sound outcomes. Many children and young people who were eligible for free school meals, or from low-income households, across nearly all sectors made good progress from their starting points.

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However, as a group, in nearly all cases their attainment was lower than that of their peers.

239. By the end of the five-year period prior to the pandemic, standards were good or better in around eight-in-ten primary schools, around one-in-ten schools had excellent standards. In secondary schools, standards were good or better in around half of secondary schools.

240. In most primary schools, pupils made good progress in the development of their speaking and listening skills. In schools that served areas with high levels of social disadvantage, pupils' speaking skills were often much weaker than those of pupils from more advantaged backgrounds. Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds did not normally have as broad a range of vocabulary to draw upon as their peers, and this has long-term implications for their learning and progress. In around half of secondary schools many pupils make strong progress in developing their understanding, knowledge and skills. In the few best cases, pupils think deeply and critically about subject-specific concepts. At the end of key stage 4, many pupils in these schools perform well in their examinations, reflecting their progress during their time at secondary school.

241. Standards of reading were good in around eight-in-ten primary schools. At an early age, pupils developed an understanding that words convey meaning. They held books correctly and used their knowledge of letter sounds and picture clues to read simple texts. As pupils matured, a majority started to use advanced reading skills and began to apply their reading skills to help them learn in subjects across the curriculum. In around seven-in-ten secondary schools, pupils read a range of texts to enhance their learning suitably. A majority read aloud competently with appropriate expression. They skim and scan texts to gain an overview or search for specific information competently. A minority of pupils develop well their ability to deduce and infer meaning.

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242. While most (around 70%) of pupils gained a good understanding of the features of a range of non-fiction texts, too few developed the ability to write creatively and at length. In around eight-in-ten schools, standards of punctuation, spelling and grammar were generally good. However, even in the best schools, too many pupils made errors with these basic writing skills.

243. In many English medium primary schools, pupils developed a positive attitude towards learning the Welsh language. In most schools, younger pupils used their Welsh speaking skills appropriately, but the progress they made year on year was often limited. In around three-in-ten schools, pupils did not develop their independent use of Welsh to a high enough level and are over-reliant on language prompts provided by their teachers to scaffold their writing and conversations. In a majority of secondary schools, pupils write suitable extended pieces for a variety of audiences and purposes across subjects. A majority of pupils organise their writing into paragraphs systematically and communicate their ideas clearly. A few write with increasing sophistication and produce creative and engaging pieces of writing. However, a minority of pupils, particularly boys, are unable to communicate their ideas coherently.

244. In around seven-in-ten schools, standards in mathematics were good or better. In the Nursery and Reception, pupils begin to acquire a basic understanding of numbers and counting by joining in with songs and rhymes. By the end of Year 2, they use a range of strategies to make simple calculations, work with a range of measures using standard units, and begin to tell the time. By the time they finish primary many pupils apply suitable calculation strategies using the four rules of number to solve problems and continue to develop a variety of wider mathematical skills. In the year prior to the pandemic, we began to see a slight improvement in the ability of pupils to apply their numeracy skills in different areas of the curriculum. Many pupils in secondary schools use their numeracy skills across the curriculum suitably. In general, graph work is completed to a high standard. A majority of pupils have a sound understanding of proportion and when to use specific techniques to answer questions or solve problems. However, in a minority of

schools, pupils do not use their problem-solving skills frequently enough, including in mathematics lessons.

Maintained Special Schools

245. These schools consistently delivered high-quality provision with little variability. Inspection outcomes were generally strong with good or excellent judgements in nearly all. Pupils made strong progress relative to their individual starting points, especially when teaching and support were well-coordinated and individualised.

PRUs

246. Outcomes were improving gradually. Several PRUs were acknowledged for strong progress, with pupils making gains in literacy, numeracy, and emotional regulation when provided with tailored support

Independent Special Schools

247. Notable improvements were observed in the experiences and outcomes for pupils in independent special schools. Some schools were recognised for excellence, which had not been seen in years prior. Schools increasingly tailored the curriculum to pupils' complex needs, focusing on both academic and life skills.

Independent Mainstream Schools

248. Attainment was more variable. Where teaching was effective and support personalised, pupils achieved very well, though inconsistencies existed across providers.

Attendance

249. Prior to the specified period, improving pupil attendance remained a priority for education providers across Wales, recognising its significant impact on learner well-being, engagement and attainment. Inspection evidence indicated that while attendance rates improved steadily across many sectors, persistent challenges remained — particularly for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those in specialist provisions.

250. In general, attendance rates in maintained primary and secondary schools showed sustained improvement over the period. Primary schools achieved steady gains, with the majority of pupils attending regularly. However, notable disparities persisted between groups of learners. Pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) continued to have lower attendance rates, with around 25% of FSM pupils attending less than 90% of the time compared to 9% of their non-FSM peers. Just under half of FSM pupils achieved attendance of 95% or more, compared to 65% of other pupils. attendance of 95% or more, compared to 65% of other pupils. Secondary schools reported a significant reduction in persistent absenteeism, with rates falling from 9% in 2011 to 4% in 2017. The average attendance improved from 91% to 94% over the same period. Attendance for pupils eligible for FSM also improved, rising from 86% (2010-2011) to 90% (2015-2016), though the gap between these pupils and their peers remained a consistent issue. Inspection findings consistently emphasised the importance of early, targeted and sustained intervention to support attendance for disadvantaged learners.

251. In special schools, particularly those catering for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, attendance remained an area of concern. While many pupils attended well, a minority continued to exhibit sporadic attendance, and two maintained special schools were placed in statutory follow-up during this period due to persistent issues, including attendance.

252. Further education colleges and independent specialist colleges generally maintained good or better attendance levels. Inspection outcomes reflected providers' commitment to monitoring attendance and punctuality rigorously. The most effective colleges used attendance data proactively to identify and

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support learners at risk of disengagement. However, a small number of settings did not use this information strategically enough to drive consistent improvements.

253. Attendance in pupil referral units (PRUs) varied considerably. While many pupils responded well to personalised, flexible interventions that improved their attendance, others continued to disengage where provision lacked adaptability and responsiveness to individual needs.

254. Work-based learning providers demonstrated mixed performance in maintaining high levels of attendance. Although many learners benefited from effective personal mentoring and support, too many experienced slow progress in completing their frameworks, often due to irregular attendance and inconsistent target-setting.

255. In the adult learning sector, providers faced challenges linked to financial pressures and reduced access to venues, which particularly affected learners from less affluent communities. Despite these difficulties, most partnerships adapted well, working collaboratively to address participation barriers and align provision to community needs.

256. Independent schools varied, but those with a clear focus on well-being and structured routines saw improvements.

257. Overall, while attendance rates improved across Wales's education and training sectors, the gap between learners living in poverty and their peers persisted. The most successful providers were those that maintained high expectations, intervened early, and worked proactively with families, external agencies and support services to address the underlying causes of absenteeism and disengagement.

Elective home education

258. In the five years leading up to January 2020, Estyn observed several evolving trends relating to the education of children and young people, particularly those who were electively home education (EHE). These observations came primarily through our inspections of Local Government Education Services (LGES), discussions with stakeholders, and analysis of local authority policies and data.

259. Over this period, there was a noticeable and steady increase in the number of children being electively home educated across Wales. Parents cited a range of reasons for choosing EHE, including dissatisfaction with school environments, concerns about bullying, perceived unmet additional learning needs (ALN), and philosophical or lifestyle choices. In some cases, local authorities raised concerns that EHE was being used reactively, for example when school placement or behaviour issues remained unresolved. Estyn identified variability in how local authorities recorded, supported, and monitored children who were educated at home. Some councils had developed proactive systems with designated EHE officers and strong multi-agency working, while others had limited capacity to engage families or assess the suitability of the education being provided. We highlighted that, without statutory powers to see the child or assess education quality, local authority oversight was inconsistent and often limited.

260. Through our inspection and thematic work, we consistently raised concerns about the potential safeguarding risks for children who were removed from school and not well known to other services. We noted a lack of robust national data and called for clearer guidance and stronger expectations on local authorities to support children and families engaged in EHE.

261. Estyn welcomed early moves toward greater consistency in EHE oversight, including the Welsh Government's commitment to strengthen statutory guidance and data collection. We emphasised that EHE should be a positive and informed choice, with appropriate support mechanisms and monitoring

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systems in place to ensure all learners receive a broad and balanced education. The following exhibits apply. Consultation response on Elective Home Education (January 2022) [Exhibit OE/096a – INQ000647954]. Consultation response on Elective Home Education – Statutory guidance for local authorities and a handbook for home educators (August 2019) [Exhibit OE/096b – INQ000647955]. Consultation response on Draft non-statutory guidance for local authorities on elective home education (July 2015) [Exhibit OE/096c – INQ000647956]. HMCI Annual Report 2022-23 – sector report on local government education services (page 120) [Exhibit OE/096d - INQ000648274].

262. Estyn identified variability in how local authorities recorded, supported, and monitored children who were educated at home. Some councils had developed proactive systems with designated EHE officers and strong multi-agency working, while others had limited capacity to engage families or assess the suitability of their home education. Through our inspection and thematic work, we consistently raised concerns about the potential safeguarding risks for children who were removed from school and not well known to other services. We noted a lack of robust national data and called for clearer guidance and stronger expectations on local authorities to support them to monitor children in elective home education.

Children's behaviour and engagement with learning

263. In non-maintained nursery settings and primary schools, pupils mostly behaved well and engaged with their learning positively. In general, behaviour and engagement with learning in secondary schools was good, although a very few pupils demonstrated challenging behaviour.

264. Maintained special schools and PRUs showed strong practice in managing challenging behaviour through nurturing environments, structured routines, and individualised support. Behaviour was a key focus in PRUs. Progress was often linked to strong therapeutic approaches and behaviour management strategies.

265. In independent special schools, progress depended heavily on staff expertise and consistency of approach. Where strong leadership existed, engagement improved notably

266. In post-16 settings, most learners displayed positive attitudes towards their learning. Most felt safe and listened to and knew where to access support if needed.

Provision for children with special educational needs ('SEND')

267. Over the period, provision for children and young people with additional learning needs (ALN) improved across most sectors. Early identification of need and deployment of effective support was a key facet of provision in non-maintained nursery settings and primary schools. In most cases, special schools provided beneficially focused support for pupils with a wide and complex range of individual needs. However, despite the improvements noted in some establishments, the effectiveness of provision in secondary schools, independent schools and post-16 settings was variable overall. This was partly due to the large numbers of staff or inconsistency in the quality of teaching.

268. Maintained special schools excelled in their provision. There was consistently high-quality teaching and bespoke curriculum adaptation.

269. Independent special schools improved significantly, with more personalised learning plans and specialist staff.

270. PRUs integrated multi-agency support and therapeutic input increasingly well to meet pupils' ALN.

Children and young people's social and development

271. Many institutions across most sectors provided useful opportunities for children and young people to develop good social and life skills. In most non-

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maintained nursery settings, pupils quickly developed strong early skills such as turn-taking and sharing. Effective provision across other sectors included purposeful curriculum planning, involvement in competitions and extra-curricular activities, the development of a sense of community and opportunities for children to take on leadership roles. Where inspectors identified provision as less effective, there was a negative impact on pupils' attendance, well-being and view of education.

272. Maintained special schools had a strong track record of nurturing social skills, independence, and personal confidence.

273. PRUs and independent special schools used structured programmes and therapeutic interventions to build resilience and self-esteem.

274. Successful settings incorporated outdoor learning, life skills, and vocational experiences to enrich personal development

Safeguarding

275. Safeguarding was generally effective across most sectors. On the whole, early years setting, schools and post-16 settings had robust and effective safeguarding procedures, although inspectors identified a few schools and providers whose work required improvement. In the independent sector, the quality of safeguarding practices varied, and not all independent schools were compliant with relevant standards over the period.

276. Safeguarding procedures were typically robust across maintained special schools and PRUs, with good inter-agency cooperation.

277. In PRUs, safeguarding was critical due to the vulnerability of pupils. Systems for early identification and intervention were generally well developed.

278. Independent schools varied more, though inspection reports increasingly noted improved safeguarding policies and training.

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Note: Estyn's data sets used in this section are explained at the end of the statement (see para 672).

Learning and education during the pandemic

279. In paragraphs 66 to 152, we identify how our work evolved during the specified period. During the period of time that we did not undertake routine core inspections, we published a range of reports. These are referenced in the paragraphs 81 to 152 and some further key reports are listed below with a brief note about the report's focus. Each report includes details about the evidence on which it is based. The reports give details about any approaches used specifically to gather evidence in addition to using that gathered during regular inspection work. The reports note which schools and other providers were visited or contacted by telephone or video call. Unless otherwise stated, schools were selected for thematic reports based on sampling that takes into account relevant factors such as provider location, main language of teaching and learner demographics.

List of relevant reports:

280. **Annual Report 2019–2020**

    This report includes a thematic section focusing on education and training sectors' response to the COVID-19 pandemic between March and August 2020 [Exhibit OE/097 – INQ000618415]. Note, this is a flagship report and appears throughout the statement.

281. **Annual Report 2020–2021**

    This report reviews how education and training providers responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic during the 2020–2021 academic year. It includes a timeline of COVID-19-related events and their impact on the education sector [Exhibit OE/098 - INQ000618416]. Note, this is a flagship report and appears throughout the statement.

282. **Summary of Findings from Our National Thematic Reviews (2020–2021)**

This compendium brings together the main findings and recommendations from our thematic reports published in 2020 and early 2021, many of which address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic [Exhibit OE/099 - INQ000618287].

283. **How Schools and Colleges Used the RRRS and Catch-up Grants for Post-16 Learners**

This report focuses on the support for post-16 learners since September 2020 through the 'Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards: Accelerating Learning Programme' grant in schools and the catch-up grant in further education colleges [Exhibit OE/083 – INQ000618401].

284. **Developments in remote and blended learning practice**

This report provides an overview of the work of further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community providers during the COVID-19 pandemic [Exhibit OE/100 – INQ000618289].

285. **Annual Report 2021–2022: Recovery from COVID-19**

This report discusses the ongoing effects of the pandemic across all education sectors during the 2021–2022 academic year. It highlights challenges such as disruptions to teaching, declines in learners' skills, and increased demand for well-being support [Exhibit OE/101 – INQ000618290].

286. **Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 - Estyn**

This report provides an overview of how local authorities and regional consortia supported schools and pupil referral units during the period following the initial lockdown, focusing on learning promotion and support for vulnerable pupils [Exhibit OE/102 – INQ000066534

287. **Insights into How Independent Schools and Specialist Colleges Have Responded During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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This report shares examples of practices adopted by independent schools and specialist colleges to meet the needs of their pupils during the pandemic [Exhibit OE/027 – INQ000618344].

288. **Support for Learners' Mental Health and Emotional Well-being in the Post-16 Sectors**

This report examines how further education colleges, work-based learning providers, and adult learning partnerships supported learners' mental health and emotional well-being during the pandemic [Exhibit OE/081 – INQ000618399].

289. **Curriculum for Wales – Support for Schools**

This thematic report examines how regional consortia and local authorities supported schools in preparing for the Curriculum for Wales, considering the challenges posed by the pandemic [Exhibit OE/089 – INQ000618407].

290. **Mitigating the Impacts of Poverty on Educational Attainment**

This report discusses how the pandemic widened the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers, highlighting factors such as the digital divide and varied home learning environments [Exhibit OE/103 - INQ000618293].

291. **School Governors – Acting as Critical Friends and the Impact of Governor Training**

This report explores the role of school governors, noting that following the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, governors resumed their visits, which had been limited during the pandemic [Exhibit OE/104 – INQ000618294].

Attendance

292. In order to consider attendance rates during this time period, Estyn have compared attendance rates to when they were last published prior to the pandemic in 2018/2019. The Welsh Government released national data for

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2022-2023 on absenteeism in secondary schools [Exhibit OE/124 – INQ000618330]. The main findings from this analysis were as follows in paragraphs 293 to 299.

293. The percentage of half-day sessions missed by secondary school-aged pupils had doubled to 12.5% between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023. This means, on average, that a pupil misses around one day a fortnight.

294. Secondary school-aged pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) missed 20.6% of half-day sessions in 2022-2023, while secondary school-aged pupils who are not eligible for free school meals missed 10.2% of half-day sessions. Both of these figures were approximately double the rates of absences during 2018-2019.

295. The attendance of all ethnic groups deteriorated between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023. The decreases in attendance of most ethnic groups were generally of a similar level to those seen across the UK.

296. Fifteen point five per cent of half-day sessions were missed by Year 11 pupils, compared with 9.4% of half-day sessions missed by Year 7 pupils, in 2022-2023.

297. The percentage of secondary school-aged pupils that were persistently absent has tripled to 16.3% between 2018-2019 and 2022-2023.

298. Thirty-five point six per cent of secondary school-aged pupils eligible for free school meals were persistently absent in 2022-2023, compared with 11.2% of secondary school-aged pupils ineligible for FSM.

299. Twenty-two point four per cent of Year 11 pupils were persistently absent, compared with 10.2% of Year 7 pupils, in 2022-2023.

300. In our engagement with schools and through data analysis, Estyn identified a notable concern in the variation in attendance between schools. Attendance

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rates across secondary schools ranged from 75% to 95% in 2022-2023. Pre-pandemic attendance rates range from 88.6% to 97.1%. In addition, the difference in attendance between pupils eligible for free school meals and those who are not eligible varies substantially across schools. When considering the percentage of pupils who are persistently absent from school, this varies from 2.7% to 42.6% of pupils in schools across Wales.

301. In January 2024, we published a report that identified the challenges and barriers schools were facing in improving pupils' attendance – Improving attendance in secondary schools [Exhibit OE/108 – INQ000618299]. The key messages from this report are summarised below. We also identified the approaches successful schools had taken. We recontacted the schools involved to update this report and published an update in May 2025.

302. Current financial challenges, along with the decrease in pupils' attendance, had reduced the capacity of support staff to respond to concerns. In addition, resources to support schools to improve attendance were not always prioritised effectively.

303. There were a number of barriers to improving pupils' attendance, which were increasingly difficult for schools to address. These included a decline in parental perception about the importance of good attendance, the capacity of schools to respond given the increased number of targeted pupils, and the timing of school terms and holidays.

304. A particular challenge was the fact that pupils are only eligible for free transport if they live beyond a three-mile radius. School leaders had identified, that during months where there is increased rainfall and darker mornings and evenings, pupils who usually walk to school, especially those who are eligible for free school meals, generally did not attend as often. This issue seemed to have worsened since the pandemic, possibly linked to the change in parental perceptions and an increase in the cost of living.

305. The school year presented additional challenges to improving pupils' attendance. School leaders noted that when terms were long, for example the autumn term lasting until late in December, pupils' attendance declined in the last few weeks of term.

306. Whilst we recognised a number of strengths in schools' approaches towards improving attendance in this report, we noted that overall, it had not had enough impact across Wales in improving pupils' attendance. From the point we resumed inspection after the pandemic, we provided just over half of secondary schools with a recommendation to improve attendance. A summary of our findings around schools approaches to improving attendance are below.

307. Most schools and many local authorities understood the importance of improving pupils' attendance. However, the work to improve attendance had not had enough impact over the past two years.

308. Where schools were beginning to bring about improvements in attendance, leaders had high expectations, monitored and analysed attendance rates rigorously and had effective processes to evaluate the impact of their work.

