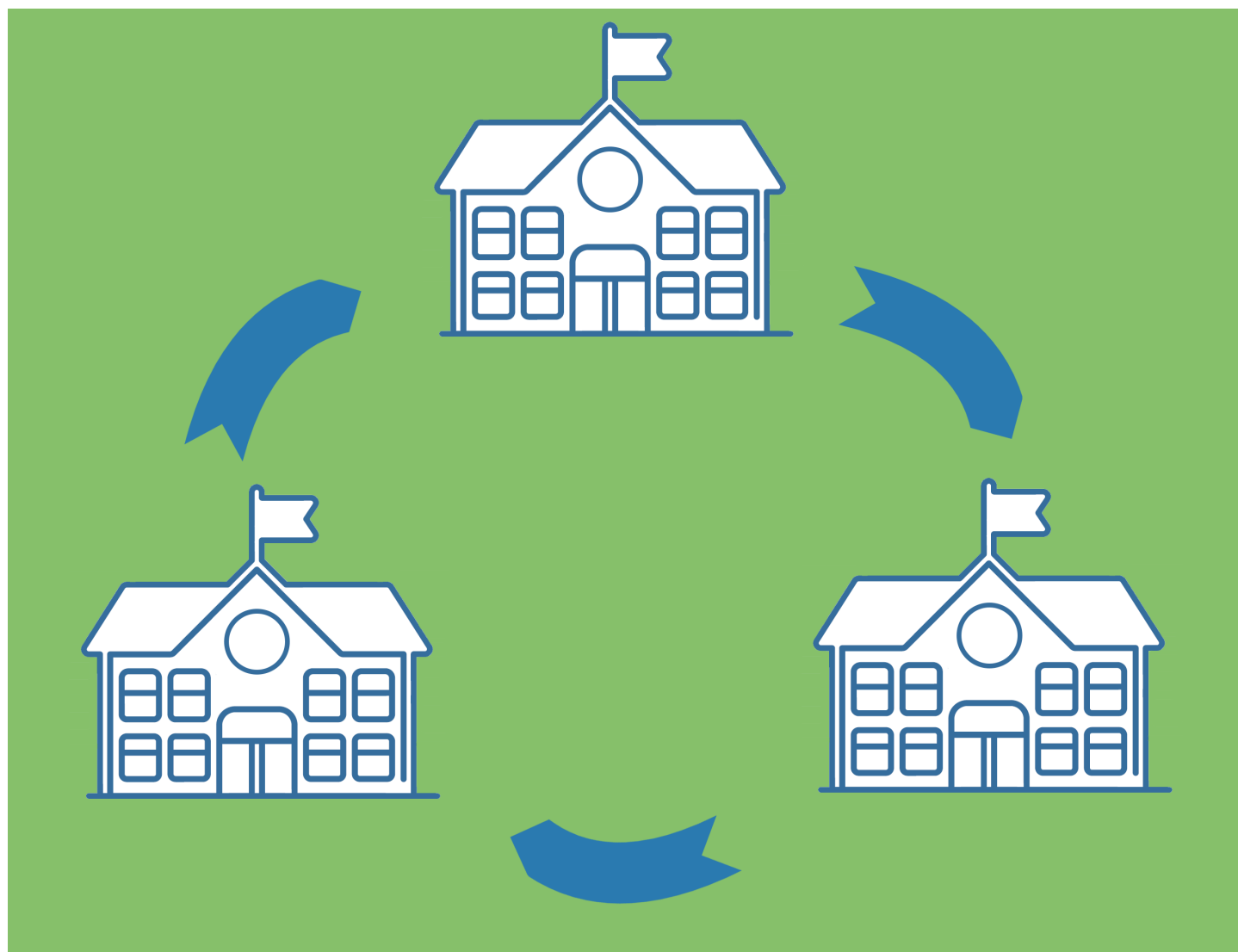

Federated Schools

Common features of effective federation

July 2019



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- ⤴ secondary schools
- ⤴ special schools
- ⤴ pupil referral units
- ⤴ all-age schools
- ⤴ independent schools
- ⤴ further education
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Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Background and summary of education research | 1 |
| Main findings | 5 |
| Recommendations | 7 |
| 1 The experience of the learner in a federated school | 8 |
| 2 Why schools federate | 10 |
| 3 The process of establishing a federation | 13 |
| 4 Realising the benefits of federation | 19 |
| | |
| Appendix 1: Self-evaluation questions for federation | 23 |
| Appendix 2: How Estyn inspects federations | 24 |
| Appendix 3: Evidence base | 25 |
| Appendix 4: List of federations in Wales | 28 |
| Glossary | 30 |
| References | 32 |