309. Where schools were having difficulty improving attendance, leaders tended to believe that they were doing all they could, despite not having sufficient impact, and did not use the broad range of information available to them to track, monitor or intervene with poor attendance.

310. Many schools have improved their approaches to gathering pupils' views on how they can work to improve attendance. However, these views are mainly gathered from pupils who are attending school more regularly so do not give leaders enough information about the barriers to those pupils who do not attend school well enough.

311. Overall, local authority support for improving attendance has had limited impact. School improvement officers did not challenge or support school

leaders well enough to improve this aspect of their work and, when pupils were referred to local authority services, officers did not build well enough on the work already carried out by schools. In the most effective cases, local authorities and schools worked closely together to plan and target support.

312. When carrying out our thematic report focusing on attendance in secondary schools, we identified that most schools we engaged with recognised the importance of improving attendance and many had it as a whole-school priority. However, only a very few had improved attendance so that rates had returned to close to pre-pandemic levels. A minority of schools had a strong focus on improving attendance and were prioritising resources carefully with the aim of bringing about improvements. However, the impact of schools' strategies to improve attendance was too variable.

313. It was clear that there was not one specific approach that reliably improved attendance and interventions that worked for some pupils did not work for others. However, it is also clear that, in the most effective schools, leaders at all levels had a relentless focus on improving attendance and set high expectations in relation to rates of attendance.

Longer-term impact upon school attendance

314. Since the pandemic, attendance rates have not recovered to pre-COVID levels. Therefore, it is clear that the pandemic has had a longer term impact on pupils' attendance. Our inspection evidence tells us that this is for a number of reasons, many of which are outlined in the response around the challenges and barriers schools face to improving attendance. In particular, some vulnerable groups found it difficult to return to school regularly and schools reported that parental attitudes around attendance had changed during and following the pandemic.

315. The Welsh Government have released detailed data for the year 2023-2024 on absenteeism in secondary schools. The main findings were:

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316. Between the academic years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the rate of attendance for secondary schools only improved by 0.5 percentage points. The rate remains 5.7 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels. This means that secondary school pupils are on average missing nearly 11 days of education more per year than they were before the pandemic.

317. At that rate of improvement, it would take over ten years for attendance rates to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

318. The attendance of Year 11 was the lowest of all school years. In 2023-2024, Year 11 pupils were present for 85.3% of sessions, up slightly from 84.5% the previous academic year. Year 11 pupils are therefore missing nearly one day out of every six of their schooling.

319. During the pandemic, the gap between the attendance of secondary aged pupils eligible for free school meals and their counterparts grew from 5.2 percentage points to 10.4 percentage points. This was a particular concern. Despite the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals increasing slightly between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the gap remained at 10.4% and these pupils were still, on average losing one day a week of their education.

320. The variation in attendance between schools is a notable concern. The difference between the attendance of the school with the highest rate in Wales and that of the school with the lowest rate is still 19.5 percentage points. This is more than double the range seen in 2018-2019 of 8.5 percentage points.

321. In response to the concerns regarding pupils' attendance, the Welsh Government have been publishing regular fortnightly updates on attendance [Exhibit OE/124 – INQ000618330]. While this data has not been verified, over the last two years, it has been very close to the validated data that was later published. For the academic year 2024-2025, up to the 14 March 2025, secondary attendance is finally showing some improvement. When

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compared to the same period of the 2023-2024 academic year, the data shows that:

322. Overall attendance for secondary schools has increased by 1.2 percentage points to 89.2%, although the rate continues to be considerably lower than pre-pandemic levels.

323. There has been a notable decrease in the rate of persistent absence at the 10% threshold, that is those pupils who are absent for at least 10% of sessions.

324. The attendance of secondary-aged pupils who are eligible for free school meals has increased from 80.2% to 81.5% although, again, they are substantially below pre pandemic levels, and these pupils are still missing too much of their education.

Home education

325. During the pandemic and on the return to school, Estyn engaged with school leaders and local authorities and discussed those children that were being withdrawn from school in favor of home education. Local authorities identified a notable increase during the early return to school and local authorities reported some success in supporting small numbers of learners back into school. However, the overall proportion of children being electively home educated has continued to rise year on year since the pandemic, accelerating a long term trend.

326. Parents voluntarily notify their local authority that they are home educating their children (unless they have withdrawn their child from school). This means the data might not include all electively home educated children.

327. During secondary school inspections we look at unique pupils numbers for Year 9, Year 10 and Year 11 and discuss with school leaders any individual pupils who cannot be matched to another education provider. This

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information is recorded in the inspection evidence. Comparing earlier figures (2018–2019 to 2020–2021) with more recent data (2021–2022 to 2023–2024), there is a upward trend in unmatched pupil destinations for both Year 9 to 10 and Year 10 to 11 transitions.

328. Since the end of the Specified Period, the number of children who are electively home educated (EHE) has remained significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. While some children who were removed from school during the pandemic have since returned to formal education, a considerable proportion have not.

329. The available data and feedback from local authorities suggest that many families who opted for home education during the pandemic made a sustained choice to continue in that mode of learning. Although some parents chose EHE as a temporary solution due to health or anxiety concerns, not all transitioned their children back to school once restrictions eased. Local authorities have reported mixed success in encouraging re-engagement, with some children returning as part of managed reintegration plans, while others remain outside the school system entirely. Local authorities reported an increase in the number of parents who opted to home educate their children since the pandemic. The figures for elective home education (EHE) learners across Wales more than doubled from 2,626 in 2018-2019 to 5,330 in 2022-2023 (Pupils educated other than at school: September 2023 to August 2024, Welsh Government) [Exhibit OE/105 – INQ000618295]. This increase in EHE learners made it more challenging for local authorities to meet their statutory requirement to ensure that the education parents provide is 'efficient full-time education suitable to the child's age, ability and aptitude, and to any special educational need' (Education Act 1996). In addition, local authorities must also carry out additional learning needs (ALN) assessments, where requested, and provide appropriate support for electively home educated learners with ALN where necessary. The Welsh Government provided £1.7 million of funding in 2022-2023 to help local authorities fulfil these duties, consisting of £50,000 for

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each authority and a further £160 per EHE learner (Senedd Cymru, 2022) [Exhibit OE/106 – INQ000618296].

330. During 2022-2023 we considered how a sample of local authorities were supporting parents and young people who had elected for home education. We included our findings in our annual report, in the section on local government education services [Exhibit OE/107 – INQ000618298].

331. The pandemic appears to have had a lasting impact on EHE figures and patterns. It accelerated a trend of increasing numbers, which had already been observed in the years preceding 2020. Importantly, the pandemic normalised home-based learning for many families and demonstrated that alternatives to traditional schooling could be viable under certain circumstances. In some cases, families have continued home education because they perceive it to offer greater flexibility, a safer environment, or better alignment with their child's needs.

332. Welsh Government figures from 2023-2024 show that the number of learners being home educated has continued to increase to 6,156 (Welsh Government, 2024). This figure suggests that the rate of increase in EHE learners may have begun to reduce, although it is too soon to be certain of this. It is not clear to what extent the increase in EHE learners can be attributed to the pandemic since the figure has been rising annually for the last 15 years at least. In 2009-2010 the proportion of EHE learners was 1.6 per 1,000. In 2023-2024, the figure was 13 per 1,000. This increase is reported as a concern in Estyn's 2023-24 Annual Report [Exhibit OE/109 – INQ000618300]. Due to the way that data is recorded, we are unable to track what proportion of learners who became EHE during the pandemic returned to school after the pandemic, but the overall figures above suggest that most did not.

Remote learning

333. Prior to the specified period, remote education was not a widespread or routine feature of provision in education settings across Wales. While there had been a longstanding emphasis on developing pupils' ICT and digital skills, particularly following the introduction of the Digital Competence Framework (DCF) in 2016, this was largely aimed at enhancing learning within the classroom environment rather than delivering lessons remotely. The E-sgol project had been launched in Ceredigion in 2018, with the aim of expanding opportunities for post-14 and post-16 learners to study courses that would not otherwise be available to them and increase the number of learners studying subjects which normally attract lower numbers of students. This was based on remote learning but had limited reach at the time of the pandemic starting.

334. Most schools had made varying degrees of progress in embedding digital tools to support classroom learning, with some schools providing opportunities for pupils to use digital technologies for research, presentations, and creative projects. In a few more digitally advanced schools, leaders had established a clear vision for ICT, invested in staff training, and integrated digital skills across the curriculum to foster independent learning and global collaboration. However, these efforts were typically supplementary to face-to-face teaching and not structured as remote education provision.

335. Inspection findings highlighted that, despite the technological advancements available, many schools did not make full use of ICT to deliver education beyond the school site. The use of digital platforms for homework, revision resources, or communication with learners and parents existed in some cases, but structured, curriculum-led remote learning was rare and generally underdeveloped. Although there had been national investment in Hwb Cymru (the National Digital Platform) and many schools were set up on Google Classroom, these tools were not being routinely used. Local authority

and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 [Exhibit OE/077 – INQ000618395].

336. Overall, while ICT provision and digital literacy were emerging priorities in the years preceding the pandemic, particularly as part of preparations for the new curriculum, Wales' education system had not yet established a consistent infrastructure or pedagogical model for remote education on a meaningful scale prior to 2020.

337. Our annual report 2019-2020 (Estyn Annual Report 2019-2020 [Exhibit OE/097 – INQ000618415]) acknowledges that a minority of learners in Wales were 'disadvantaged due to a lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity. The report refers to the variation in staff digital skills across Wales and the need for further professional learning for most teachers in using digital and blended learning methods.

338. The report also highlights headteachers' perception of a 'digital divide' across Wales between those parents who were competent users of technology and could support their children at home and those who did not have the digital skills necessary to assist. This is despite schools working with local authorities to provide the necessary equipment and broadband.

339. Our thematic on Community schools published in 2020 'Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life' refers to the work of schools to distribute IT equipment where needed. The report also refers to examples of schools that strove to address the digital divide through the provision of appropriate training for families [Exhibit OE/072 – INQ000618389].

340. In Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 we highlight the digital divide. 'Although many teachers from primary schools and PRUs and a majority of those from special schools said that schools were helping pupils to overcome barriers to learning at home, only around half of the secondary school teachers and a

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minority of the teachers from all-age schools who responded to our survey agreed with this.' [Exhibit OE/077 – INQ000618395].

Access to technology or to broadband

341. From March 2020 onwards, Estyn identified digital access as one of the most significant barriers to effective remote learning. Our conversations with schools and local authorities revealed that a substantial number of learners lacked access to devices or stable internet connections. This was especially acute in areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage.

342. Access to technology and broadband after 18 March 2020:
Following the announcement of school closures, schools quickly assessed the digital readiness of their pupils. Many reported that a significant proportion of learners—particularly those eligible for free school meals or from low-income households—had no suitable device at home. In some cases, households had only one device shared among several children or relied solely on mobile phones. Broadband access was also limited for some families, particularly those in rural areas or on pay-as-you-go data plans.

343. Local authority and school distribution of IT equipment during the pandemic:
To address this urgent need, schools and local authorities acted swiftly. Throughout the Specified Period, they organised the distribution of thousands of devices directly to pupils' homes. This included repurposed school laptops and tablets, as well as new devices funded through Welsh Government's "Stay Safe. Stay Learning" initiative. Some local authorities also arranged for MiFi units or data top-ups to support families without reliable internet access.

344. Schools prioritised learners identified as vulnerable, including those with additional learning needs or at key educational stages. Where digital solutions were not immediately feasible, schools provided printed learning packs, regular phone check-ins, and, in some cases, doorstep support to ensure continuity of learning.

345. Estyn observed that, while these efforts significantly improved digital access over time, challenges remained. Device shortages, delivery delays, and varying levels of digital literacy within families meant that engagement remained inconsistent for some learners. Nonetheless, the proactive and compassionate response from schools and councils helped reduce the digital divide and kept many learners connected to education during a highly disrupted period.

346. We concluded that one of the pandemic's lasting legacies is the need to embed digital inclusion into long-term education planning, ensuring that no child is left behind in future scenarios where remote or blended learning may again become necessary.

347. In the primary and secondary sectors, rates of pupil engagement with online learning varied considerably. One of the biggest obstacles for pupils was a shortage of suitable ICT equipment, especially where pupils had to share hardware with siblings and parents. It soon became clear that, although pupils could usually access tasks using smartphones, using them to complete work was rarely appropriate. They were particularly unsuitable when pupils were expected to provide written responses of any length or to use specific software. Schools worked with their local authorities to address shortages by providing equipment and internet access to those families most in need. Despite this, headteachers spoke of a 'digital divide' between those parents who were competent users of technology and could support their children at home, and those who did not have the digital skills necessary to use technology provided and whose children, therefore, did not engage well with learning. To overcome this, one school set up a technical helpdesk at the start of lockdown to help parents with issues. Parents welcomed this support and it enabled many pupils to access online learning instead of having to rely on paper-based packs. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in its 'Remote Learning: Rapid Evidence Assessment' (2020a) identified access to technology as key to the success of remote learning, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. Furthermore, the report recognised that

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ensuring that teachers and pupils have the support and guidance to use specific platforms is essential, particularly if new forms of technology are being implemented. HMCI Annual Report 2019-20 [Exhibit OE/097 – INQ000618415].

348. In its COVID-19 survey, Welsh Government (2020) found that 93% of parents with a child at primary school and 85% of parents with a child at secondary school were content that the school was finding ways to support children with their learning.

349. The need for schools to act quickly to address the need for pupils to learn at home became more urgent as the summer term in 2020 progressed. It became clear in September 2020 that schools were going to be affected by positive COVID-19 cases and that pupils would be required to self-isolate at home for periods of time. In our survey, many governors said that their schools and PRUs had sound plans in place to ensure that teaching could continue if pupils were away from school because of another lockdown or the need to isolate. A majority of headteachers agreed, saying that local authorities had provided effective guidance to support schools and PRUs to develop flexible plans to deal with further outbreaks of COVID-19 infection. In practice, pupils' experiences as a result of these outbreaks varied widely across Wales due to the varied impact of the pandemic in different areas and also the different policies and practices adopted by local authorities in relation to close contacts and the different ways that schools organised groups and cohorts of pupils. This resulted in further inequity in the learning experiences between pupils who have received their autumn term education in school and those who have been taught at a distance, in some cases for a significant proportion of the term. Where this happens, the barriers to learning at home identified in the summer term, including access to digital technology and parental support, remain. Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 (January 2021) [Exhibit OE/077 – INQ000618395].

350. When we surveyed school leaders in October 2020, many headteachers felt that local authorities had been proactive in providing information technology resources and internet connectivity for those pupils without access to these at home. Teachers and governors were less positive about this support. Around half of governors said that local authorities had provided effective support in this area. Although many teachers from primary schools and PRUs and a majority of those from special schools said that schools were helping pupils to overcome barriers to learning at home, only around half of the secondary school teachers and a minority of the teachers from all-age schools who responded to our survey agreed with this. Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 (published January 2021) [Exhibit OE/077 – INQ000618395].

351. In November 2020, the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020) spoke to pupils from Years 9 to 13 to identify any differences in their learning experiences between the summer and autumn terms, in particular the period where all pupils in these year groups were working at home because of the national firebreak. The pupils involved in this work said that there had been improvements in their experiences of distance learning. Their days were structured in a similar way to a school timetable, and teachers had checked that all pupils had access to digital devices and were provided with feedback on their work online in a timely manner. In some schools, pupils had been asked to complete surveys about their learning experiences and, as a result, teachers had made adjustments to suit pupils. For example, some schools provided recordings of lessons that pupils could use at a time that suited them. The issues raised by pupils included the amount of work provided, which meant that they were working long hours, and the inconsistency of provision between different subject areas. They also shared concerns about the lack of support from parents who do not have the skills to support them and the lack of digital skills of some teachers. Many said that they missed interacting with teachers and other pupils and that, although the distance learning offer had improved, it still does not compare well with learning at school. The importance of remote peer interaction was one of the findings from the EEF's Rapid Evidence Assessment (2020). Across the studies that

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EEF researchers reviewed, they found a range of strategies to support peer interaction, including peer marking and feedback, sharing models of good work, and opportunities for pupils to participate in live discussions of content. The evidence from pupils and schools indicates that this is an area of distance learning that needs development.

Professional learning

352. Regional consortia and local authorities initially working with Welsh Government to develop guidance on blended learning approaches. During the summer term, they adapted their range of professional learning opportunities to address the additional need caused by the pandemic. Much of their work in the autumn term focused on supporting schools to understand and develop approaches to distance and blended learning, building on the work they started in the initial lockdown. As schools identified pupils' needs on their return to full-time schooling, officers in local authorities and regional consortia responded by tailoring their learning offer to support teachers to address pupils' specific needs.

353. Officers from local authorities and regional consortia used the initial lockdown period to engage with national and international research, to identify effective practice to share with schools. In Bridgend, school improvement partners collated evidence about learning from the Education Endowment Foundation (2020) whose findings include that the quality of teaching is more important than how it is delivered. This helped schools in the local authority to think about their approaches to distance and blended learning. Officers from local authorities and regional consortia started to put plans in place to evaluate the impact of their support for schools on pupils' learning.

354. Most consortia and local authorities found that, as professional learning moved online, more practitioners have taken up learning opportunities as they no longer involve full days out of school and materials can be accessed at any time. A majority of the support staff who responded to our survey said

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that they had received effective professional learning to support them to make a successful return to school. Despite the opportunities available for professional learning, our survey also found that 22% of teachers who responded do not feel that they have had sufficient opportunities to support their understanding of distance and blended learning.

355. In the spring and summer terms 2020, teachers had to respond quickly to the need to provide distance learning materials for pupils. This provision improved though the summer term and as the number of pupils needing to learn away from the classroom has increased in the autumn, the need to further improve and embed distance and blended learning provision remains a priority. The pandemic reinforced issues that local authorities and consortia had already been working with schools to address. These include the impact of poverty on families and in particular on children's learning. Pupils across Wales have experienced the pandemic in very different ways as a result of their local and home circumstances. The initial lockdown period and the necessity for pupils to work at home for periods of time in the autumn term have highlighted the need for pupils to be able to work independently successfully and for schools to focus on supporting pupils to improve learning resilience. Local authorities' and consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 [Exhibit OE/077 – INQ000618395].

356. Colleges are still benefiting from the investment in equipment and the resources that were developed during the pandemic with courses making use of the asynchronous materials that are now readily available. These digital resources are being used to support and enhance classroom delivery, to offer extension activities and homework, and to enable a flipped approach to learning whereby learners can access resources prior to lessons to prepare them for class-based activities and discussions. Likewise, lessons are sometimes recorded so that learners can revisit them or access them at a later date. Digital and online learning in further education colleges – autumn 2022 insights [Exhibit OE/110 – INQ000618301].

Guidance and advice that Estyn developed and published

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357. We focus here on the guidance and advice that Estyn developed and published during this period, rather than the range of guidance published by Welsh Government. Estyn responded to the challenges of the pandemic by developing a flexible strategy that included five stages of response: resolve, resilience, re-imagining, return and reform.

358. The 'resolve' stage focused on addressing the immediate health threat.

359. During the 'resilience' stage, the main priority was supporting the Welsh Government's 'Continuity of learning' programme across education and training in Wales. This programme of work consisted of four 'underlying principles' (UPs) and 12 'deliverables' (Ds). Estyn was asked to lead on two strands: UP2 (inclusion) and D7 (support for school leaders on business continuity).

360. Throughout the pandemic, Estyn published a wide range of guidance and resources to support schools in developing and delivering remote learning.

361. Advice for school and PRU leaders and governors on how to continue with school and PRU business during the COVID-19 pandemic. was published in April 2020 and provided guidance on governance, communication and leadership continuity during lockdown [Exhibit OE/019 – INQ000618336].

362. Key principles to support the continuation of school and PRU business. This has been made available to the Inquiry alongside this statement, also published in April 2020, focused on advising schools in planning continuity of learning and communication with stakeholders [Exhibit OE/020 – INQ000618337].

363. Developing Integrated Approaches to Support Blended Learning for the Phased Opening of Schools (published June 2020 in collaboration with regional consortia) – provided strategic guidance for schools in Wales on implementing blended learning during the phased reopening following the

first pandemic lockdown [Exhibit OE/067 – INQ000618384]. This document outlined principles for blending in-school and remote learning and emphasised the importance of professional judgment in planning.

364. Aligned with the ethos of Curriculum for Wales. 'Models of Blended Learning' was published alongside the previous document. Learning [Exhibit OE/068 – INQ000618385].

365. Sector-specific reports and blogs showcasing good practice were also published in June 2020 in Supporting well-being and learning during COVID-19 [Exhibit OE/030 – INQ000618347].

366. Published in July 2020, Cameos and ideas for continuity of school business during COVID-19 highlighted examples of effective practice in managing teaching and pupil well-being remotely [Exhibit OE/025 – INQ000618342].

367. Having contributed to the 'Continuity of learning' programme, the 're-imagining' stage of Estyn's work involved re-establishing contact with individual providers and services through a 'keeping in touch' strategy. This strategy prioritised providers causing concern and needing the most support. It allowed Estyn to gather intelligence that could be fed back to the Welsh Government. Towards the end of the summer term, the Welsh Government asked Estyn to facilitate a group of headteachers and the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW) members in identifying and publishing different models of full school opening in a document entitled Arrangements for September 2020: Planned approaches across maintained schools and PRUs [Exhibit OE/031 – INQ000618348]. The focus was to share practical information and strategies to help schools/PRUs minimise social contact between groups of pupils and staff. The document also provided further guidance in relation to supporting effective remote learning.

368. There was a shift in focus during the autumn term of 2020 towards the 'return' phase of Estyn's strategy. Estyn gathered information about the support local authorities and regional consortia had provided for their

schools/PRUs and their vulnerable learners during the pandemic. Inspectors contacted schools/PRUs by phone and surveyed the views of stakeholders to inform this work. The evidence was published in January 2021 in a thematic report, Local authorities' and consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 [Exhibit OE/077 – INQ000618395]. The report included cameos from local authorities and regional consortia to exemplify points and give a flavour of the work that had taken place across Wales.

369. During the 2020-2021 academic year, Estyn's support for education reform (stage 5 of our strategic plan) included:
    • focusing on curriculum reform in engagement calls and visits to schools/PRUs
    • sharing the findings from engagement calls and visits through sector reports, including links to good practice and areas for improvement for providers to consider. For example:

370. Summary of engagement calls and visits to schools and PRUs:

    • Summary of engagement calls and visits to schools and PRUs - autumn 2021 [Exhibit OE/050 – INQ000618367]
    • Engagement Work – Primary Sector Update Autumn 2020 [Exhibit OE/032 – INQ000618349]
    • Engagement Work – Primary Sector Update Spring 2021 *[Exhibit OE/038 – INQ000618355]*
    • Engagement work - further education and adult learning in the community update – autumn 2021 [Exhibit OE/052 – INQ000618369]

371. During the pandemic, Estyn introduced a programme of remote and face-to-face engagement with all schools. This enabled inspectors to gather evidence of the impact of the pandemic on pupils and staff. As a result we published a series of reports that are listed in paragraphs 81 to 152. For example, the report 'Summary of engagement calls and visits to schools and PRUs Autumn 2021' [Exhibit OE/050 – INQ000618367], summarises the

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findings from our engagement with schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) during the autumn term 2021. It identifies key messages that schools and PRUs needed to consider as they continued with their work to support recovery and reform. During the autumn term 2021, we made engagement visits and phone calls to 79 primary schools, 20 secondary schools, 2 all-age schools, 2 maintained special schools and 2 PRUs. We made visits to a further 38 primary schools, 57 secondary schools, 6 special schools and 1 PRU through our thematic work and visited 28 schools and PRUs in follow-up. The report is based on visits to classrooms and discussions with school leaders, teachers, and pupils, either remotely or in person. Proportions relate to the sample of schools that we contacted during this period.

372. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Estyn did not directly observe online teaching across most education sectors. This decision was informed by a conscious shift in Estyn's role from evaluation to support. The aim was to help schools, PRUs and local authorities respond to an unprecedented and fast-evolving situation, focusing on maintaining continuity of learning and supporting well-being. Rather than carrying out inspections or assessments of online lessons, Estyn gathered evidence through engagement calls, surveys, and self-evaluation processes conducted by providers themselves. Leaders in special schools and PRUs monitored remote learning using internal processes, such as tracking engagement through online platforms, reviewing uploaded work, and discussing the quality of provision in staff meetings. Estyn used these accounts to develop national-level insights into the effectiveness of remote and blended learning.

373. The rationale for not directly evaluating online teaching stemmed from several concerns. Foremost among these were safeguarding and data protection issues. Inspectors joining live online lessons would have introduced risks related to learners' privacy, especially where pupils were in vulnerable circumstances. Some pupils lacked a private or safe environment at home, making participation in live sessions difficult or inappropriate. In some cases, pupils experienced selective mutism or social anxiety that made video-based learning challenging. There were also disparities in digital

access and skills among families, meaning that online learning was not a consistent experience for all. Evaluating such provision risked unfairly misrepresenting quality and equity. In light of these complexities, Estyn concentrated on gathering and sharing effective practice and offering support to leaders through thematic reports and reflective tools.

374. To report on the quality of online teaching during the pandemic, Estyn relied on indirect evidence. This included school and PRU leaders' feedback, analysis of engagement data, and examples of adaptations made to improve provision. Teachers used online platforms such as Google Classroom to deliver lessons, while some providers developed creative solutions like distributing paper packs to pupils with limited digital access. Estyn produced documents that highlighted effective practices, such as modifying the structure of online sessions to mirror classroom routines or using asynchronous content to reduce screen time. Guidance was also issued to help practitioners reflect on the effectiveness of their remote learning approaches. Tools such as the "Evaluating blended learning" document included prompts for leaders, staff, parents, and learners to assess the quality of teaching, learner engagement, well-being, and safeguarding within the context of blended and remote provision.

375. Both Estyn and the Welsh Government issued guidance to support schools in evaluating online teaching. This included detailed models of blended learning—such as the Flipped Classroom and Station Rotation approaches—which helped providers align their remote delivery with the curriculum. Strategic planning questions were provided to help schools choose models that best suited their learners' needs. These documents stressed the importance of coherent curriculum delivery, regular feedback, and safe use of digital technology. Additionally, safeguarding protocols were developed to support safe online learning. These included expectations for staff training, safe platform use, protocols for live streaming, and enhanced online safety messaging for learners and families. Concerns around privacy were particularly acute in households where learners did not have safe or confidential spaces for online engagement, which influenced the decision not

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to observe online lessons. Live-streaming and video conferencing – safeguarding principles and practice for education-en [Exhibit OE/52a - INQ000541502

376. Despite the cautious approach taken for most sectors, Estyn did evaluate online teaching in the Post-16 and Welsh for Adults sectors. The different decision in this context reflected both practical and policy-related factors. Adult learners do not face the same safeguarding constraints as children, making direct observation less problematic. Furthermore, many adult learning and post-16 providers had already adopted online and blended learning approaches before the pandemic, creating a more stable framework for evaluation. Estyn's review of these sectors was consistent with the national strategic priority to support Welsh language acquisition and ensure that adult learners and post-16 students continued to progress. The sectors' greater familiarity with digital learning platforms and reduced safeguarding risks made it more appropriate for Estyn to carry out evaluative work in this context.

Findings and learning about how effective the provision of remote education to children was during the Specified Period

The challenges of delivering remote education.

377. Our evidence shows that pupils were disadvantaged when there was a lack of access to suitable devices or reliable internet connectivity, despite the efforts of schools and local authorities to provide equipment. While some pupils adapted well, others and particularly younger pupils and vulnerable groups, struggled to engage with remote lessons.

378. Teachers' and pupils' confidence in using digital platforms varied widely. Schools that had invested in professional development on digital tools before the pandemic were better prepared. However, as time progressed, many teachers and pupils became more confident and proficient.

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379. Monitoring pupils' progress remotely was difficult, as teachers had limited ways to assess pupils' understanding and provide timely feedback.

380. Support from parents was inconsistent as they had varied capacity to support their children's learning. Over time, parental engagement declined. This was particularly the case in those households where adults had limited digital skills or where they had other responsibilities, such as their own work pressures.

381. Balancing live and recorded lessons was a challenge, especially for younger pupils, where managing screen time was a priority. Also, younger pupils needed notably more support from adults to access on-line learning.

382. Independent schools faced significant uncertainty at the start of the pandemic, including ensuring digital access for pupils and staff. Independent schools did not have access to the Hwb platforms.

383. There were inconsistent remote learning experiences across Wales due to varying policies and approaches by local authorities. Many headteachers we spoke with identified that their local authorities were proactive in establishing structured digital learning strategies, ensuring that learners had access to resources. However, others struggled, for instance with resource limitations, leading to inconsistent remote learning. Additionally, local authority and regional consortia oversight of the quality of provision was inconsistent.

How effectively schools adapted the curriculum they were delivering.

384. As the pandemic progressed, schools demonstrated flexibility in adapting their curriculum to remote education. Often, they moved from daily uploads of activities and learning to longer-term projects due to manageability issues and reduced engagement.

385. Many schools focused on core skills, such as literacy, numeracy, and digital competence. Areas of learning that needed more practical or experiential

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learning, such as science and music, faced significant challenges and pupils had limited exposure to these areas. For example, science and technology learning tended to focus on theoretical aspects.

386. Most schools included well-being elements in their remote curricula and prioritised pupils' emotional support to support them through lockdown. In a minority of cases, the lockdown helped to prompt a more fundamental reassessment of what pupils need, supporting preparation for Curriculum for Wales by focusing on areas such as pupil resilience and independent learning skills.

Whether any form of remote education was more effective than others.

387. The national digital platform, Hwb, helped to provide structure and accessible tools for both teachers and for pupils.

388. Early in the pandemic, many schools tried to provide pupils with access to printed work packs to support pupils with limited digital access. A few tried to provide a full timetable of live, online lessons, but later adopted more sustainable models.

389. Overall, there were inequalities in the amount of live teaching received by pupils, depending on school policy and digital access. In many cases, teachers pre-recorded lessons to allow pupils and their households flexibility in when they could access learning. However, this did limit face-to-face interaction with the class and with teachers.

390. While live lessons helped maintain engagement and structure, they posed challenges, for instance for those without good internet or who needed parental support to be online.

391. Learning and teaching approaches that combined live-session and tasks that pupils could undertake at their own pace, along with regular check-ins, proved to be more sustainable and engaging than purely on-line, live

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lessons. Over-reliance on live sessions was often less effective, especially in households with multiple children and limited devices.

How effective remote forms of education were for children with SEND.

392. Most special schools remained open for vulnerable pupils and adapted materials, such as creating therapist-led videos for parents. SEND learners frequently needed one-on-one interaction and sensory or practical engagement, which was hard to replicate digitally. Where pupils did work from home, special schools often adapted well, for instance by providing physical resources, such as mobility aids and digital equipment, to support pupils at home.

393. Many SEND pupils struggled to work from home as they were often used to receiving high levels of support, such as one-on-one or small-group teaching. Online learning was often inaccessible to pupils with complex needs, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who struggled to associate home with school.

394. While a few SEND services continued remotely, statutory assessments and reviews often faced delays due to service disruptions, such as educational psychology services.

395. Pupils with additional learning needs, including those with low levels of literacy and language, faced greater difficulties in accessing online learning independently.

396. Overall, evidence suggests that, for disadvantaged pupils, there was a regression in core skills, such as their literacy and numeracy skills.

397. Pupils with English an additional language found online learning particularly challenging, especially if their parents did not speak English. Pupils who usually had alternative curriculum provision, such as work experience or

outdoor learning courses, could not access their usual learning experiences, and this had a negative impact on their motivation and engagement.

Whether there is evidence that remote education was more effective for older children as compared to younger children.

398. Overall, our evidence suggests that the effectiveness of remote learning was mixed, based on the quality of individual school's provision. Older pupils generally had more independence and digital literacy to engage in remote learning, while younger pupils faced more challenges, requiring additional support and adaptations to ensure meaningful learning experiences.

399. Our work suggests that older pupils generally adapted more easily to remote learning. They were more self-reliant. Often, older pupils progressed efficiently where online learning was structured and effective. For primary school pupils, and particularly younger primary pupils, the situation was more challenging. Many struggled with accessing remote learning online and there were difficulties in them grasping concepts remotely, such as in mathematics.

400. Generally, younger pupils fell behind with reading and writing skills, and there was a negative impact on the speaking and social skills of younger pupils in the foundation phase. Many pupils in Welsh medium education who were not able to practise Welsh at home, such as those whose parents did not speak the language, lost confidence and fluency in communicating in Welsh.

The extent to which the effectiveness of remote education was dependent upon parental (or carer) support and or learners' material circumstances.

401. The effectiveness of remote education was significantly influenced by both parental or carer support and the material circumstances of learners. Evidence drawn from our reviews and reports on remote learning across various education sectors highlights the extent to which these two factors

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were interlinked with learner engagement, well-being, and academic progress.

402. Parental involvement played a crucial role in supporting children's education during school closures. Across independent and maintained special schools, as well as in PRUs, school leaders reported that families were essential in facilitating daily routines, maintaining engagement with learning platforms, and supporting task completion. For many pupils, especially those with ALN, having a parent or carer available to help interpret instructions, manage behaviour, and communicate with teachers was vital. Schools responded by increasing the amount of direct communication with families, offering resources such as video tutorials, guidance documents, and dedicated support lines. These efforts were often necessary to build parents' confidence and capability in supporting their children's learning at home. In some cases, schools held regular virtual meetings with parents to monitor well-being and provide updates, and many observed that the strengthened relationships with families were an unexpected benefit of the lockdown period.

403. However, the degree of parental support varied widely, influenced by each family's circumstances. Leaders noted that some parents, particularly those balancing work-from-home responsibilities or dealing with their own learning difficulties, found it challenging to engage consistently. In a minority of instances, parents were reluctant or unable to participate in the educational process, which negatively impacted pupils' learning and well-being. This was especially concerning for pupils with complex needs, where consistent support and communication were essential.

404. Material circumstances also had a profound impact on the quality and consistency of remote education. One of the most pressing issues at the onset of the pandemic was the digital divide. A significant proportion of pupils lacked access to appropriate devices or a stable internet connection. In some areas, up to 30% of learners did not have suitable technology for online learning. This problem was compounded in households with multiple

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children sharing a single device or relying solely on smartphones. In response, schools and local authorities undertook extensive efforts to bridge this gap. Government-funded initiatives such as 'Stay Safe. Stay Learning.' facilitated the distribution of thousands of laptops and tablets. Schools also collaborated with internet providers to offer mobile hotspots and subsidised broadband to families in need.

405. Despite these efforts, disparities remained. In independent special schools and colleges and PRUs, for example, many pupils were already at a disadvantage due to disrupted educational histories or complex social backgrounds. Leaders observed that such pupils often lacked both the resources and the home environments conducive to effective learning. For these pupils, schools attempted to maintain engagement by delivering hard-copy learning packs and conducting home visits where feasible. While this enabled some continuity, the inconsistency of uptake and engagement led to concerns that many learners were not making sufficient progress.

406. Certain groups of pupils, such as those with profound and multiple learning difficulties, required specialist equipment or face-to-face therapeutic interventions that could not be delivered remotely. The inability to access these services at home, combined with the limitations of digital tools for these learners, highlighted the importance of in-person support and underscored how material constraints could limit educational outcomes.

How effectively schools were able to assess what children were learning during periods of school closures

407. Providing meaningful and timely feedback to pupils was challenging. Early on, many teachers simply recorded the tasks pupils completed or noted that pupils had accessed the materials. Only a very few schools evaluated the quality of pupils' responses to tasks systematically, as identified in our annual report. On the return to school in September 2020, most schools identified a need to assess the progress pupils had made during the previous, disrupted year. Nearly all approached assessment arrangements

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with sensitivity. They used a variety of different methods, including informal teacher observations, standardised tests and the Welsh Government's personalised assessments. Often, schools placed a greater reliance on teachers using their professional judgement to ascertain pupils' learning needs, rather than tests that often assess a narrow range of skills. In a few cases, schools moved away from the use of formal tracking systems as they felt that these relied on a limited set of measures and did not help them identify well enough the breadth of the impact of the pandemic on pupils' learning and well-being. In many primary schools, teachers understood the importance of maintaining a dialogue with pupils about their learning during periods of remote learning and during in-school teaching. By the second national lockdown in spring 2021, most schools had developed systems that enabled teachers to provide pupils with helpful feedback on the tasks they completed at home. Frequent check-in sessions to answer pupils' questions and address misconceptions in their learning, as well as the selective use of live sessions, were valuable in engaging pupils.

How effectively schools were able to address any gaps in children's learning following periods of school closures.

408. Overall, schools worked effectively to re-establish effective teaching to support pupils' learning and address any gaps:

Positive aspects

- Most learners have welcomed the return to face-to-face provision and generally engage better than they did online, though many providers are retaining elements of remote learning.
- Many of the 'issues' affected by the pandemic, such as the decline in learners' skills, have gradually improved since the return to more 'normal' education.
- Providers across sectors have placed a strong emphasis on supporting well-being, which has resulted in increased and more wide-ranging provision.

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- Leaders across all sectors have demonstrated agility and creative thinking in responding to the pandemic and have worked purposefully to re-establish experiences affected by restrictions, such as extra-curricular activities.
- Due to improved and more extensive communication over the pandemic, providers in general have a better understanding of the families and communities they serve.
- Many providers gradually returned to self-evaluation and quality assurance activities over the 2020-2021 academic year, resulting in a better understanding of the impact of their work.

Issues and concerns

- Cases of COVID-19 among learners and staff caused continued disruption to teaching and learning throughout the academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.
- Overall, learners' skills have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. This is especially the case for numeracy and literacy skills, particularly oracy skills. The social and personal skills of a minority of learners have also been affected, especially the youngest children and those who have struggled to settle back in to more 'normal' educational routines.
- Learners' use of spoken Welsh generally declined as a result of the pandemic.
- Restrictions had a negative impact on learning involving practical elements, including work placements, practical assessments for vocational qualifications and subjects such as music, design and technology and physical education.
- Overall, the progress providers made towards key national reforms such as the implementation of the Curriculum for Wales was impacted by the pandemic and remained too variable.
- Across all sectors, there has been a notable increase in demand for well-being and mental health support.
- Attendance, in schools in particular, continues to be below pre-pandemic levels and persistent absence issues have increased.