Introduction

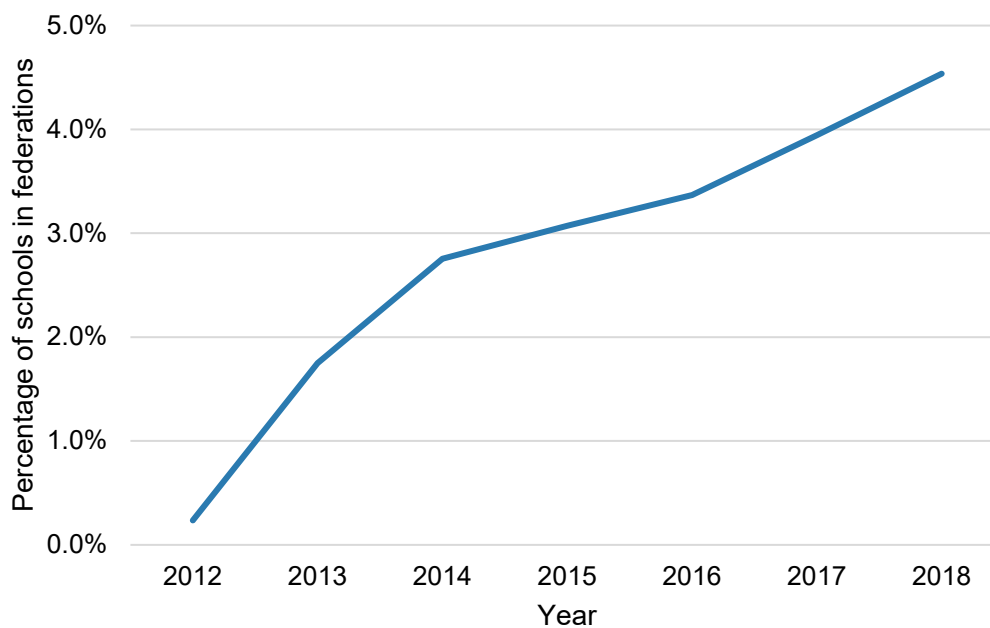
This report is written in response to a request for advice from the Minister for Education in her remit letter to Estyn for 2018-2019. The report examines the features of effective federation. It identifies the conditions, processes and arrangements that lead to and maintain effective federations. It also considers the possible pitfalls for federations and explores the reasons why federations are not always successful. It identifies examples of effective practice where governing bodies and local authorities have achieved successful federation.

In this report, the term ‘federation’ refers to a formal and legal arrangement by which a number of schools share governance arrangements and have a single governing body. The remit considers these legally-established federations and, in a very few cases, those schools currently in a formal consultation process leading to federation. It does not consider those schools in informal partnership arrangements or so-called ‘soft federations’. The report is intended for the Welsh Government, headteachers, governors, local authority elected members and officers.

The report is based on visits to a range of federated schools taking account of socio-economic and linguistic factors, geographical locations, size and type of federation. The report also draws on evidence gathered through inspection, questionnaires and telephone interviews with local authority representatives, and discussions at Estyn’s stakeholder forum for federated schools.

Background and summary of education research

Federation in Wales is a formal and legal agreement by which between two and six schools share governance arrangements and have a single governing body. Federations can involve a mix of maintained schools which are either nursery, primary, special or secondary schools. Under the Federation of Maintained Schools (Wales) Regulations 2014 (National Assembly for Wales, 2014), voluntary aided or voluntary controlled schools can only federate with schools of the same category or with schools that have a similar charitable trust status or religious ethos.

Figure 1: Percentage of maintained schools in federations¹, 2012 to 2018

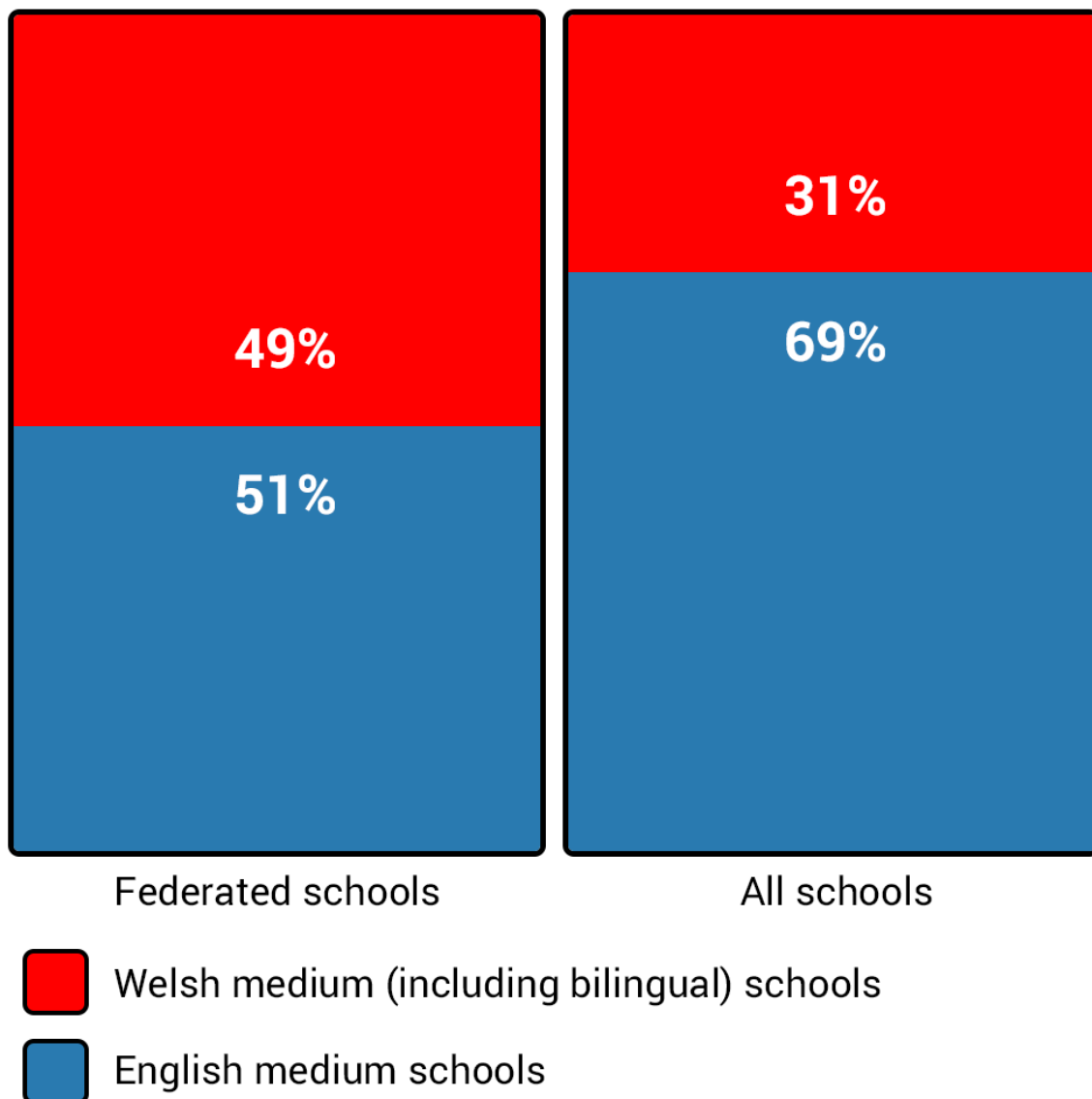
Source: Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), Welsh Government