- There were significant challenges related to staffing, particularly in terms of managing COVID-related absences, sourcing supply staff and recruiting new staff.
- A few providers across all sectors were too slow to resume self-evaluation activities, resulting in an incomplete understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement.

Keeping everyone informed

409. In a changing landscape it became increasingly clear that effective communication with learners, families and staff was vital. Leaders provided staff with regular updates, staff meetings were held online and families were kept informed through emails. In one or two exceptional cases, newly appointed headteachers did not meet their staff face-to-face for months.

410. Leaders and staff worked closely with families to establish clear expectations. Schools knowing their learners, families and communities well proved key to successful engagement with distance learning. Obviously, this was frequently considerably more challenging in the larger schools.

411. Parents appreciated where schools tried to maintain a sense of community through online assemblies and to celebrate achievements for example. This often improved engagement, particularly for younger learners.

412. As the length of time learners were out of schools, settings and other providers increased, communication evolved to include learner and parental feedback on the quality of the provision and adaptations that may be required.

Well-being support

413. Schools, settings and other providers attempted to maintain their support networks through a variety of means including telephone calls, text messages, emails and home visits from well-being officers.

414. There were deliveries of food parcels and the loan of digital equipment to allow learning to continue. In a few cases, online well-being activities including relaxation and self-reflection were created to promote staff and learner well-being.

415. There were specific challenges in relation to distance learning for vulnerable learners. In the most effective practice, learners with additional learning needs were provided with additional guidance and support and adapted support plans. One special school organised minibus visits around the county twice weekly. This allowed physical resources to be delivered to families, for example mobility aids and ICT equipment. This was very popular with staff and families and allows valuable face to face interaction at a safe distance. At one PRU, the few pupils in receipt of PRU-based counselling continued their individual sessions by either email, text or phone. All of the counsellors completed a module to be able to offer phone counselling.

416. While hubs provided care for pupils, the level of education they received through them was too variable, particularly in the secondary sector.

Innovative digital delivery

417. Staff provided learning activities using innovative approaches delivered through a variety of online platforms. However, the pressure this put on teachers was considerable and almost inevitably the quality of sessions was extremely variable.

418. Staff from a specialist resource base within a mainstream secondary school provided its pupils with a weekly timetable of interactive activities on appropriate live streaming platforms. These engaging activities include wildlife watching, Makaton sign of the week, dance and fitness activities, craft sessions, storytelling, singing sessions and show and tell activities. At one PRU, staff provided pupils with planned learning activities such as relaxation techniques, social stories, literacy and numeracy, as well as class

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assemblies and the opportunity to follow a commercial programme to promote their social, emotional and behavioural well-being. Visual timetables, lesson objectives and success criteria were provided to try to maintain a similar routine to the usual lesson format.

Supporting Welsh-medium education

419. In many Welsh-medium schools, most pupils come from homes where Welsh is not spoken. Staff tried to overcome this by providing pupils with learning activities that encouraged them to use their Welsh as naturally as possible. The focus was on reading, understanding and, most importantly, speaking Welsh. Opportunities for pupils to develop presentations and create their own versions of Welsh songs and rhymes were particularly successful in primary schools.

Supporting professional learning

420. In a few providers, comprehensive programmes of professional learning activities were rolled out to all staff with the focus on blended learning training.

421. The providers supported training by using a set of guiding principles for the planning and delivery of teaching, training and assessment. Staff were trained and updated in the use of digital technology and online platforms. For many though, the requirement for rapid learning on the job was incredibly difficult.

Planning for the future

422. Learners and staff across all sectors were surveyed to obtain feedback on their experiences during lockdown and to help inform planning for future learning delivery. The key message from learners was that they were missing their friends, teachers and the school environment. While many said that they were coping well with remote delivery, a minority admitted that they

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sometimes found it difficult to maintain motivation and sustain engagement with remote learning activities. In the secondary sector, pupils not turning on their cameras or engaging with their work was more commonplace.

423. Leaders produced comprehensive recovery plans that included logistical aspects and curriculum arrangements and set out the responsibilities of members of staff and communication strategies for parents.

424. Contact with schools was largely done remotely with the focus being on well-being and teaching and learning. Subsequently, this led to the introduction of engagement visits in due course when the focus shifted to curriculum design. During the period defined, the considerable challenges included the impact on the well-being of the workforce and the sense of isolation felt by both learners and staff alike. The problems were also exacerbated initially by the widely differing views about what constituted best practice. Teachers adapted practice and raised their digital skills which gradually improved the quality of online learning. However, the divide between pupils from disadvantaged and more privileged backgrounds increased. There was considerable variation in the online provision (though this improved after January 2021) and the levels of pupil engagement. Research (NFER Lucas et al 2020) suggested that up to a third of pupils did not engage with set work and particular concerns were expressed regarding pupils with ALN and those eligible for FSM. Monitoring of pupils' engagement was very challenging however.

425. The following reports are have been made available to the Inquiry alongside this statement.

426. Evolving approaches to blended learning in independent schools [Exhibit OE/044 – INQ000618361].

427. Developments in remote and blended learning practice [Exhibit OE/100 – INQ000618289].

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428. Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19 [Exhibit OE/077 – INQ000618395].

429. Reflections on refining remote learning in maintained special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) [Exhibit OE/111 – INQ000618309].

430. Estyn's Findings on Access to Technology and Internet for Remote Learning [Exhibit OE/112 – INQ000618310].

431. Independent sector summary report from engagement telephone calls during the COVID–19 pandemic [Exhibit OE/114 – INQ000618314].

432. Contact with schools was largely done remotely with the focus being on well-being and teaching and learning. Subsequently, this led to the introduction of engagement visits in due course when the focus shifted to curriculum design. During the period defined, the considerable challenges included the impact on the well-being of the workforce and the sense of isolation felt by both learners and staff alike. The problems were also exacerbated initially by the widely differing views about what constituted best practice. There was no single, established model of what good remote teaching should look like; different schools and local authorities interpreted "best practice" in their own ways, which was at times, based on limited guidance or experience. For example, some teachers believed that best practice involved delivering live video lessons each day to replicate the structure of the traditional school timetable. In contrast, others, due to concerns about safeguarding, digital access, or varying levels of digital confidence, chose to upload pre-recorded lessons or assign offline tasks for pupils to complete independently.

433. These differing interpretations led to inconsistencies in pupils' learning experiences, even within the same school or local authority. What remains is that teachers adapted their practice and raised their digital skills, which gradually improved the quality of online learning. However, the divide between pupils from disadvantaged and more privileged backgrounds increased. There was considerable variation in the online provision (though

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this improved after January 2021) and the levels of pupil engagement. Research (NFER Lucas et al 2020) suggested that up to a third of pupils did not engage with set work and particular concerns were expressed regarding pupils with ALN and those eligible for FSM. Monitoring of pupils' engagement was very challenging however.

Online safety

434. Estyn did not engage directly with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, it relied on schools, pupil referral units, and other education providers to maintain communication with families and gather parental feedback. Estyn's insights into parental experiences were drawn from the reflections and reporting of these providers, rather than through its own direct contact with parents.

435. Estyn engaged extensively with the sector during the pandemic. In the academic year 2020-2021 alone:
   - We made engagement phone calls to 267 non-maintained settings (September 2020 – February 2021)
   - We engaged with 78 independent schools
   - In summer 2020, 48 pilot calls were made to primary schools
   - In autumn 2020, we made 371 calls, including 114 to secondary schools and 19 to all-age schools
   - In spring 2021, 578 calls were made, including 39 to special schools and PRUs
   - In autumn 2021, we made follow-up visits and calls to 79 primary, 20 secondary, 2 all-age, 2 maintained special schools, and 2 PRUs

436. Our engagement calls and other focused activity with schools and PRUs between March 2020 and the second national closure of schools January 2021, were complemented via structured interviews using a clear framework to ensure that our inspectors evaluated how schools approached children's online safety and remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic effectively. We developed prompts and questions designed to elicit comprehensive,

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qualitative evidence from various stakeholders—learners, parents, teachers, support staff, school leaders, and governors—and enabled inspectors to form a detailed picture of practice across different contexts.

437. Regarding what concerns or issues schools were communicating to us, the prompts encouraged teaching staff, senior leaders, and governors to reflect on the biggest challenges faced in delivering blended learning. Questions such as "What have been the biggest challenges with blended learning?" and "How do you support disadvantaged or vulnerable learners?" guided schools to highlight difficulties including digital exclusion, safeguarding concerns, mental health issues, and inconsistent pupil engagement. Similarly, prompts asked how schools were adapting to meet statutory duties and provide appropriate interventions, helping inspectors understand where support systems were under strain and which learner groups were most affected.

438. Although we did not explicitly ask about teachers' safety concerns related to the use of cameras, prompts under well-being and safeguarding—such as "How well do child protection and safeguarding approaches allow you to identify and support vulnerable learners...?" and "What specific measures are you taking to support pupils to stay safe online during blended learning?"—allowed teachers and leaders to discuss privacy, data protection, and behavioural concerns that may arise during live video instruction. These open-ended questions enabled inspectors to surface any reservations educators had about remote visual engagement methods, including the use of cameras.

439. When considering whether guidance was provided to schools about how to approach online teaching, our approach included asking leaders 'how they established and communicated a vision and expectations for blended learning experiences' and 'what training has taken place to enable them to support learners' well-being through blended learning'. These questions encouraged leaders to discuss policy implementation, professional development, and communication strategies. They enabled inspectors to

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assess the extent and clarity of any guidance received from local authorities, consortia, or the Welsh Government, and how such guidance was interpreted and applied at the school level.

440. During our engagement with schools, inspectors gathered information about online safety asking How do you ensure pupils' safety when working online?" Inspectors considered whether safety education was embedded, whether technical controls were in place, and how practice evolved during the remote learning period. The inclusion of questions on staff training, such as "What training has taken place to enable you to support learners' well-being through blended learning?" allowed inspectors to assess how confident and prepared staff were in safeguarding learners digitally. Regarding the impacts of increased use of devices and social media, inspectors approached this issue indirectly through inquiries into well-being, workload, engagement, and digital competence. Questions such as "How is blended learning impacting on your health and well-being?" and "What are the biggest challenges?" for both parents and learners gave space to explore the emotional and behavioural consequences of screen time and online interaction. From the teaching perspective, prompts around workload, pupil engagement, and assessment quality like "How do you monitor learners' progress through blended learning activity?" offered insights into whether technology was enhancing or hindering learning outcomes.

441. Our July 2020 report, "A summary report of local authorities' own self-evaluation of their work to support vulnerable and disadvantaged learners," provides valuable insights into how schools approached the issue of children's online safety associated with remote learning. The evidence gathered from 13 Welsh local authorities highlights the complexity and diversity of responses across different educational contexts, particularly regarding digital safety, access to learning, and the well-being of vulnerable learners [Exhibit OE/113 – INQ000618417].

442. The local authorities communicated several concerns to us about the challenges schools faced. A dominant issue was digital exclusion. Many

vulnerable learners did not initially have access to suitable devices, internet connectivity, or the digital literacy necessary to participate safely and effectively in online learning. Authorities reported that some families lacked the skills to operate digital platforms, and in cases where learners came from homes with low levels of literacy or where English or Welsh was an additional language, engagement with digital content was particularly challenging. Moreover, schools raised concerns about online safety and safeguarding in the context of remote learning. Authorities noted that when there was a risk of criminal or sexual exploitation, or concerns that learners might misuse digital devices, decisions were made not to provide them with equipment. This cautious approach underscored the heightened awareness of safeguarding risks in the digital environment during the lockdown period.

443. While we did not offer detailed commentary on specific teacher concerns regarding the use of cameras in online teaching, it is evident from local authority responses that online safety was a key consideration. Authorities took steps to manage and mitigate risks associated with remote interactions. The withholding of devices from high-risk learners and the emphasis on safeguarding practices suggest a broader apprehension about privacy and potential misuse of live video or other interactive online tools. Teachers and support staff were given updated information on safe digital practices, and in some authorities, this guidance was extended to parents and learners.

444. The guidance provided to schools about face-to-face online teaching varied. Many local authorities worked in collaboration with regional consortia to offer support and professional development to schools. This included helping educators understand the unique challenges faced by vulnerable learners during remote learning and offering strategies to overcome these. Although there were examples of useful local guidance, there was a widespread call for clearer, nationally consistent direction on safe remote teaching, including how to address the specific needs of learners with additional learning needs or those who could not adhere to standard safety protocols.

445. In response to concerns about online safety, schools and local authorities adjusted their practices to better support learners and mitigate risk. A notable change was the selective distribution of digital devices, where risk assessments influenced who received technology. In situations where learners could not safely use digital platforms, alternative methods—such as paper-based learning packs, telephone support, or face-to-face provision in school hubs—were implemented. Paragraph 479 below outlines under what circumstances learners might be restricted in their use of digital devices or digital platforms. Local authorities reported that updates on safe online conduct were regularly shared with learners, parents, and carers, reinforcing the importance of vigilance and appropriate behaviour in digital spaces [Exhibit OE/113 – INQ000618417].

446. Furthermore, authorities refined their safeguarding practices, with a particular focus on enhanced collaboration with social services to enable earlier interventions. For example, enhanced collaboration across local services, including youth services and social care, resulted in more consistent, proactive and earlier interventions for vulnerable learners. It also helped to rationalise the contacts with vulnerable learners and their families improved the consistency of contact with families, reduced overlap, and ensured that the most appropriate services were responsible for follow-up actions. Such collaboration led to more efficient triage, fewer gaps in support, and quicker interventions when learners were at risk. Safeguarding policies reflected the changes.

447. We also reported on the broader impacts of children's increased use of digital devices and social media during the school closures. There were widespread concerns about the implications for learners' mental health and emotional well-being. The shift to predominantly online interaction intensified feelings of isolation among some pupils, particularly those already experiencing trauma or with limited family support. The lack of structured routines, physical activity, and extracurricular engagement disproportionately affected vulnerable learners, further exacerbating pre-existing inequalities. Some authorities anticipated a rise in safeguarding issues and child

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protection referrals when schools reopened, owing to unreported incidents during the lockdown period. Additionally, the digital divide not only created barriers to academic progress but also hindered therapeutic and counselling services, many of which moved online and saw decreased participation.

448. Based on our thematic report "Insights into how independent schools and specialist colleges have responded during the COVID–19 pandemic" (July 2020), we gathered comprehensive evidence regarding how schools approached the issue of children's online safety in the context of remote learning. The report draws on information from 78 independent schools and colleges across Wales and reflects the adaptations made during the early stages of the pandemic [Exhibit OE/027 – INQ000618344].

449. School leaders communicated a wide range of concerns to Estyn about the challenges of remote learning and online safety. Many leaders were particularly concerned about how the pandemic and subsequent school closures affected vulnerable learners. There were challenges in maintaining contact with a small number of pupils and their families, and concerns that some vulnerable learners would not benefit from the necessary social interactions, potentially exacerbating their physical and emotional well-being needs. These worries extended to difficulties with re-integration and the impact of extended isolation, particularly for pupils with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), who would require a focus on emotional recovery before academic learning could resume.

450. The report does not explicitly describe widespread teacher concerns about the use of cameras for online lessons, but it does highlight how at least one mainstream independent secondary school implemented clear safety protocols for video-conferencing lessons. This included a policy that all sessions (excluding counselling) be recorded automatically for safeguarding purposes and made accessible to pupils who could not attend live. This proactive stance, coupled with an addendum to the safeguarding policy and guidance shared with parents and pupils, indicates that concerns about privacy and safe engagement online were taken seriously by school

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leadership and staff. By extension, such measures also reflect the kind of safety concerns likely held by teaching staff during the early adaptation to digital platforms.

451. In terms of official guidance on face-to-face online teaching, some schools benefited from connections with international counterparts that were further along in managing pandemic-related disruptions. These links enabled them to shape their responses using established examples of good practice from abroad. Additionally, schools integrated safeguarding guidance from the Welsh Government and the NSPCC into their distance learning communications and platforms, embedding structured approaches to online safety within their evolving distance learning policies.

452. Schools addressed online safety concerns by implementing various protective and educational strategies. These included formalising video-conferencing protocols, monitoring social media platforms used for pupil-staff communication, and equipping tutors with resources like "thinkuknow" e-safety materials to guide discussions in virtual tutor groups. Many schools also used their websites to share online safety advice and well-being guidance with families. Some schools engaged in direct outreach through weekly phone calls or home visits, distributing learning packs and using these encounters to check on pupil well-being and online engagement. In a few cases, schools created social media platforms that were carefully monitored by leadership to encourage safe communication between pupils and staff, while also serving as a method to identify and support pupils showing signs of distress.

453. Our findings on the impacts of increased device and social media use during school closures are nuanced. On the one hand, pupils and staff had to rapidly improve their digital competence, and many learners reportedly gained greater independence and self-reliance through their online learning experiences. In several schools, the use of technology even motivated learners to explore future career options in digital fields. On the other hand, some pupils, especially those with complex needs, struggled with online

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engagement due to a lack of access to devices, unsuitable home environments, or learning difficulties that made distance learning impractical. In these cases, staff distributed physical learning materials and prioritised emotional and therapeutic support over digital instruction. While there is no direct analysis of social media use, the increased reliance on online platforms and communication channels inherently raised safeguarding concerns that schools addressed through protocols, consistent monitoring, and family outreach.

454. Our report 'Independent schools summary report from engagement telephone calls during the COVID-19 pandemic' presents detailed insights into how schools approached the issue of children's online safety during remote learning throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are based on discussions with senior leaders in nearly all of Wales' independent special schools and reflect the varied experiences and strategies adopted in response to the challenges of the pandemic [Exhibit OE/114 – INQ000618314].

455. School leaders highlighted a number of concerns, particularly relating to the shift to remote learning and its implications for online safety and educational continuity. A consistent theme was the challenge of digital exclusion and the complications surrounding internet access. For instance, at the Branas School, there was an initial reluctance to implement online learning due to pre-existing safeguarding policies that limited internet access for residential pupils. This situation prompted leaders to introduce personal computers and mobile hubs with robust monitoring systems to ensure safe access. These systems included real-time alerts and the ability to restrict pupil access to inappropriate content, illustrating a strong commitment to safeguarding in a digital environment.

456. Leaders also reported increased safeguarding concerns, especially in schools catering for day pupils. Many attributed this to the pressure placed on parents who had to support their children's learning at home, often without the usual professional input or therapeutic support. In several

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instances, parents expressed exhaustion from managing their child's behaviour during lockdown periods, further exacerbated by the suspension or reduction of external support services. Additionally, schools noted that some pupils exhibited regression in behaviour and social skills, which was linked to the lack of peer interaction and routine.

457. We reported that schools approached digital engagement cautiously. In residential settings, the introduction of digital learning platforms was accompanied by stringent safeguards, indicating a broad awareness of the potential risks associated with live or recorded online interactions. Leaders often preferred to continue with face-to-face or paper-based provision for pupils who were deemed at risk or unable to engage effectively online.