¹Percentage of schools that were in federations on school census day in January of each year

The number of federated schools has grown steadily over the past few years. There are currently 31 federations across Wales, which represents about 5% of all schools. Nearly all of these consist of primary school federations. However, there are a few exceptions:

- The Federated Schools of the Upper Afan Valley: one secondary school and four primary schools
- The Cwlwm Federation: one primary and one secondary school
- Bryngwyn and Glan Y Mor Federation: two secondary schools
- The Western Learning Campus: three special schools

Almost all of the current primary school federations consist of two or three schools. Of the 72 schools that are part of a federation, many have fewer than 150 pupils on roll. Around a third of schools working in federation have less than 60 pupils. Around half are Welsh-medium and about 7% are faith schools.

Figure 2: Proportion of federated schools that are Welsh or English medium

Formal federation of schools has been possible in Wales since 2010. A review of the future delivery of education services in Wales (Hill, 2013, pp. 9-10) found a 'strong case on both educational and cost effectiveness grounds for the majority, and potentially all, of schools in Wales to be part of a formal federation or hard cluster with shared governance that is led by an executive leader'. In 2014, Federation Regulations were issued (National Assembly for Wales, 2014), which provided local authorities with a mechanism to federate schools in Wales. Accompanying guidance (Welsh Government, 2014) affirmed the policy objective to promote school federation in Wales, citing as part of the rationale a positive evaluation of the impact of federated schools in England (Ofsted, 2011).

A study by Chapman and Muijs (2013), found a positive relationship between federation membership and pupil attainment in secondary schools, although this was found to emerge in the years following federation. An earlier research study

(Chapman, Muijs and McAllister, 2011) estimated a time-lag of two to four years from federation to performance overtaking that of non-federated peers in England. The evidence suggested that the impact on student outcomes was greater where the federation partnered a high performing school with a low performing school, enabling cultures and practices to transfer from the 'stronger' to the 'weaker' school, and that the movement of staff between schools led to a shared understanding of approaches to teaching and learning as well as better economies of scale. The impact on outcomes was also greater where collaboration was formalised rather than informal. Muijs (2015) also found a positive relationship between collaboration and pupil attainment in primary schools, although the scale of the study was small. Here, success was characterised by the schools' capacity to engage in intensive interventions that were focused on key processes related to student outcomes: teaching and learning, assessment and strong leadership.

A review of evidence on effective school collaboration for school improvement (Armstrong, 2015) found that few studies had explored the link between collaboration and student outcomes. Where outcomes were the direct focus of the research, findings were mixed, contributing to a lack of empirical evidence linking student attainment convincingly to collaboration.

Existing research literature highlights a number of important factors associated with effective inter-school collaboration more generally. Among the most commonly cited are strong leadership, development of a clear set of shared goals, clear communication, and sensitivity to local context (Armstrong, 2015). The most frequently-cited barriers to effective inter-school collaboration were threats to school autonomy (Chapman et al., 2011), perceived power imbalances between schools (Lindsay et al., 2007), and additional workload and time pressure (Aiston et al., 2002).

The research literature paints a diverse picture of school-to-school collaboration and the guidance issued in Wales (Welsh Government, 2014, p. 11) similarly notes that 'the design or operational workings of a federation will depend entirely on the circumstances of the individual schools and the focus or purpose of their [...] work together'. However, the guidance, and the research evidence, is clear that benefits for learners must be a primary objective. Estyn's (2015) thematic report on school-to-school collaboration also suggests that partnerships work best when there is a clear focus on improving outcomes for pupils. The gaps in knowledge identified in the existing research literature on school collaboration, and the growing emphasis on 'self-improving school systems' (Hadfield and Ainscow, 2018, p. 443), make clear the need for further independent research into the conditions for successful federation, in particular what works, what does not work and why.

Recently, the Welsh Government (2018) published its rural education action plan. This commits to a national approach to small and rural schools and indicates that federation may be an appropriate tool for ensuring the sustainability of provision in rural locations.

Main findings

The experience of the learner in a federated school

- 1 Most federations use economies of scale to fund enhancements to the curriculum, such as residential visits and external visitors. In a few cases, federations use staff expertise to support the progress of specific groups of learners, such as those with additional learning needs (ALN). However, overall, senior leaders do not make sufficient use of staff expertise across the federation to enhance learning experiences for all pupils and to ensure the progress of particular groups of pupils, such as the more able or those who may underachieve because of deprivation.
- 2 In a minority of federated schools, teachers plan regular opportunities for pupils to work collaboratively with their peers in other schools. This has a positive impact on pupils' social skills and sense of wellbeing. In nearly all cases, federation has a positive impact on the transition experience for many pupils as they move from key stage 2 to key stage 3. This is particularly strong in federations that consist of a secondary school and cluster primaries.

Why schools federate

- 3 In most cases, governing bodies and local authorities enter into federation to increase the likelihood of securing effective leadership and the long-term viability and sustainability of schools. This is particularly the case for small schools, those in rural or geographically isolated positions, and Welsh-medium schools where headteacher recruitment is particularly challenging. In these cases, federation can improve the attractiveness of headship through benefits such as offering a larger salary, a reduced teaching commitment, and a wider pool of staff.
- 4 Although an important factor, budget efficiencies are seldom the sole motivation for federation. They are usually secondary to issues related to headteacher recruitment and sustainability of provision.
- 5 In a few cases, local authorities use federation in an attempt to bring about improvement in underperforming schools. They do this by linking the underperforming school with nearby stronger schools. Where this is successful, local authorities and governing bodies have secured effective overall leadership for the federation. Federation in itself does not necessarily ensure an improvement in standards of teaching and learning.
- 6 The pre-existence of effective informal collaboration between schools is a strong driver in ensuring the success of formal federation. Where informal arrangements have not been in place leading up to formal federation, successful leaders ensure that there is clear communication, a shared vision and sensitivity to local contexts, from the outset.
- 7 The geographical proximity of schools is an important consideration when local

authorities and governing bodies are considering federation. Closer proximity allows for more effective collaborative working at all levels, particularly with regard to providing opportunities for pupils to collaborate.

The process of establishing a federation

- 8 Where federation is most successful, governing bodies, senior leaders and local authorities have a clear vision of what they wish to achieve through the federation process. Their vision focuses sharply on outcomes for pupils. They are explicit from the outset about what federation does and does not entail and they communicate this clearly to staff, parents and pupils. In the best cases, they use existing federations to illustrate the potential benefits. They engage stakeholders in a transparent and meaningful consultation and co-construction process. Where these processes are effective, schools reap the benefits of federation early.
- 9 In the most successful cases, local authorities, governing bodies and senior leaders play a key role in ensuring that they place equal weight to the views of parents, staff and pupils from each of their school communities. They take care to ensure a balance between maintaining each school's individual identity and developing a sense of a larger, combined learning community.
- 10 In effective federations, governing bodies quickly establish leadership structures that support their vision for the federation. This includes ensuring effective arrangements for the leadership and management of each school in the headteacher's absence.
- 11 The quality of support local authorities provide governing bodies to assist them through the federation process is variable. In the best cases, local authorities ensure consistency of support across all schools in the federation, for example through the deployment of the same challenge adviser to each school.

Realising the benefits of federation

- 12 In successful federations, leaders improve provision and outcomes for pupils by sharing resources, systems and good practice across schools. However, in most cases, federated schools do not use information and communication technology (ICT) effectively to support collaboration, and in particular pupil collaboration, across school sites.
- 13 In most cases, where there is good governance and an effective executive headteacher in place, federation has a positive impact on leadership capacity at all levels. However, there are too few opportunities for headteachers to engage in professional learning that will prepare them to lead a federation or for senior leaders and staff of federated schools to network and share practice.
- 14 Federation frequently results in budget efficiencies for schools. Where capacity allows, increasing the role of administrative staff or employing a business manager to oversee budgets across the federation often results in further savings and efficiencies. However, in federations of smaller schools, managing two or three separate budgets and the pooling of resources can be a challenge for governing bodies and headteachers.