458. The report notes that while national and local advice was available, leaders often found it complex and at times overwhelming. Schools that had pupils placed by multiple local authorities across Wales and England found it particularly challenging to align their practices with the varying policies and expectations. A few leaders expressed frustration that the guidance provided did not always account for the specific circumstances and needs of independent special schools. Although most schools followed national recommendations and made ongoing adjustments to their operational practices, there appears to have been a lack of clearly tailored guidance on how to deliver face-to-face online teaching safely and effectively.

459. To address concerns around online safety, schools implemented a range of protective measures and adapted their approaches. Besides the introduction of monitored digital platforms, many schools enhanced their in-house therapeutic support. This included the development of therapy rooms, structured sensory activities, increased nurture provision, and the integration of well-being routines such as circle time and non-contact boxing to support self-regulation. Where online access was deemed inappropriate or unsafe, some schools provided learning through printed materials or even in-person home support visits during lockdown periods. These actions reflected a flexible and pupil-centred approach to safeguarding and learning.

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460. The increased use of devices during school closures had mixed consequences. While some pupils benefited from improved access to digital learning tools, others experienced heightened anxiety and reduced engagement. Leaders observed that pupils with limited or no access to therapeutic services during lockdowns were particularly affected. The lack of routine, coupled with reduced opportunities for community engagement and off-site learning, had a negative impact on the development of life skills and overall readiness for transition to adulthood. A few school leaders reported that pupils' social and emotional well-being suffered due to prolonged isolation, with anxiety increasing particularly among older pupils facing uncertainty about post-school destinations.

461. We shared findings on online safety with the Welsh Government during the pandemic. While specific details about the individual providers were not included in a published report, the Welsh Government's action plan, "Enhancing digital resilience in education," references Estyn's findings, particularly concerning peer-on-peer sexual harassment in further education colleges. This plan includes multiple actions to address online safety, such as delivering training to recognise online sexual harassment and supporting schools with incidents of nude image sharing [Exhibit OE/115 – INQ000618315].

The Underpinning Principle (UP2) taskforce

462. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Estyn played a pivotal leadership role in supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners through its chairing of the UP2 (Underpinning Principle 2) taskforce, one of the four core strategic elements within the Welsh Government's Continuity of Learning (CoL) programme. Chaired by Dyfrig Ellis, Assistant Director at Estyn, the UP2 group was responsible for embedding inclusion as a cross-cutting priority across all elements of the national education response. Its remit was both comprehensive and urgent: to ensure that all learners, particularly those most at risk of exclusion, underachievement, or harm, received equitable,

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safe, and meaningful access to education during remote and blended learning periods. This included providing feedback to the Welsh Government about the safety of children online.

463. The UP2 taskforce was a multidisciplinary steering group, made up of representatives from Estyn, the Welsh Government, the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW), the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), regional consortia, headteachers, local authority inclusion leads, and third-sector organisations. The group worked across five dedicated workstreams, each addressing the needs of specific learner groups including: learners with special educational needs (SEN), learners eligible for free school meals, those with English as an Additional Language or from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, learners in Education otherwise than in a school (EOTAS) provision, and vulnerable children including those in care, on the child protection register, or involved with the youth justice system. Each stream gathered evidence on barriers to learning and well-being during the pandemic, evaluated risks, and identified responsive interventions and practical policy solutions.

464. A key feature of UP2's work was its advisory role to government. The group reported directly to Kevin Palmer, Deputy Director at the Welsh Government responsible for education strategy and inclusion. Mr. Palmer in turn reported to the Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams MS (Member of the Senedd), ensuring that the insights and recommendations developed by UP2 fed directly into ministerial decision-making at the highest level. The Welsh Government's involvement in UP2 was broad and substantive, involving a dedicated team of senior officials whose expertise spanned safeguarding, inclusion, additional learning needs, pupil well-being, and curriculum strategy.

465. The following officials represented the Welsh Government in UP2 and its workstreams, each contributing specific expertise:
   - Supporting Achievement and Safeguarding (SLD): Co-lead for overall UP2 oversight and coordination.

- Supporting Achievement and Safeguarding (SLD): Contributed to strategic direction and alignment across safeguarding and inclusion policy.
- ALN Policy (SLD): Specialist adviser for learners with additional learning needs, especially in the context of statutory duties and SEN reform.
- ALN Policy (SLD): Partnered in SEN-focused workstream delivery and national planning.
- Pupil Well-being (SLD): Advisers for EOTAS and pupil referral units, ensuring that the needs of learners outside mainstream provision were considered.
- Adviser on digital learning and curriculum.
- Supporting Achievement and Safeguarding (SLD): Contributed to the FSM and equity-focused workstream.
- Supporting Achievement and Safeguarding (SLD): Key adviser for work relating to EAL learners and those from minority ethnic backgrounds.
- Supporting Achievement and Safeguarding (SLD): Provided expertise on children at risk, looked-after children, and youth justice.

466. This structure gave UP2 a strategic platform to influence national priorities, and its contributions shaped guidance, funding decisions, and operational expectations across all education providers during the crisis.

467. The UP2 group produced detailed advice on a wide range of inclusion-related issues. It provided guidance on sustaining statutory SEN duties, ensuring access to therapy and counselling services, addressing digital exclusion, and maintaining contact with learners through structured welfare checks. The group also shaped risk assessment frameworks for local authorities and schools, and helped to define expectations for learner progression during remote learning. It emphasised online safety and advocated for additional professional learning for teachers to support digital safeguarding, trauma-informed practice, and inclusive pedagogy. Notably, UP2 led on planning for the post-lockdown "recovery phase", urging the government to anticipate a spike in safeguarding referrals and

disengagement among vulnerable learners, and to prepare coordinated multi-agency responses.

468. UP2's coordination of cross-sector expertise ensured that inclusion was not treated as an afterthought but remained central to the Continuity of Learning strategy. It engaged actively with local authorities and providers, monitored implementation, and identified emerging best practice to share across Wales. Its workstreams reported on challenges ranging from the emotional and behavioural impact of lockdown on learners in care, to the technological barriers facing low-income families and the linguistic isolation of learners with EAL. The strategic analysis and practical solutions developed by UP2 contributed directly to national planning and helped education services adapt swiftly in an evolving emergency context.

469. Estyn expanded its role from inspection to actively shaping policy and supporting collaboration across agencies. The Welsh Government's decision to entrust us with leading a key part of the national response reflects our credibility and commitment to learners' welfare. The internal documents managed by UP2 provide an essential record of Wales' inclusive response to the educational challenges of the pandemic. They also show Estyn's key role in advising government, supporting vulnerable learners, and helping maintain an inclusive education system during a critical time.

Extent that remote forms of teaching continue to be used in schools.

Primary sector

470. Overall, primary school inspections note the use of online platforms to support pupils' learning across the curriculum, such as Microsoft teams, Google classroom or HWB. However, these are generally used to support classroom teaching or homework activities and there is limited evidence of remote teaching being used as part of everyday practice across the sector.

Secondary sector

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471. Some post-16 Level 3 courses are delivered via e-sgol (online learning) to ensure that courses that have low numbers of pupils can run. These courses are delivered in partnership with other schools.

472. During secondary school inspections, it is apparent that small numbers of pupils in some secondary schools, who are not attending school full-time due to health reasons, are receiving well-being check-ins and some provision using remote forms of teaching. Online platforms are also used to support learning and homework.

473. During school inspections it is apparent that many schools use online platforms (such as Teams or Google) to ensure that pupils have access to Level 2 and Level 3 schemes of work and resources. This enables pupils to complete their work electronically during and outside of school hours.

Post-16 sector

474. During post-16 inspections, some providers use online learning platforms, such as Teams, to deliver certain courses (including some evening courses). Estyn observes a sample of these sessions during post-16 inspections.

Safeguarding

475. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Estyn, in collaboration with the Welsh Government and through the Inclusion workstream (UP2) of the Continuity of Learning (CoL) plan, gathered extensive evidence about heightened safeguarding concerns raised by schools and local authorities. This was achieved primarily through our engagement calls and a thematic survey of local authorities' self-evaluation reports, which were designed to capture the evolving challenges for learners, including vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, particularly those most at risk of harm, neglect, or exploitation. The feedback received through these activities provided clear evidence that safeguarding children was a core concern and significantly impacted the way

education and care were delivered during this period. We published a summary report of the findings from these self-evaluation reports. For a summary report of local authorities' own self-evaluation of their work to support vulnerable and disadvantaged learners during the COVID–19 pandemic [Exhibit OE/113 – INQ000618417].

476. We highlighted a growing anxiety about learners who were no longer in daily contact with school staff, who are often the first line of defence in identifying safeguarding risks. For children on the child protection register, looked after children, young carers, and those known to the youth offending service, schools served as a consistent source of support, stability, and protection. With the closure of schools, these protective factors were interrupted. Local authorities identified that many vulnerable children were at risk of becoming "invisible" to professionals, particularly those who were not already involved with social services. There was a common expectation among local authorities that child protection referrals would surge once schools reopened, revealing issues that had gone undetected during the lockdown period due to limited face-to-face contact and constrained social service provision.

477. Local authorities reported that multi-agency safeguarding practices had to evolve quickly to maintain a level of protection. In several cases, authorities developed or enhanced joint working protocols between education, social care, and health services to address safeguarding risks in a more coordinated manner. These included establishing communication pathways that enabled regular contact with children and families considered at risk. For some authorities, this led to better information-sharing practices and more effective use of digital platforms for Looked After Children (LAC) reviews and well-being check-ins. Nonetheless, the variation in platform use, combined with digital poverty and technical barriers, meant that consistent engagement was not always possible. Several authorities noted that not being able to use a platform of their choice was itself a barrier for children, particularly for those used to interacting with specific apps or social networks.

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478. A consistent theme in the feedback was the inadequacy of remote mechanisms to replace the depth of insight and trust built through in-person relationships. For children with complex needs, including those with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties or who had experienced trauma, the transition to online-only communication hampered the ability of practitioners to identify emerging safeguarding concerns. Practitioners expressed concern that disclosures were less likely to be made in virtual environments. There were also concerns about how to provide therapeutic support remotely, especially where children had been receiving counselling or other interventions before the pandemic. In some areas, these services either ceased or were significantly reduced, leading to increased risks for already vulnerable learners.

479. Specific concerns were raised in relation to learners receiving Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) and those attending pupil referral units (PRUs), many of whom were already considered to be on the margins of educational and social inclusion. Staff reported variable engagement among these learners and noted that disengagement often coincided with elevated safeguarding risks, such as exposure to criminal exploitation or mental health deterioration. Some local authorities deliberately withheld digital devices from learners deemed to be at significant safeguarding risk due to fears of misuse, further deepening the digital divide for those already facing educational disadvantage. In Exhibit OE/113 – INQ000618417 we unpack the reasons why digital devices may be withheld. We note that in cases where local authorities determined that individual learners were at significant safeguarding risk, such as those with known histories of accessing or being targeted by online grooming, those under active child protection plans involving digital exploitation, or those with patterns of behaviour suggesting a likelihood of accessing inappropriate or harmful content, they exercised caution. In such circumstances, local authorities did not provide digital devices to these learners unless additional safeguarding measures were in place (e.g., tightly monitored software, parental supervision agreements, or controlled school-based access). For example, where a learner had previously been identified as being at risk of criminal exploitation via social

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media platforms, or where there were concerns of self-generated sexual imagery being shared under coercion, authorities withheld device provision to prevent exacerbating the risk. This approach reflected a strong commitment to safeguarding principles and the need to prevent digital access from becoming harmful.

480. Safeguarding concerns extended beyond the learners themselves to their families and carers. For young carers, for instance, the pandemic led to increased domestic responsibilities and stress, with limited access to respite care and external support. For looked after children, reduced contact with birth families and the cessation of extracurricular activities exacerbated feelings of isolation and disrupted therapeutic routines. In foster care settings, the emotional and behavioural toll led to an increase in placement breakdowns in some cases, which placed additional stress on already stretched local authority services.

481. Estyn's analysis of this feedback led to the identification of several systemic issues requiring attention in the recovery phase. These included the need for trauma-informed training for school staff, improved digital safeguarding protocols, consistent use of communication platforms across services, enhanced multi-agency collaboration, and better translation of public health and educational information for minority ethnic and EAL families. Furthermore, Estyn identified the importance of reaffirming statutory safeguarding responsibilities despite pandemic-related constraints, highlighting that delays in statutory reviews and assessments could place learners at further risk.

482. Estyn also contributed to the "Stay Safe. Stay Learning" initiative, an umbrella framework under which the UP2 workstream operated. This workstream was one of four cross-cutting priorities and focused on the inclusion of learners most at risk of exclusion, neglect, or disengagement. We ensured that safeguarding was embedded into every aspect of the CoL plan, from digital learning to hub school operations. As part of this work, we reported regularly to the Welsh Government through steering group

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meetings and working papers, where safeguarding risks, such as reduced oversight of at-risk children, gaps in therapeutic service delivery, and digital safety concerns, were continuously monitored and escalated.

483. We also contributed to safeguarding-specific guidance documents, often in collaboration with the Welsh Government. A notable example is the updated August 2020 document, "Live-streaming and video conferencing – safeguarding principles and practice for education". This guide outlined measures for ensuring children's safety while learning online, a critical concern raised by several local authorities during the pandemic. It offered advice to educators on how to maintain professional boundaries, record keeping, parental consent, and appropriate conduct during live sessions, all of which addressed safeguarding in a remote education context.

484. Another dimension of our reporting came through informal, real-time feedback loops with education providers and services. This included collecting and disseminating emerging practice on safeguarding vulnerable learners, identifying systemic weaknesses (such as a lack of multi-agency coherence or translation barriers for EAL families), and advising on professional learning needs, particularly around responding to disclosures made online or during partial attendance.

485. Regular updates to Welsh Government officials, participation in cross-agency steering groups, and contributions to working documents such as the Barriers to Learning and UP2 Project Brief papers ensured that safeguarding remained a priority. Our reports also identified where improved clarity was needed in relation to statutory responsibilities and recommended that schools and local authorities be supported with guidance, particularly where pandemic conditions impeded adherence to safeguarding protocols, such as child protection reviews, risk assessments, or therapy delivery

486. Throughout the pandemic, we reported these findings in thematic reports and contributed to Welsh Government guidance documents. These outputs

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not only informed national policy responses but also shaped the professional learning and support provided to schools.

Food security

487. During the specified period, we engaged regularly with schools. This allowed us to monitor and subsequently report on how schools addressed concerns about children's access to food and other basic needs.

488. In our annual report 2019-2020, we evaluated the strong focus that schools had on pupil well-being, particularly for those who are vulnerable. We noted that schools 'identified those that required additional support and regular contact from external services, including those whose engagement with learning was especially low. They ensured that eligible pupils received free meals, or vouchers or payments.'

489. In the report we also noted the support that local authorities gave to schools during this period. 'Local authorities often used their staff creatively to provide additional support for schools in working with vulnerable learners and the families. For example, they visited homes, delivered food parcels, and supported childcare hubs.'

490. In our 2020-2021 annual report we noted how schools prioritised the well-being of all learners and the importance of a community school approach as outlined in our thematic Community schools: families and communities at the heart of school life [Exhibit OE/072 – INQ000618389].

491. In this report we identified how 'staff in schools and local authorities have made sure that children eligible for free school meals have received food. They have worked with food banks to deliver food parcels to vulnerable families.' The report highlighted the impact of strategic collaboration between schools and other agencies to support pupils' access to food and to meet their needs. In addition, the report provides case studies of schools where

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families access support for their children and family, such as access to food bank vouchers.

492. The 2020-2021 annual report also provides a very few case studies where schools worked successfully in partnership with the local authority to support vulnerable families to access food and other essentials such as hygiene packs.

493. In our annual report 2022-2023, we evaluated the extent to which schools had taken action to mitigate the impact of poverty on educational attainment. In this we noted that: 'Local authorities did not support schools to gain a better understanding of their communities sufficiently well. In a minority of schools and settings, leaders did not know their communities well enough.'

494. We noted that successful schools knew their communities well and had key staff members such as family engagement officers who worked with families to identify any needs.

Non-pharmaceutical interventions

495. It is not within our remit to evaluate the impact of the use of non-pharmaceutical interventions. Although, in our discussions with schools and other providers, headteachers described how they had considered many approaches to keep children and staff safe as they returned to on-site teaching.

Grades and examinations

496. Not explicitly but we garnered information from sources such as core inspections, questionnaires including pre-inspection, follow-up visits, engagement visits, stakeholder meetings and external research. In 2020 'examination outcomes' were considerably higher than in recent years as was the case in 2021. We met regularly with Qualifications Wales to discuss the arrangements that were being put in place in relation to Centre Assessed Grades and Centre Determined Grades. We were aware that there was

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variation in results across centres, centre types, local authorities, and regional consortia for A level, AS, and GCSEs.

497. The difference between standardised grades, Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs), and revised grades by centre type shows that:

   - For A levels, relative to the standardised grades, CAGs increased the centre average grade score by 0.3 for colleges/FE, 0.5 for independent centres, and 0.7 for secondary centres. The revised grades, relative to the standardised grades, increased the centre average grade score by 0.4 for colleges/FE, 0.6 for independent centres, and 0.7 for secondary centres.

498. There was no verified or reliable data to hold schools to account with no All Wales Core Data Sets. Estyn did not have access to outcomes for individual centres.

499. We looked at the impact of the cancellation of exams on settings and had particular concerns about the variation in disruption from school to school and the importance of ensuring that pupils are not disadvantaged (year groups and staff having to self-isolate, whilst others have not experienced any disruption of this kind since September). We were aware that some schools were ahead of others in terms of how they were able to manage disruption for pupils in exam years and also the support they were able to provide some pupils in relation to exam preparation. We were also concerned about the impact of assessments on some groups or the potential for bias, including unconscious bias.

500. There was also a variation in disruption across subjects. During the lockdown period, pupils chose to engage with some subjects more than others and schools could not control this in the same way as they can with a timetable. When we spoke to school leaders, they told us that practical subjects were impacted as well as some other curriculum areas.

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501. Teachers and leaders were also anxious with the quality of sufficient assessment information and, as a result, pupils in examination year groups were having to complete a considerable number of assessments across all their subjects.

502. There was also an impact on the workload of pupils – pupils were worried that each piece of work they completed could influence their final grade. They were afraid to make mistakes and ask for help. This having a negative impact on their well-being.

503. Children following vocational courses were under disadvantage by long-term impacts of the pandemic and the different messages and guidance given by various awarding bodies. For example, there were difficulties in meeting the requirements for completing mandatory work placement activities in some health, social and childcare qualifications or completing required summative practical assessments in some craft and technical qualifications such as in the construction and the built environment sector. This resulted in delays in learners completing and achieving these qualifications and also delayed progression to further learning or employment. The different messages and guidance given by awarding organisations largely reflected the nature of different vocational qualifications across occupational sectors. However, there were also differences in the specific adaptations to assessment arrangements introduced by different organisations, especially for those qualifications which assess occupational or professional competency, proficiency or act as a licence to practice.

504. Welsh-medium pupils who came from homes where Welsh is not spoken were disadvantaged. Although schools were providing pupils with learning activities that encouraged them to use their Welsh as naturally as possible, especially speaking Welsh, it was difficult for pupils to develop fully their Welsh literacy skills.