Recommendations

Federated schools should:

- R1 Work with stakeholders from the outset to establish a clear vision for the federation that focuses on improving outcomes for pupils
- R2 Develop leadership structures for the federation, including some non-teaching time for a senior leader on each site, to support effective day-to-day operation and good communication within and between schools
- R3 Use self-evaluation processes to identify how the skills and expertise of staff may be deployed to improve learning experiences for pupils across the federation
- R4 Develop the use of ICT to support collaboration by staff and pupils

Schools considering federation should also:

- R5 Evaluate the potential impact of federation on pupil standards and wellbeing
- R6 Identify the extent and effectiveness of any pre-existing collaboration
- R7 Identify and evaluate the potential impact of any barriers to effective federation, such as geographical remoteness

Local authorities and regional consortia should:

- R8 Provide relevant professional learning opportunities for senior leaders of federated schools
- R9 Review their funding arrangements so as to allow federated schools the flexibility to pool their resources more easily
- R10 Share good practice of effective federation with schools as they consider embarking on the federation process
- R11 Ensure consistency of support for all schools within a federation by, for example deploying the same challenge adviser to each school

The Welsh Government should:

- R12 Explore arrangements to help federated schools pool their resources

1. The experience of the learner in a federated school

- 15 In the few most effective and well-established federations, leaders make the best use of the larger staff body to deliver a curriculum and learning experiences tailored specifically to the individual needs of pupils. They draw on the strengths and skills of each individual teacher and deploy them to best effect across the federation. As a result, many pupils make better progress in standards and wellbeing than prior to federation.
- 16 In a few cases, a broader pool of teaching expertise, for example where the federation is cross-phase, allows schools to challenge more able pupils at levels suited to their needs. For instance, subject specific teaching from secondary school staff in art and music enables talented pupils in the primary phase to work at a level that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. Similarly, expertise in ALN provision allows for more specialist 'in house' knowledge that enables pupils with specific learning difficulties to make better progress. For example, senior leaders deploy a teaching assistant across all schools in a federation to target pupils' basic reading skills.
- 17 However, many federations, particularly those that are recently established, do not take enough advantage of the expertise of staff members to enhance learning experiences for all pupils and to ensure the progress of particular groups of pupils, such as those who may underachieve because of deprivation.
- 18 Many senior leaders seek to take advantage of the economies of scale arising from federation to provide pupils with curriculum enhancements that may be difficult to afford for a single provider, particularly a small school. This allows pupils to engage in sporting, cultural and social activities that are not available or are more difficult to facilitate, in smaller schools. For example, pupils from schools across a federation combine to take part in team sports, joint performances and residential trips. They share the cost of visits or of visitors to provide pupils with additional learning experiences that help to enrich their curriculum. A few federations purchase the services of specialist teachers that they deploy across all schools, such as employing a ukulele teacher to work with pupils in a specific year group. This has a positive impact on most pupils' physical, creative and social skills, as well as their overall sense of wellbeing.
- 19 Federation has a positive impact on transition experiences for many pupils in federated primary schools. Where federation arrangements are well established and pupils have frequent opportunities to work and play together, most pupils feel better prepared for the transition from key stage 2 to key stage 3. Socialising with a wider group of pupils provides them with a greater sense of confidence. This is particularly relevant in small schools where pupils may be part of a cohort of only four or five pupils.
- 20 In cross-phase federations containing both a secondary school and primary schools,

the impact on the wellbeing of pupils as they move to the next phase of their learning is particularly marked. In these cases, pupils not only have a wider social group to support them in their move, they also have a greater familiarity with their new teachers and learning environment. Similarly, staff in the receiving school have a greater knowledge of pupils and their family contexts. This reduces the impact of transition on the rate of progress pupils make in key stage 3.