Enduring impact

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505. On 9 July 2020, the Welsh Government announced that it would provide an additional £29 million to schools to boost support for learners at crucial stages in their education from September 2020. The strategy was that providers should target extra support at Years 11, 12 and 13, as well as disadvantaged and vulnerable learners of all ages. It was envisaged that the grant would allow schools to recruit the equivalent of 600 extra teachers and 300 teaching assistants throughout 2020-2021 academic year. Initially, the 'Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards: Accelerating Learning Programme' (RRRS) grant was intended to include learners in the sixth form. However, in July 2020, the Welsh Government announced additional schemes for colleges and sixth forms (in schools, this was still called the RRRS grant and the conditions for spending it were the same as those set out in the initial allocation). Over £15 million was provided to support learners following A level or vocational courses at an FE college or sixth form. This represented a 5% increase to funding per student.

506. The Welsh Government set out 5 principles to guide schools' spending decisions:

- Principle 1: Learners in Greatest Need
- Principle 2: The Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards Curriculum
- Principle 3: Growing Capacity
- Principle 4: Reducing Bureaucracy and Ensuring Transparency
- Principle 5: The Principle of Collaboration

507. Nearly all schools and colleges planned carefully to make good use of the RRRS or catch-up grants though there was a high degree of variability in the approaches leaders took in spending the RRRS or catch-up grants.

508. In schools, the most common approaches were appointing additional staff to:
   o cover teaching in key stage 3 to free up time for extra lessons for learners in key stage 4 and post 16 or greater pastoral support in the sixth-form
   o teach specific subjects

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o focus mainly on learners' well-being

509. Colleges have a high number of learners following vocational courses and took a different approach from schools. Most commonly they:
   o provided additional 'catch-up' sessions
   o created capacity for additional sessions for practical assessments
   o provided additional capacity to track and support learners' well-being

510. Appointing high quality additional staff at short notice was challenging for providers, especially in rural areas, Welsh-medium or bilingual schools, and areas of high deprivation. Instead, most leaders in schools and colleges extended hours for part-time staff, paid current staff overtime or retained the services of staff who were about to retire.

511. A few Welsh-medium or bilingual schools and colleges used the grant strategically to ensure that learners maintained their Welsh speaking skills during periods where they could not attend school in person. In many cases this was not a strong aspect of providers' work and learners' ability and confidence to use Welsh declined during lockdown.

512. In many cases, courses run in partnership with other providers that normally involved learners travelling between centres operated smoothly by streaming lessons. A few of these courses were not delivered successfully and learners dropped out. Mostly, this was because learners embarking on new partnership courses found remote learning in this context frustrating and ineffective.

513. All schools and colleges reported close working with a range of external services including social services, health boards, the police and counselling services. All of these services saw increases in demand during the pandemic. Leaders in a few schools worked creatively with other providers, for example to evaluate each other's work or to identify and address gaps in learners' studies.

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514. How schools and colleges used the RRRS and catch-up grants for post-16 learners Cymru provided useful networks for college leaders to discuss issues and share practice during the pandemic.

515. Many school leaders were in regular contact with representatives from regional consortia and local authorities. In the most useful cases, these representatives offered leaders valuable guidance on catch up approaches based on research.

516. Many leaders in schools and colleges continually evaluated and refined their approach to grant spending during the pandemic. In the best examples, leaders had a vision for what they would like to achieve and set a range of criteria against which they could track and evaluate the success of initiatives. In a few cases, leaders did not consider the impact of additional spending.

Attainment

517. The pandemic had a negative impact on the progress of many learners across most sectors, particularly around the progressive development of skills. Learners' development in some aspect of the curriculum was hampered by the pandemic. Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately affected. In many cases, these learners fell behind more than their peers and their attendance, which was already poorer, became worse. During the 2021-2022 academic year, and a return to more 'normal' education, many of the 'issues' exacerbated by the pandemic, such as the deterioration in learners' oracy and social skills or learner anxiety, showed gradual improvement but continued to persist.

518. Overall, the literacy and numeracy skills of many children and young people were adversely affected by the pandemic, although they started to improve fairly swiftly on returning to face to face education. This was less of an issue for learners in sixth forms and adult learners, who generally engaged well with their learning during the pandemic. Providers in the further education and work-based learning sectors reported that, overall, learners had lower levels of literacy and numeracy skills on entering courses than was the case

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pre-pandemic. This was mainly due to gaps in their learning over the previous year and a half. The decline in learners' oracy skills was a particular concern in schools and non-maintained settings, especially for the youngest children, though this generally improved on returning to face-to-face provision.

519. Learners' ability and readiness to use spoken Welsh was negatively impacted by long periods of non-contact with the language. In both Welsh and English-medium providers, many learners lacked confidence in speaking Welsh when they returned, as their main contact with the language had always been through their educational provider. In secondary schools in particular there was a general decline in the use of Welsh between peers. On the return to on-site learning, many Welsh-medium providers placed a strong emphasis on improving learners' spoken Welsh, which had a positive impact.

520. The most recent annual report (2023-2024) identified that, in most sectors, children and young people are now generally making sound progress in their learning. In nearly all non-maintained nurseries inspected during the most recent academic year, most children made at least good progress from their individual starting points and developed a wide range of skills through their play. In many cases, primary aged pupils' oracy and basic reading skills, such as reading with appropriate fluency and accuracy, continued to develop steadily. In the majority of secondary schools, positive teaching features enabled many pupils to make suitable progress in literacy, and, where relevant, numeracy. However, at least a minority of lessons had shortcomings, leading to pupils' under-achievement. A minority of schools had clear strategies for developing literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, resulting in compelling pupil progress in applying these skills across contexts. Across the independent mainstream schools, pupil attainment was notably strong, with public examination results significantly above national averages. Many pupils at independent ALN specialist schools had previously experienced significant educational disruptions, but the strong support provided by most staff enabled many students to make suitable progress

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from their starting points. In further education settings, inspectors noted a clear link between effective teaching and strong learning. In the work-based learning sector, many learners made at least sound progress in developing a wide range of theory knowledge that helped support their job roles. In most cases, learners developed a comprehensive range of practical skills that they applied to their work roles well.

521. However, across all sectors there were key areas for continued improvement. The quality of teaching and learning was too variable within and across providers leading to inconsistent progress for learners. The socio-economic attainment gap remained too large and generally, attainment at higher grades in graded qualifications was too low.

Children's behaviour and engagement with learning

522. In the earliest stages of education establishments reopening and returning to 'normal' practice, the behaviour of children and young people was generally good. Overall, they were happy to return to a sense of 'normality' and engaged with their education appropriately. However, settings quickly became aware of a few learners displaying a range of negative and disruptive behaviour as they struggled to readapt to the routines and expectations. Across the system there was increasing demand for well-being and mental health support, particularly amongst the most disadvantaged learners.

523. The most recent annual report (2023-2024) identifies that many children and young people across the non-maintained, primary, secondary and all-age sectors demonstrate positive attitudes towards their learning, with particular strength in primary schools and sixth forms. In secondary schools while the behaviour of many pupils was good, a minority of learners did not engage with online learning regularly or decided to switch cameras off and not participate in face-to-face discussions. As a result a minority of pupils have found it difficult to adjust to routines in secondary schools post pandemic. While rates of attendance are improving, persistent absence is high and

there is a correlation between pupils poor behaviour and weaknesses in attendance. School leaders and teachers report that defiance is an ongoing issue with pupils reluctant to follow instructions. A very few secondary age pupils demonstrate complex behavioural needs, often beyond what a mainstream setting is able to manage. Across the independent mainstream and special school sectors, most children and young people were seen to behave well and take part in their learning enthusiastically. Most pupils in PRUs showed significant behavioural improvements, and exclusions and physical interventions were low, reflecting the success of tailored behaviour strategies.

Attendance

524. During 2021-2022 we found that attendance rates in schools, and PRUs in particular, remained below pre-pandemic levels and issues of persistent absence proved more stubborn and difficult to tackle than previously.

525. Following the pandemic, the first academic year for which verified attendance was published by the Welsh Government was 2022-2023.

526. In our 2022-2023 HMCI's annual report, we highlighted the notable decrease in school attendance following the pandemic. The fall was particularly large for secondary-age pupils, with the national rate of attendance falling by 6.3 percentage points between 2018-2019 (93.8) and 2022-2023. This equates to each pupil, on average, attending school for 12 days less in 2022-2023 than they did in 2018-2019. For primary-age pupils, attendance fell by 3.2 percentage points over the same period.

527. During 2023-2024, the rate of attendance for primary-age pupils increased by 0.6 percentage points to 92.1%, although the rate remains 2.5 percentage points below the pre-pandemic level. For secondary-age pupils, attendance has not shown any overall significant improvement. Over 2023-2024, the rate of secondary attendance has increased by just 0.5 percentage points and remains 5.7 percentage points below 2018-2019 figures at 88%.

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528. Analysis of attendance rates post pandemic shows a much wider variation in attendance than rates prior to the pandemic. For example, in one secondary school, attendance in 2022-2023 was just 1.3 percentage points below that in 2018-2019, whereas 10 other secondary schools saw their attendance fall by more than 10 percentage points over the same period.

529. There is also variation in the attendance rates between local authorities, and the quality of support offered by local authorities to support schools with improving attendance. In the most severe cases of poor attendance, local authorities have not responded quickly enough to develop bespoke arrangements to support individual schools.

530. When the data is considered by school Year, the rate of attendance is fairly similar for pupils of all ages in the primary sector. However, for secondary-age pupils, the rate of attendance falls substantially as pupils get older. In 2023-2024, Year 11 pupils show the lowest rate of attendance at 85.3%.

531. One of the groups of pupils whose attendance has been most affected by the pandemic is pupils who are eligible for free school meals. In 2018-2019, the gap between the attendance of pupils who were eligible for free school meals and their counterparts was 3.1 percentage points in the primary sector and 5.2 percentage points in the secondary sector. The attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals fell by a notably bigger amount than that of their counterparts during the pandemic. As a result, these differences increased substantially, and in 2022-2023 the gaps were 5.8 percentage points for primary age pupils and 10.4% for secondary aged pupils. Between 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the difference between the attendance of pupils eligible for free school meals and their peers grew smaller, but only by a very small margin. The difference is still substantially bigger than pre-pandemic levels. In the secondary sector, pupils eligible for free schools are still, on average, missing one day of school per week.

532. In maintained special schools, attendance improved post-pandemic. However, historical comparisons in 2023-2024 academic year were challenging due to a lack of current national data for maintained special schools.

533. The following reports are applicable:

- Recovery from COVID-19 – Adroddiad Blynyddol | Annual Report [E*xhibit* OE/116 – INQ000618316].

- Improving attendance in secondary schools 2024 [E*xhibit* OE/108 – INQ000618299].

- Attendance 2023 to 2024 [E*xhibit* OE/109 – INQ000618300].

Elective home education

534. One of the most enduring impacts we observed was the marked increase in the number of families choosing Elective Home Education (EHE) during and after the pandemic. Some families reported positive experiences of home learning and felt confident to continue educating their children outside of school. Others opted for EHE due to health concerns, dissatisfaction with how schools managed COVID-19 safety measures, or anxiety experienced by their children during the return to school.

535. Estyn reported that this surge in EHE placed considerable strain on local authority services, which were already variable in capacity and resources before the pandemic. In many cases, local authorities lacked up-to-date information, robust systems for engagement, or the ability to adequately assess the suitability of the education being provided. Concerns around safeguarding and the visibility of vulnerable learners became more acute.

536. We concluded that the growth in EHE has created new and lasting challenges for the education system in Wales. While EHE may work well for

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some families, it also raises significant questions about equity, oversight, and access to broader learning and social experiences. Estyn actively advocates for the development of robust and coherent national guidance, and strongly emphasises the importance of equipping local authorities with the necessary support, tools, and resources to effectively monitor, evaluate, and promote the progress of this growing learner cohort.

Provision for children with special educational needs ('SEND')

537. In our annual report 2020-2021 we reported that the disruption caused by the pandemic had led to particular challenges for those learners with additional learning needs (ALN). Many were used to receiving support from a teacher or teaching assistant in the classroom, and this was often not available due to a shortage of adult support or was not possible when learners worked from home. Providers continued to look for different and often innovative ways to help these learners continue with their learning, although learners with ALN often found it difficult to engage in online, remote learning. Disruptions also led to delays in some learners being assessed for their additional learning needs. Nearly all special schools and PRUs remained open throughout the pandemic, continuing support for these vulnerable learners'

538. During 2020-2021 we found the impact of the pandemic on pupils with ALN in secondary schools had been considerable. These pupils tended to engage less than others with online learning. Schools offered them support, for example, they involved teaching assistants in online classes and invited pupils into school so that staff could help them to complete their work and support them with any other issues. Secondary school staff were especially concerned about the low engagement of pupils with ALN during periods of lockdown. In our annual report 2020-2021 we reported that primary school staff continued to work with pupils who required additional support, either via remote learning or in the hub provision, although teachers often found it more challenging to meet pupils' individual needs remotely. In a minority of

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schools, pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) continued to find it difficult to engage with remote learning activities.

539. In maintained special schools, our 2020-2021 findings showed that the well-being of many pupils remained good overall, despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic. However, in some cases, pupils struggled without the structure and routine they were used to in their normal learning environments.

540. In 2023-2024 Independent schools and maintained special schools, reported a change in pupil profiles, noting an increase in referrals of pupils with complex mental health needs. During the same period, PRUs have noted an increase in pupils with autistic spectrum conditions.

541. In 2023-2024 we conducted a thematic review of the impact of poverty on the educational attainment, support, provision and transition for early education Exhibit OE/117 INQ000618318]. We found that leaders reported an increase in the numbers of children starting in settings or schools with emerging additional needs.

Children and people's social and development

542. In many sectors there was a notably negative impact on the social skills of some learners. For example, in non-maintained settings there was an increase in the number of children with less developed social and personal skills, who found it difficult to share and play with other children. However, by the time of the 2023-2024 annual report, many non-maintained settings planned opportunities that enabled pupils to develop their social and collaborative skills purposefully. In special schools, PRUs and the justice sector, a few learners struggled to settle back in to more normal routines. However, by 2023-2024, the high quality of care, support and guidance available to pupils in effective PRUs was impacting on children and young people's social, emotional, behavioural and mental health needs well. In secondary schools, a minority of pupils had difficulties re-engaging with

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school life and expectations, leading to an increase in behaviour issues. However, by 2023-2024 most secondary schools offered solid support for vulnerable learners, including those adversely affected by poverty, and those with behavioural and emotional needs. Many schools had specific areas where anxious or insecure pupils could receive support for their learning. Vocational subjects and tailored courses were available in many schools to keep pupils at risk of disengagement and exclusion engaged in education. These efforts contributed significantly to the inclusive and nurturing nature of schools, enabling vulnerable pupils to continue their learning.

Safeguarding in schools

543. In primary schools, safeguarding referrals often increased during lockdown and around a fifth of independent schools reported an increase in safeguarding concerns. Further education providers reported a high demand for counselling and many also reported an increase in safeguarding referrals, particularly relating to self-harm and suicidal thoughts. In most cases following the pandemic, non-maintained nurseries and primary schools had maintained a robust and effective focus on safeguarding. Overall, staff were well-trained and had a good understanding of policies and procedures. However, in a few cases there were concerns around aspects such as site security and record keeping. In the independent sector, there was an appropriate culture of safeguarding overall, with half of schools deemed to have strong practice. Currently, in most sectors education settings have strong and effective safeguarding cultures. However, too many independent special schools do not have formal procedures and policies for managing safeguarding.

The extent technology in classrooms has evolved to deliver education remotely since the pandemic

Primary Sector

544. Primary inspections do not currently suggest that approaches to deliver education remotely have evolved significantly since the pandemic. Rather, schools often highlight the need for more direct teaching to ensure that pupils have the basic skills in literacy and numeracy required to access the wider curriculum. In addition, schools often note anecdotally that pupils' social skills and emotional regulation are still affected from the experiences of the pandemic and improving attendance and ensuring face-to-face contact with adults and other pupils remains a priority: "During 2022-2023, primary schools continued to place a strong emphasis on supporting the well-being of pupils and their families. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools strengthened their pastoral systems to provide the additional emotional support that many pupils and their families needed."

Secondary Schools

545. Secondary schools have captured the learning from the pandemic and some have used the remote arrangements for pupils to continue to learn when there are unexpected school closures, for example poor weather or where individual pupils are absent due to health issues. During the pandemic many schools changed the organisation of lunchtime and created zones around the school grounds to limit year groups mixing. Many schools have retained some aspects of these changes.

Further Education

546. Over time, FE colleges have either returned fully to face-to-face delivery or have chosen to retain a very small amount of online delivery where appropriate. The rationale for moving back to face-to-face delivery is that it is preferable to both teachers and learners. Where remote learning is still in place, it is primarily on commercial and professional programmes, and some higher-level courses where learners and employers value this flexible approach. In a very few cases, colleges also offer part-time mathematics and English courses online.

547. Our report Digital and online learning in further education colleges – autumn 2022 insights applies [Exhibit OE/110 – INQ000618301].

Summary

What Did We Do and What Did We Learn

548. Estyn responded swiftly to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic by suspending all inspection activities in March 2020, in agreement with the Welsh Government, to allow education providers to focus fully on the well-being of learners, staff, and their communities. In place of inspections, Estyn redeployed staff to support Welsh Government policy development and engaged directly with providers through calls, visits, and thematic analysis across all sectors.

549. We learned that the flexibility to shift roles from inspectors to supporters was vital in times of crisis. Engagement with providers revealed the uneven impact of the pandemic across Wales and underscored the critical importance of school leadership, digital access, community links, and a strong focus on learner and staff well-being. The absence of routine inspections allowed providers space to adapt creatively and focus on essential support for their pupils.

Main Impacts:

550. The main impacts were:
    - The suspension of inspections enabled schools to prioritise pupil welfare and adapt to remote learning without external pressures
    - Estyn contributed significantly to national understanding through thematic reports, practical guidance, and engagement updates
    - Engagement with providers supported the identification of effective practices and common challenges, informing both policy and provider-level improvements
    - The pandemic deepened educational inequalities, particularly for disadvantaged learners, and highlighted the digital divide

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Implications for the Future:

551. The implications for the future are:

- Estyn's approach during the pandemic has influenced longer-term inspection reform, including the shift away from summative judgments and toward greater emphasis on professional dialogue and contextual evaluation
- The importance of sustained support for well-being, digital inclusion, and flexible learning models has been reinforced
- Future inspection and advisory roles will need to remain adaptive and responsive, especially in the face of emergencies, and should continue to focus on building system resilience
- Continued investment in thematic research, engagement strategies, and collaborative policy shaping will be essential in supporting recovery and reform across the Welsh education system

The impact of the pandemic on children in nursery settings

552. In January 2019, Estyn began to inspect non-maintained nursery settings together with Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), using a joint inspection framework. The guidance handbook for inspecting care and education in regulated non-school settings eligible for funding for part-time education [Exhibit OE/013 – INQ000618320]. Up to March 2020, joint inspections considered the quality of care and education provided for three- and four-year-old children that do not receive their education in a maintained setting. In setting that included registered after school provision, CIW also considered the care and well-being of children up to the age of 12. The inspection framework, at this time, comprised of six themes in three key areas: themes 1 and 2 considered children's outcomes, themes 3 and 4 considered how well practitioners contribute towards these, and themes 5 and 6 considered the quality of leadership in ensuring good outcomes for children.

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553. Prior to January 2019, we inspected non-maintained nursery settings as a single agency. Inspectors considered the following three Key Questions:

- 1: How good are the outcomes?
- 2: How good is provision?
- 3: How good are leadership and management?

554. The key questions covered ten aspects of provision and outcomes. These were standards, well-being, learning experiences, teaching, care support and guidance, learning environment, improving quality, partnership working and resource management.

555. Prior to March 2020 (and currently) we provided judgements on the quality of provision using a four-point scale ranging from Excellent to Poor. We also considered whether settings needed any follow-up activity as well as highlighting effective practice that was worthy of dissemination on our website. We normally inspect around 90 settings a year but this was reduced slightly in the 2019-2020 academic year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

556. It is worth noting that, as outlined at paragraph 37 above, Estyn are not a regulator of nursery or non-maintained settings. In Wales, CIW fulfils this role.

557. We paused our joint inspections of all non-maintained settings in March 2020 due to COVID-19.

558. In mid-September 2020, we began engagement calls with non-maintained settings funded to deliver early education to learn more about how individual settings and the sector in general had managed since March 2020, and how they were operating at that time. The work focused on three main topics, including well-being, supporting learning and re-establishing provision.

559. Through our engagement work during the academic year 2020-2021, we spoke to leaders of around have the total number of settings across Wales. We made engagement phone calls to 267 non-maintained settings between the end of September 2020 and mid-February 2021. The focus for each discussion was the well-being of children and staff and how settings supported learning and re-established provision following lockdown. Most contact was through planned engagement calls, and we also visited eight providers.

560. Additionally, we carried out 12 area meetings with early years advisory teachers and support partners from local authorities, regional consortia and umbrella organisations. The focus for discussions was the well-being of children and staff, curriculum and teaching, professional learning, setting leadership and additional learning needs.

561. In January 2022 we resumed inspections of non-maintained nursery settings, although summative judgements were ceased temporarily. During the spring and summer terms of 2022 Estyn carried out a total of 60 joint inspections.

Nature and method of the inspections conducted

562. During the Specified Period, Estyn conducted 267 engagement calls in the Spring Term of 2021 and 57 engagement visits during Autumn Term of 2021. These were not formal inspections, but engagement activities designed to gather quantitative insights through discussions with leaders and staff. Additionally, insights were collected from 12 area meetings involving early years advisory teachers and support partners, for example local authorities, regional consortia and umbrella organisations. The discussions during these visits focused on the following key themes:
   - Well-being of children and staff
   - Supporting learning
   - Re-establishing provision
   - Curriculum and teaching
   - Professional learning

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- Leadership
- ALN

563. The visits and involved direct conversations, observations and collection of anecdotal evidence to understand how settings adapted to and operated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

How the pre-school settings that were inspected were selected

564. From January 2021, Estyn made contact with settings in all local Authorities that offered early education in non-maintained settings. We selected a range of settings with the intention to capture a broad overview of the sector ensuring a diverse and equal representation from urban, rural, Welsh-medium and English-medium settings. The sample provided data representative of the wider non-maintained sector across the whole of Wales during the Specific Period.

The objectives of these visits and reports

565. The overarching aim of these telephone conversations and engagement visits was to understand how non-maintained settings were responding to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of each discussion was the well-being of children and staff, curriculum and teaching, professional learning, setting leadership and additional learning needs.

566. Initial objectives included:
- To understand how settings supported children, families and staff during and after lockdowns
- Focused on well-being, continuity of learning, safeguarding and reopening procedures

567. Estyn captured the sector's response to closures, infection control, remote support and engagement with parents. Our 2021 Autumn Term visits included the following objectives:

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- To assess the well-being of children and staff in the aftermath of lockdowns

- To evaluate changes and adaptations in teaching practice and delivery

- To identify how settings were preparing for the implementation of the new curriculum

- To assess the extent and effectiveness of professional learning opportunities for staff during the pandemic

- To review leadership strategies for maintaining safe environments and effective provision

- To monitor how settings were preparing for the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Tribunal (Wales) Act ALNET)

568. These objectives supported broader efforts to inform guidance, resource allocation, and policy development for early years education in Wales.

569. Engagement work – Non-maintained sector update autumn term 2021 and Engagement work: Non-maintained sector update – spring 2021 [Exhibit OE/051 – INQ000618368] and [Exhibit OE/039 – INQ000618356].

Main findings about how the pandemic impacted children attending nursery settings

Numbers and proportions of children attending

570. During the early stages of the pandemic, attendance at non-maintained nursery settings decreased significantly due to national lockdowns and parental concerns. Although many settings reopened relatively early, numbers remained lower than usual, especially in areas of deprivation or where families had health concerns. By late 2021, most settings had resumed operations, but some continued to experience reduced enrolments and attendance due to lingering anxieties and disrupted routines.

Children's learning

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571. Many children returned to nursery settings with notable gaps in their learning, particularly in early language development and foundational literacy and numeracy skills. Practitioners reported that children had reduced concentration spans and needed more time to re-establish routines. The limited access to early education during closures had particularly impacted children who had been due to start early learning for the first time during the lockdown periods.

Children's development

572. *Gross motor skills*: Practitioners observed delays in physical development, especially in children from families without access to outdoor spaces. A few children showed reduced coordination and strength compared to pre-pandemic cohorts.

573. *Emotional and social development*: There was a noticeable decline in children's social confidence. Many struggled with separation anxiety and group interactions. Turn-taking, sharing and forming friendships took longer to develop than previously observed.

574. *Speech and language development*: There were widespread concerns about delayed speech and language skills, especially among children from non-English or non-Welsh speaking households. This was more acute in Welsh-medium settings where language immersion had been disrupted.

575. *Independent self-care skills*: Settings noted that many children required more support with self-care routines, including toileting and dressing, than previous cohorts. These skills had not developed consistently during periods of home isolation.

Behaviour of children upon their return

576. Whilst most children were pleased to return, many initially displayed heightened anxiety and low resilience. Practitioners reported increased instances of clinginess, frustration, and reduced self-regulation. Over time, supportive routines and nurturing approaches helped many children reacquire expected behaviours, although a small cohort continued to experience challenges well into 2022.

577. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with additional learning needs were disproportionately affected. These children often lacked access to digital resources, stimulating home environments, and consistent routines. In Welsh-medium settings, children from non-Welsh-speaking homes showed greater regression in their oracy and comprehension. Practitioners also reported that boys appeared slightly more affected in terms of emotional regulation and physical development.

Communication

578. Estyn maintained regular communication with Welsh Government officials throughout the Specified Period, particularly with the Foundation Phase Team. Senior Civil Servant Mr Stephen Gear was the primary liaison from the Welsh Government. HMCI and Strategic Directors discussed key findings from engagement activities, including challenges in early years provision, during scheduled advisory meetings.

579. These discussions included:
- The impact on children's well-being and development
- Emerging issues with speech and language delays
- Observations on the recovery of learning post-lockdown

Outcomes included:
- Informing Welsh Government policy and funding decisions (e.g. support for EAL/Welsh-medium immersion)
- Contribution to revised guidance on early education post-pandemic
- Supporting the development of the early years elements of the Curriculum for Wales

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Non-pharmaceutical interventions

580. Estyn did not have a direct role in monitoring infection control measures in nursery settings, as this falls under the remit of Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). However, we maintained regular engagement with key stakeholders, including CIW and Welsh Government representatives, to discuss the implementation of government guidance on non-pharmaceutical interventions. Through these meetings, we remained informed of emerging issues and shared observations from our inspection activity where relevant.

581. From our engagement calls and observations, we reported the following infection control measures:

582. Settings implemented bubble systems, staggered entry/exit times, and hygiene routines.

583. Many settings adapted outdoor play and learning to reduce infection risks.

584. Challenges included explaining NPIs to young children and managing parental access.

585. Estyn shared these insights with CIW and the Welsh Government to support aligned messaging and mutual understanding.

Summary

586. Estyn's analysis indicates several enduring impacts for the cohort of children who were nursery-aged during the pandemic, many of which continued into their early primary school years.

587. Developmental delays: Delays in speech, physical development, and emotional regulation were evident upon transition to primary school. These children often needed more support to settle and learn.

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588. Learning gaps: Teachers in primary schools reported that these children required focused interventions in early literacy and numeracy, as well as additional time to develop independent learning behaviours.

589. Social and emotional challenges: A number of children displayed lower resilience and struggled more with social integration and collaborative learning. Settings reported increased demand for pastoral support and anxiety-related behaviour management.

590. Disparities in readiness: Children who missed out on quality early education due to prolonged closures or inconsistent access started school with less developed school-readiness skills. This was particularly noticeable in children from lower-income households.

591. Staff workload and professional learning needs: Early years practitioners required ongoing professional development to support recovery and address complex needs that were more prevalent post-pandemic.

592. Welsh language acquisition for children transferring to Welsh-medium schools: In Welsh-medium settings where very few children speak Welsh at home, most leaders reported that children's Welsh language development deteriorated during the initial lockdown periods. As a result, this cohort of children lacked the basic Welsh language skills on entry to primary schools.

593. However, we noted that subsequent cohorts of children who attended settings from September 2020 received the usual immersion provision which allowed them to acquire the appropriate Welsh language skills from the outset.

594. Estyn concluded that while most children adapted with support, the pandemic's legacy continues to shape early learning needs and highlights the importance of robust early years strategies, especially in addressing inequality.

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The impact of the pandemic on children and young people receiving further education and work based learning

595. In the period up to March 2020, we undertook a range of activities across the further education sector. This included core inspections, which were conducted on a whole-college basis across all campuses. Each further education college was inspected once per inspection cycle. As a result of previous mergers many further education colleges were large multi-sited institutions often spanning several local authority areas. Inspections involved a substantial number of peer inspectors drawn from other colleges working alongside a team of HMIs. Inspections were conducted in line with our Common Inspection Framework. All reports were published on our website and included a series of summative judgements.

596. In March 2020, immediately prior to pandemic restrictions being introduced, inspectors completed the FE core inspection of NPTC group of colleges between 25 February 2020 and 6 March 2020. This inspection report was subsequently published as planned. With the completion of this inspection, nine of the twelve further education colleges had been inspected in the then current cycle of inspections.

597. Our team of Estyn HMIs also made annual link inspector visits to further education colleges. These visits focused on a range of predetermined themes which were shared with providers ahead of the link visit. Visits were in person to one or more college campuses and usually lasted for two days. Common issues identified during each round of FE link visits were incorporated into the further education section of my Annual Report along with key issues identified in each year's core FE inspections and any thematic review(s) relevant to the further education sector.

598. In work-based learning, we undertook a range of key activities including core inspections of lead providers and their subcontractor partners. Inspectors also undertook annual link inspector visits to the lead providers to review the

effectiveness and quality of the provision. Inspectors also undertook a range of thematic surveys.

599. FE core inspection activity was suspended from 16 March 2020 in line with the announcement of a suspension of all our inspection activity due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This decision was made to allow leaders and staff in all education and training providers, and those organisations that support them, to focus fully on the well-being of their learners, their staff and their families. This suspension of inspection activities resulted in the postponement of the FE core inspection of Coleg Sir Gar / Coleg Ceredigion, which was planned to take place in late March / early April 2020.

600. Further education colleges began to re-open in June 2020 for face-to-face learning for priority groups of learners who needed to return to college to carry out practical assessments to complete their qualifications, and those learners who needed extra support and guidance to stay in education. From July 2020 we published several thematic reports and subject sector insight reports to support Wales to keep learning.

601. In May 2020 we resumed link inspector activities in further education by undertaking link inspector engagement calls with senior leaders of further education colleges. We conducted these remotely and they enabled us to obtain a national picture of the work being done across further education colleges in response to the pandemic. Our discussions with leaders focused on the well-being of learners and staff, how colleges supported teaching and learning and leadership throughout the pandemic.

602. In July 2020 we published brief insights into how further education colleges had worked to support their learners and community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Supporting well-being and learning during COVID-19 – approaches from further education colleges [Exhibit OE/029 – INQ000618346].

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603. We also continued to gather evidence for thematic reviews and reports on these continued to be published as planned.

604. In August 2020, we published a thematic report on Business and social studies at A-level for which the fieldwork had been completed prior to the pandemic, Business and social studies subjects at A level [Exhibit Estyn OE/073 – INQ000618391].

605. In October 2020 we published a thematic report on Celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion. This report identified good practice in supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) learners in schools and colleges based on fieldwork prior to the pandemic [Exhibit OE/74 – INQ000618392].

606. In summer 2021, we visited several further education colleges to find out how they had adapted to the return of face-to-face delivery. A summary of our findings is contained in the HMCI Annual Report 2020-2021 [Exhibit OE/098 – INQ000618416], pages 78-83. The summary details our findings in the following three areas:

- Well-being
- Teaching, training, learning and the curriculum
- Leadership

607. We also published a report on our engagement work in further education summarising the findings from link inspector engagement visits and calls made to all further education colleges between September 2021 and December 2021. Engagement work – further education and adult learning in the community update – autumn 2021 [Exhibit OE/052 – INQ000618369].

608. FE core inspections resumed in March 2022 and the remaining three FE colleges in the then current inspection cycle were inspected as follows:

609. Bridgend College was inspected between 22 March 2022 and 31 March 2022 [Exhibit OE/118 – INQ000618324].

610. Coleg Sir Gar / Coleg Ceredigion was inspected between 03 May 2022 and 12 May 2022. In line with other inspections taking place immediately after resumption of core inspection activities the report included evaluative statements for each of the five inspection areas along with a series of recommendations but did not include summative judgements for each of the inspection areas. This was an approach that we had agreed with Welsh Government and FE college leaders. The inspection report Coleg Sir Gâr and Coleg Ceredigion 2022 [Exhibit OE/119 – INQ000618325].

611. Coleg Cambria was inspected between 11 October 2022 and 20 October 2022. This inspection concluded that cycle of FE core inspections [Exhibit OE/120 – INQ000618326].

612. No follow-up activity was required for any further education colleges during this period.

613. In work-based learning, inspectors maintained regular contact with providers by means of remote meetings with key senior and middle leaders. The meetings had a clear focus on the support learners were receiving during the period of lockdown and the learning they were accessing. This included remote learning and assessment where appropriate and available and the pastoral support that learners accessed. During these meetings we gained an understanding of the remote activity learners undertaking and the evolving challenges they faced. We also maintained regular contact with Welsh Government key contacts to review and discuss the impact of actions.

614. In the period November 2020 to January 2021, inspectors contacted a sample of four providers from each of FE, work-based learning apprenticeships and adult learning in the community across Wales to find out greater depth about the successes and challenges of introducing remote and blended learning, as well as changing practice. To do this, inspectors held

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online meetings with senior and middle leaders, online meetings with teachers leading courses and programmes, which providers judged to be working well, remote observations of teaching and learning online and remote 'listening to learners' sessions. Estyn published two reports as a result of this work to support improvement across these sectors. Developments in remote and blended learning practice (23/1/2021) [Exhibit OE/100 – INQ000618289] and Support for learners' mental health and emotional well-being - Estyn (23/1/2021) [Exhibit OE/081 – INQ000618399].

615. We published a range of reports during and following the pandemic. These are referenced below with a brief note about the report's focus. Each report includes details about the evidence on which it is based. The reports give details about any approaches used specifically to gather evidence in addition to using that gathered during regular inspection work. The reports note which providers were visited or contacted by telephone or video call. Unless otherwise stated, schools are selected for thematic reports based on sampling that takes into account relevant factors such as provider location, main language of teaching and learner demographics.

List of relevant reports

616. **2019–2020** This report includes a thematic section focusing on education and training sectors' response to the COVID-19 pandemic between March and August 2020 [Exhibit OE/097 – INQ000618415].

617. **Annual Report 2020–2021** This report reviews how education and training providers responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic during the 2020–2021 academic year. It includes a timeline of COVID-19-related events and their impact on the education sector [Exhibit OE/098 – INQ000618416].

618. **Summary of Findings from Our National Thematic Reviews (2020–2021)** This compendium brings together the main findings and recommendations from our thematic reports published in 2020 and early 2021, many of which address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic [Exhibit OE/099 –

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INQ000618287].

619. **How Schools and Colleges Used the RRRS and Catch-up Grants for Post-16 Learners** This report focuses on the support for post-16 learners since September 2020 through the 'Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards: Accelerating Learning Programme' grant in schools and the catch-up grant in further education colleges [Exhibit OE/083 – INQ000618401].

620. **Annual Report 2021–2022: Recovery from COVID-19** This report discusses the ongoing effects of the pandemic across all education sectors during the 2021–2022 academic year. It highlights challenges such as disruptions to teaching, declines in learners' skills, and increased demand for well-being support [Exhibit OE/101 – INQ000618290].

621. **Developments in remote and blended learning practice** This report provides an overview of the work of further education, work-based learning and adult learning in the community providers during the COVID-19 pandemic [Exhibit OE/100 – INQ000618289].

622. **Support for Learners' Mental Health and Emotional Well-being in the Post-16 Sectors** This report examines how further education colleges, work-based learning providers, and adult learning partnerships supported learners' mental health and emotional well-being during the pandemic [Exhibit OE/081 – INQ000618399].

Main findings

623. In further education colleges, most learners welcomed the return to face-to-face delivery. However, as a result of many of the least able learners having fallen further behind during the pandemic, skills in literacy and particularly numeracy, remained substantially wider than for similar cohorts of learners prior to the pandemic.

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624. Learners on programmes where there was a backlog of practical assessments due to disruption caused by the pandemic were also particularly adversely affected. This was especially the case on child-care and health and social care courses where placements were severely disrupted. This resulted in a lower proportion of learners successfully completing these programmes and increased numbers of learners taking considerably longer than anticipated to complete their programmes.

625. The pandemic also affected learner recruitment patterns in further education colleges. Due to the increased proportion of learners achieving GCSE examination grades that allowed them to access level 3 programmes, including AS/A-levels and/or level 3 vocational programmes the proportion of learners in further education colleges undertaking these programmes increased in the two-year period after the pandemic. This reflected the increase in GCSE grade profiles associated with the period during which centre-assessed or centre-determined grades were in operation. Further education colleges reported that a higher proportion of these learners struggled to cope with the demands of studying on advanced level programmes and this has impacted adversely on both learner retention and achievement rates on these programmes during this period.

626. In work-based learning, nearly all learners made limited progress in the development of their practical skills because of their workplaces being closed. Although providers delivered theory sessions remotely these new to all participants and the process took time to be developed and become settled. Assessors and tutors worked hard to give learners individual support. During this period many learners' motivation declined and in sectors such as health and social care learners often left the setting due to the pressure of work. Learners often lost self-confidence and those interpersonal skills, such as communication, declined. In effect most learners had their progress put on hold and this had a negative impact.

Communication

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627. We were in regular communication with Welsh Government officials responsible for post-16 education and training. Our formal advice was through the series of publications outlined in paragraphs 81 to 152.

628. The Welsh Government published a 'Post-16 Resilience Plan for the Post-16 sector' in May 2020' [Exhibit OE/121 – INQ000618327] and established several task and finish groups to support the key delivery areas of the plan, involving working closely with Estyn and a wide range of post-16 stakeholders and organisations. We were asked to chair the group developing guidance to support A-level provision in school sixth forms and further education colleges. We also contributed to work on developing blended learning guidance for the post-16 sectors and we continued to be part of a group looking at supporting well-being. Guidance was published by the Welsh Government and no longer available on their website. Alongside this ongoing advice, we also published a range of cameos to bring to life how post-16 providers have approached their work during the crisis.