- 21 In a very few federations, senior leaders take advantage of a wider pool of experience and expertise to deploy staff across the federation to enhance learning opportunities, both in lessons and as part of extra-curricular activities. For example, staff may have skills in languages, art and music that they are able to share across the federation. However, there is limited evidence of this in many federations. Too few senior leaders currently take full advantage of the breadth of staff expertise their schools contain to provide enhanced learning experiences for pupils. In a minority of federations, senior leaders use the expertise of staff who have strong Welsh language skills to improve the skills of others and raise pupils' standards across the federation.
- 22 While some research (Chapman, Muijs and McAllister, 2011) suggests a positive relationship between federation membership and pupil attainment in secondary schools, overall, the impact on standards resulting from federation is unclear. Although evidence suggests that senior leaders perceive benefits to pupils' outcomes overall as a result of federation, there is little empirical evidence to support this.

2. Why schools federate

- 23 In most cases, governing bodies and local authorities enter into federation to secure effective leadership and the long-term sustainability of schools. In many cases, local authorities are the initial instigators of this process, approaching governing bodies where they believe federation may be a solution to challenges of headteacher recruitment or of the viability of provision resulting from falling pupil numbers. Where there is a history of collaboration between schools, governing bodies themselves often initiate the federation process with guidance from local authorities. Imposed federation of schools by local authorities without support from all governing bodies is rare.
- 24 Governing bodies of small schools can find it difficult to fill vacant headteacher posts. The lower salary associated with headship of a small school, the likelihood of a demanding teaching commitment, and the lack of available support from a middle management team make it less attractive to potential candidates. This is particularly the case for schools in rural settings or those that are geographically isolated. Federation can improve the attractiveness of headship, offering a larger salary, a reduced teaching commitment, and more opportunities to develop leadership capacity across the school. This attracts a wider pool of candidates, including those with some previous experience of headship who wish a more challenging leadership role.
- 25 In most cases, federation of small rural schools occurs in a piecemeal and accumulative fashion, with an initial federation of two schools extending to three or more over time. This usually occurs as headteacher positions become vacant and collaboration with established local federations provides a solution to headteacher recruitment. In a few cases, local authorities take a planned, long-term approach to bring schools into the federation as they anticipate headteachers retiring or moving to new posts.
- 26 Governing bodies of Welsh-medium and faith schools face an additional challenge, in that the pool of potential candidates with the necessary language skills is smaller than for other schools. Again, governing bodies and local authorities use federation as a tool to address this issue in an attempt to attract a wider field of candidates.
- 27 Budget savings through shared leadership and pooling of resources can be a motivation for federating. For example, sharing the cost of leadership roles, such as those of the headteacher or additional learning needs co-ordinator, represents an opportunity to achieve financial savings. In many cases, leaders of federated schools employ administrative staff to work across the federation. In a few cases, this includes a bursar with responsibilities for managing the schools' budgets. This arrangement can offer potential economies of scale through bulk purchasing or the joint tendering for contracts, such as grounds maintenance. However, budget efficiencies are seldom the sole motivation for federation and are usually secondary to issues related to headteacher recruitment and sustainability of provision.

- 28 Where local authorities are concerned about the performance of a school, they may consider federation with a high performing near-by school as a method of improving standards. Such school-to-school support works best when there is a clear identification of need, a focus on improving outcomes for pupils and the relationships between schools are equal, trusting, open and transparent (Estyn, 2015). Federation does not by itself bring about improvements in teaching and learning unless senior leaders have the skills to developing a mutual commitment to school improvement among all staff across the federation.

Cameo: Cwmfelinfach and Ynysddu primary schools – moving from collaboration to federation

Cwmfelinfach and Ynysddu primary schools have shared a headteacher for the last five years. The two schools collaborate on many areas of their work and achieve financial efficiencies through sharing the headteacher's salary, bulk purchasing and joint tendering for contracts. They share aspects of their most effective practice, including using particular strengths of pupil skills across both schools. For example, pupils with strong skills in coding act as learning ambassadors in their own school and in their partner school to help develop the abilities of their peers.