Summary

629. In further education colleges throughout the period since the end of the pandemic, we have identified that a majority of learners are continuing to start their courses from a lower starting point than would have been expected. Overall, these learners' knowledge and skills were not as strong as that of similar cohorts before the pandemic, reflecting the disruption to their prior learning. In particular, the majority of learners' literacy and numeracy skills were less developed than previous cohorts and many learners did not make sufficient progress in developing their numeracy skills. This is despite more learners than usual starting college with GCSE English and mathematics qualifications at grade C or higher and fewer needing to do resits.

630. Many learners studying qualifications that involve external examinations tell us that that they continue to be anxious about sitting examinations,

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especially as many did not sit many (or any) external examinations due to disruption caused by the pandemic.

631. Colleges continue to tell us that there continues to be much higher numbers of learners facing challenges with mental health issues than prior to the pandemic.

632. The effects of the pandemic are also said to have accelerated the staff recruitment challenges many colleges were already facing. Many colleges experienced an increase in staff turnover and report ongoing difficulties in recruiting staff to a few specialist teaching and support roles. Almost all college leaders continue to report difficulties recruiting Welsh-speaking staff. Staff recruitment to lower paid roles, such as learning support assistants and ancillary staff, continue to be cited as particularly challenging.

633. In work-based learning, providers and employers generally tried to return to 'normal' activities as soon as they could. Most providers realised that face-to-face delivery is the most effective and beneficial method. In health and social care assessors encountered particular difficulties in entering settings and therefore the number of assessments and reviews undertaken were limited. This restricted access continued for longer than other sectors and was compounded by learners leaving the sector due to the stress and conditions. The health and care sector has been the slowest to recover post-pandemic. This is attributed to the nature of the work, the terms and conditions, and the lack of support employers often give learners to attend off-the-job teaching and training activities.

The impact of the pandemic on children and young people accessing youth work

634. Since September 2010 and up to March 2020, Estyn's work as an inspectorate in the youth work sector was primarily carried out through our inspections of Local Government Education Services (LGES). As part of these inspections, we evaluated the planning, delivery, and effectiveness of

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youth support services, including youth work, provided by local authorities under the statutory framework of the Learning and Skills Act 2000.

635. Our remit involved assessing how well youth services contributed to the well-being, engagement, and progression of young people, particularly those at risk of disengagement. We focused on aspects such as strategic leadership, partnerships with voluntary sector providers, resource allocation, and the quality and impact of direct youth work interventions.

636. In addition to inspection, we also undertook thematic reviews and research that considered youth work as part of a broader support network for children and young people such as 'Youth Support Services in Wales: The Value of Youth Work' published in 2018 [Exhibit **OE/121a - INQ000649812**]. This included reporting on innovative practice and providing advice to Welsh Government on youth policy and improvement planning. Our work aimed to promote the value of youth work as a preventative and developmental service that contributed to wider educational and social outcomes.

637. Estyn worked closely with other inspectorates and stakeholders, such as the Welsh Government Youth Engagement Branch, to ensure coherence and shared understanding of youth work's role within the education and well-being landscape. While we did not inspect individual youth work projects in isolation, our inspection methodology incorporated consultation with youth workers, young people, and service managers, providing a well-rounded picture of the sector's contribution.

638. At the start of the pandemic in March 2020, Estyn suspended all routine inspections in line with national lockdown restrictions and public health measures. This included inspections of Local Government Education Services (LGES), which encompass youth work. Our work changed significantly – we shifted towards a supportive and advisory role, engaging virtually with providers to gather insights, share effective practice, and monitor emerging challenges. By autumn 2021, Estyn resumed inspection activity on a phased basis, guided by Welsh Government advice. During this

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time, we updated our frameworks and methods to reflect pandemic-related challenges and recovery priorities.

639. We did not carry out direct inspections or formal evaluations of youth work settings specifically during the peak of lockdown. However, we maintained regular contact with local authorities and regional consortia, capturing qualitative evidence on how youth work had adapted. For instance, many youth services moved online or delivered outreach support in new ways. The disruption due to social distancing, closure of centres, and reduced face-to-face engagement had a significant impact on access and continuity. Our observations were shared informally with Government colleagues and contributed to thematic briefings on learner engagement and well-being.

640. Many youth workers worked in school hubs. They worked with other educational professionals to provide support for learners, through visiting homes, delivering food and toiletry parcels and medication. Those with play work experience used their skills effectively to support the work in primary school hubs. Youth workers remained active during school holiday periods and during evenings and weekends during the school terms. Many of these practices were recognised in the Wavehill report (Marshall et al., 2021) to the Welsh Government, 'Research to inform development of the youth work strategy'. We found evidence that detached and street-based youth workers engaged with young people to ensure that they understood key health messages, such as the need to maintain social distancing. They also ensured that they stayed in touch with young people who did not connect through virtual platforms. In areas such as Rhondda Cynon Taf, the local authority invested in mobile provision such as vans equipped with seating and television screens, and teams used these with groups of young people who had been congregating on streets. As the restrictions lifted in the spring, youth workers in the Vale of Glamorgan developed a 'pop up youth club' offer. Youth workers in authorities such as Conwy and Gwynedd worked closely through outreach programmes with North Wales Police to tackle anti-social behaviour and its causes.

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641. Throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, we found that youth workers worked to support homeless young people at a time when they were particularly vulnerable. They also provided support for other vulnerable groups, such as looked after children, young carers, those experiencing family breakdown and those who are not in touch with other agencies or support networks. For example, youth workers in Blaenau Gwent helped young people to find accommodation and the local authority placed some young people, who would not usually be eligible to access support, in bed and breakfast accommodation to ensure that they had a safe place to live. Youth workers across Wales assisted and advised young people facing unemployment or eviction and gave them help in applying for financial support. The pandemic has raised the profile and benefits of youth work through highlighting the broad and adaptive skillset of youth workers. We shared the findings in relation to how youth work services adapted during the pandemic in our Chief Inspector's Annual Report for 2020-2021 (pages 74-75) and through our blog Understanding the value of youth work and youth workers (2021) [Exhibit **OE/121b - INQ000649813**]

Main findings

642. The pandemic had a profound impact on youth work. Services were quickly forced to adapt to remote or digital delivery, which affected reach and quality, especially for vulnerable or digitally excluded young people. Staff redeployment, reduced funding, and changing risk assessments further constrained provision. Although some innovations emerged – like online mentoring and digital hubs – the loss of trusted spaces, informal social contact, and preventative support weakened protective factors for many young people. Youth workers reported increased anxiety, disengagement, and safeguarding concerns.

Communication

643. We participated in cross-Government working groups, including those convened by the Welsh Government's Education Directorate. Our Chief

Inspector and Assistant Directors shared our findings through formal briefings and advisory meetings with senior civil servants, including Directors for Education and Youth Engagement. While we did not produce youth-work-specific reports, our broader insights on well-being and disengagement were used by Government in shaping recovery funding and well-being initiatives. For instance, some of our evidence informed the development of the Renew and Reform programme and Local Government engagement planning.

Summary

644. The pandemic's impact on youth work has lasting consequences. The forced shift to remote engagement altered how young people interact with services, and in a few cases, trust and participation have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Reduced staffing, inconsistent funding, and challenges in re-establishing face-to-face provision remain. Mental health and social development issues among young people appear to have increased. Youth work settings now face a dual challenge: supporting a cohort with heightened needs and rebuilding inclusive, accessible services.

The provision of education services to children in the secure estate

645. In respect of the provision of education services to children in the secure estate, key reports setting out analyses of the impact of the pandemic include:

- April 2020 (approx. date - unclear as post-holder at the time has left): YOI Parc Scrutiny Visit Estyn summative report
- April 2020 – Report by HMI Prisons on short scrutiny visits to Young offender institutions holding children, dated April 2020 which covers all aspects of HMI Prison's expectations:
  - Safety
  - Care
  - Purposeful Activity – including information on the education provision at the only YOI in Wales – HMYOI Parc

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- Resettlement
- April 2021 HMI Prison's Debrief on scrutiny visit to HMYOI Parc on 27th and 28th April 2021
- April 2021 HMI Prison's template evidence form for Children's resettlement with information on specific cases
- April 2021 Estyn's Note of Visit provided as submission for inclusion into HMIP's inspection report on HMYOI Parc during April 2021
- July 2022 Estyn's Note of Visit provided as submission for inclusion into HMIP's inspection report on HMYOI Parc during July 2022
- Hillside Secure Children's home – November 2023 Estyn report for Care Inspectorate Wales regarding Hillside Secure Children's Home

646. Advice provided by Estyn to Government about the impact of the pandemic in this area include:

- In Estyn Annual Report 2020-2021 [Exhibit OE/098 – INQ000618416] we identified some findings in relation to YOI Parc which is the only provision for children in the secure estate in Wales. We identified that in HMP/YOI Parc, the education provision engaged young people in learning throughout the pandemic effectively and enabled them to progress in their learning. Throughout the period of restrictions, the young people's unit continued to provide its learners with education, enabling them to access workshops or class-based sessions for a minimum of two hours each weekday, while managing their risks of exposure to infection by allocating them to small cohort bubbles.
- HMP/YOI Parc's management of learners' provision gradually increased the level of activities they could access over the first year of the pandemic, and from 19 April 2021 the offer of educational activities for learners was extended to 4½ hours a day. This was made possible by the fact that there was only a small number of young people in the institution and they were isolated from the main prison population. The continued provision of education and skills activities enabled them to gain many qualifications between April 2020 and March 2021.

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- Estyn Annual Report 2021-2022 [Exhibit OE/122 – INQ000618328].

647. The key data sets on which Estyn has relied in this area include:

- April 2021 results of HMIP's confidential survey of children held at HMYOI Parc
- April 2021 summary results of HMIP's confidential survey of children held at HMYOI Parc
- June 2021 Activities outline of provision held at HMYOI Parc
- Hillside Secure Children's Home - all data held for the relevant period held by Care Inspectorate Wales

Note: we do not consider the provision of children's social care services.

General assessment of the impact of the pandemic on children and young people, and lessons learned

Preparing for the future

648. We had scheduled an internal audit on our business continuity planning arrangements for September 2020. It's aim was to review our arrangements to continue to deliver core services in the event of major disruption to services. This did not proceed as planned due to prioritising our efforts on managing the current situation. Instead, the audit was deferred to February 2023.

649. We are refining our Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery plans in light of this audit. We have implemented a technology solution which we will be testing during autumn term 2025. We will:

- Develop a training and awareness plan
- Deliver training for staff
- Perform awareness walkthroughs for employees and third parties that have a role to play in systems recovery
- Begin tabletop exercise planning for testing
- Integrate IT procedures with business continuity workflows

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- Implement all support procedures
- Test the Business Continuity plan

650. We have identified the need for someone to formally act as GOLD command in any future incident such as a pandemic. The nominated individual attended training to fulfil this role w/c 2 June 2025. This will enable us to be better prepared for managing any incident or event including how we work with key stakeholders, capture contemporaneous notes of discussions and decisions as the incident unfolds and manage clear communication internally and externally. We plan to evaluate our approach in light of this training in August 2025.

651. We will review our policy for responding to a pandemic to reflect what we've learned over the last 5 years. The policy will be evolved to capture not only how we manage our own workforce but also to express how we might refocus our efforts to support the continuation of learning. We aim to complete this work in autumn term 2025. Central to the review will be the balance between our role in supporting practitioners but also ensuring minimum standards of expectations for education and training.

652. We will review and update our guidance on 'When will the next school or pupil referral unit (PRU) inspection take place?' to capture our approach to cancelling, postponing or deferring a statutory inspection during a similar event in autumn term 2025. This will provide transparency about our arrangements.

653. The negative impacts of the pandemic are multi-faceted but will need a relentless focus on:
- Returning attendance and participation to pre-pandemic rates
- High quality and targeted national programmes of guidance and support for reading and mathematics
- A relentless focus on mitigating the impact of poverty on learners' experiences and outcomes
- Ensuring an appropriate workforce through ITE

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- Rebuilding the social contract between education providers and the home

How children's learning and educational attainment could be better protected in the event of a future pandemic

654. The evidence presented throughout this statement demonstrates that approaches to teaching and learning evolved throughout the two periods of lockdown, but that remote learning remained overall insufficient in the delivery of the educational experiences children need. There are some sectors such as part-time Welsh for Adults provision where remote learning has become much more the norm since the pandemic and would likely largely continue unaltered in a future pandemic. However, this approach does not appear to meet the needs of children in full-time education and in particular younger learners, those with additional learning needs and those without strong home support.

655. It is clear that the best ways to protect children's learning and educational attainment may not be the best ways to protect their health. However, it would be helpful to weigh up the various health impacts of any approaches including the longer term mental health impacts we are seeing, as well as those that are potentially linked to lower attainment and progress into higher levels of education. Being in school has widespread benefits beyond formal learning in terms of supporting children's well-being and their social and interpersonal skills. Our view is that wherever possible some in person learning should be maintained and any school closures should be minimised. It may be that some of the measures that were put in place to support the return to in person learning such as bubbles or part-time in person learning should be considered earlier should a similar situation arise again.

656. However, we recognise that any decisions need to balance the short term public health considerations with the longer term health and educational considerations. Schools were certainly better placed by the second lockdown in January 2021 to deliver a better range of remote learning experiences, but

these still didn't meet the educational or well-being needs of children and young people fully.

How nursery provision for children could be better protected in the event of a future pandemic

Prioritising Early Years in Emergency Planning

657. We reported that early years settings, including nurseries, were particularly vulnerable during the pandemic. We suggest that these services should be given higher priority in national and local authority emergency response plans. This means ensuring:
    - clear guidance tailored for early years which aligns with that of schools and childcare settings to avoid any conflicting messages or confusion for setting leaders and parents/carers
    - consideration of the unique needs of very young children in decision-making

Support for Staff Well-being and Professional Development

658. The stress on nursery staff during the pandemic was significant, especially as many had direct contact with children from very early on in the pandemic. As such, it is important that in the event of a future pandemic, leaders and staff should be given:
    - improved access to mental health and well-being support
    - continued professional learning, particularly in remote learning methods and child development under disrupted conditions to better support children and their families
    - improved training on infection control methods, aligned across Wales to avoid duplication of delivery

Strengthening Digital Inclusion and Remote Engagement

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659. Many nurseries struggled to stay connected with families during closures. As such, it is important to further develop:

- better digital infrastructure and support for staff and families as many settings do not have access to wi-fi or digital equipment
- age-appropriate online resources for parents to use with young children, especially for those new to the Welsh language

Enhanced Communication with Parents and Carers

660. Clear, timely communication helped maintain relationships and support learning – settings often used their own social media channels or similar online platforms to communicate with families. We propose developing:

- structured systems to keep parents informed and involved
- guidance for staff on how to effectively communicate and support age and stage appropriate home learning

Maintaining Continuity of Care and Learning

661. Nurseries need support to continue key routines and developmental activities even during closures. This could include:

- creating flexible, developmentally appropriate learning packs or activity guides
- establishing safe ways to provide in-person support when possible, such as outdoor sessions or small group bubbles

Robust Safeguarding Measures

662. To protect vulnerable children during a pandemic, it is important to:

- strengthen safeguarding processes that can operate during setting closures
- ensure regular check-ins with families who may be at risk

Financial and Operational Resilience

663. Many nursery settings faced financial uncertainty during the pandemic, especially as many lacked financial reserves or guaranteed income. As such, it is important to ensure:

- greater financial support from the outset to ensure sustainability, including supporting outdoor learning provision through capital grants and the purchase of PPE, infection control supplies, etc. as well as early Furlough support

- streamlined guidance and support for safe reopening procedures so that leaders can plan how to provide continuity of service whilst protecting staff, children and families

How the provision of youth work could be better protected in the event of a future pandemic

664. Youth work provision could be better protected through:

- clearer national guidance on maintaining safe access to youth services during public health emergencies

- investment in digital inclusion to ensure all young people can access support remotely

- cross-agency protocols to safeguard continuity of youth engagement

- prioritising youth work in local recovery planning and funding allocations

- developing a national contingency strategy that includes youth voice and learning from this pandemic

In conclusion

What did we do and what did we learn

665. Estyn already had a workforce that worked remotely and regularly took part in hybrid meetings. From this point of view, we were well-placed to convert to working from home. We had already been planning to carry our engagement visits and had piloted these, so we had an activity format that was well suited to a more supportive engagement and evidence gathering. However, we had done less planning about how we would carry out our responsibilities in the event of the widespread and prolonged closure of all educational

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establishments. We responded quickly, contributed to national efforts to provide guidance and were quickly in a position to recommence engagement work with education providers. This allowed us to provide ongoing evidence about the response.

666. In the early days of the pandemic there was an overriding concern for supporting children's well-being, as well as that of education providers. In similar events, we would hope there would be a more seamless switch to a more consistent ongoing education provision, and we would more quickly switch our activities to gather first hand evidence of approaches and provide advice and assurance to government. We do not think it is fair to apply our usual inspection framework or carry out a programme of core inspections during a lockdown type situation. However, it is likely that we would return to such a programme sooner in similar circumstances in the future.

667. The work we did carry out allowed us to provide valuable published insights into the quality of the work of providers overall during this period. We provided more public accountability at an earlier stage about the work of local authorities in supporting schools than we did in terms of individual providers.

668. The work we did do built valuable relationships with education providers. They, and local authorities, valued our engagement and the consideration for their well-being. As time progressed, they valued the in person engagement visits we carried out and these provided a firm foundation for the interim visits that we now routinely carry out in addition to core inspections. These enhanced stakeholder relationships are allowing our evidence and evaluations to have more impact on supporting improvements in education and training.

Main impacts

669. We have outlined the range of impacts that the pandemic has had for outcomes for learners. These can be summarised as:

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- lower skill levels across curriculum areas but in particularly seen in literacy, numeracy and oracy, with greatest impact on younger children and those from disadvantaged background

- increased levels of persistent absence and attendance stubbornly slow to return to pre-pandemic levels

- increased low level behaviour incidents and negative shift in the attitudes towards learning for a few learners and parents

- widening of educational inequality in terms of attendance, engagement and attainment

- loss of Welsh language confidence for those learners not from Welsh-speaking homes

- increased mental health and well-being concerns, and an initial spike in safeguarding concerns

- sustained increase in elective home education (EHE)

- many younger and vulnerable learners experienced setbacks in social and emotional skills

Implications for future

670. Overall, it would be helpful to have a clear nationally agreed ambition for what experience we would like for learners in Wales should a similar situation arise. It would be helpful for education leaders, the Welsh Government and Estyn to engage in shared scenario planning to help support a more seamless response in a future pandemic. There needs to be a continued focus on ensuring that digital skills and access to technology are appropriate to enable any switch to online learning of any kind. Education needs continued investment to address the deficits in skills development that have been identified.

Glossary and key data sets

671. A glossary [Exhibit **OE/123** - INQ000618329].

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672. An explanation of the key data sets on which Estyn has relied in answer to the questions in this R9 [Exhibit OE/124 – INQ000618330].

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

673. **Signed:** Personal Data

Owen Evans

674. **Dated:** 31 July 2025