The two schools have a strong history of effective partnership working. As a result, the benefits of collaboration are already clear to staff, parents and governors. As an informal arrangement, there is the option for either school to opt out of the agreement at any point with little notice. As a result of the positive impact on provision and in order to formalise and secure the arrangement, the local authority suggested federation to the governing bodies of both schools. This streamlines the work of the headteacher as they engage and consult with only one governing body that oversees the work of both schools. This process is proceeding with the local authority aiming to establish the federation formally from September 2019.

- 29 In cases where the motivation to federate arises from a strong history of collaboration, federation is more likely to succeed. In schools that have shared a headteacher for a number of years or where there is a strong track record of staff collaboration, the federation process can strengthen pre-existing joint systems and processes. In these cases, governing bodies often initiate federation in order to formalise arrangements for collaborative working, secure the sustainability of the partnership and reduce the workload of the headteacher.
- 30 In all cases where schools have considered federation, geographical distance and travel time between the schools have been important factors in determining the viability of the proposals. Close proximity between schools reduces the pressure on senior leaders and other staff who work on more than one site. It also allows for more effective collaboration between pupils, particularly if the schools are within

walking distance of each other and do not entail additional transport costs. In a very few cases, larger federations are able to use budget savings arising from federation to address transport costs, such as through the purchase of a federation minibus.

Questions for governing bodies and local authorities to consider before proposing federation

- What are the key aims of the federation?
- Will federation improve leadership capacity at all levels?
- How will federation support an improvement in standards of teaching and learning?
- Is there a strong history of collaboration for senior leaders to build upon?
- Will the geographical distances between schools assist or hinder collaborative working?
- Will federation ensure financial efficiencies that help to support the sustainability of provision in the area?

3. The process of establishing a federation

Creating a federation

- 31 In the most successful cases, governing bodies, senior leaders and the local authority are clear about what they want to achieve through federation. They engage meaningfully at an early stage with parents, pupils, the local community, staff and governors to ensure that all parties understand the federation process and what it means for each school. They provide clear guidance to stakeholders on how they can express their views and respond appropriately when addressing any concerns. For example, governors and the local authority arrange a single meeting with parents from all schools to outline their proposals and answer questions. They point to existing federations as a practical example of how the new structure will operate. In all cases where federation is successful, the local authority and governing bodies provide a frank picture of what federation entails and treat any concerns seriously. Where the federation process is most successful, it is one of consultation and co-construction with stakeholders taking an active role in shaping the long-term vision for the federation.
- 32 Where governing bodies and local authorities are effective in establishing and sharing their vision, schools are quicker to gain the benefits of federation, such as sharing of effective practice and achieving financial efficiencies. Conversely, where they do not do this well, there is a tendency for parents and staff to be suspicious of the intended outcomes and as a result engage less well with the process. For example, staff may be less willing to observe and share good practice with colleagues from across the federation, or parents may be less supportive of senior leaders and less likely to engage with and support new initiatives.
- 33 Where the federation process is most effective, staff in all schools are fully engaged and have a clear and early understanding of the implications for their roles and line management responsibilities. They understand the benefits of the federation arrangements in terms of its stability and sustainability, and the positive outcomes arising from sharing expertise and resources.
- 34 The local authority and governing bodies play an important role in ensuring that they give equal weight to the views of parents from all schools, that they consider these carefully and act upon them meaningfully. Where this is not the case, parents and stakeholders perceive that one school is ‘taking over’ another. This is a particular issue where there is one school in the federation that is considered to be high performing, while other schools are giving cause for concern.

Cameo: Carmarthenshire local authority – ensuring successful federation through consultation and co-construction

Carmarthenshire local authority has overseen the formation of five federations in recent years. In most cases, this involves linking together of small primary schools, but also includes the federation of two secondary schools. The local authority has developed a collaborative approach to federation that focuses strongly on engagement with stakeholders. The detail of the processes varies according to the characteristics of the schools and their communities, but key steps and actions include:

- The early establishment of a federation steering group that includes senior leaders and governors from each school, senior local authority officers and the schools' challenge advisers. The group sets the strategic direction for the federation process and oversees consultation with stakeholders.
- The drafting of consultation documents outlining the vision for the federation. These focus explicitly on the impact of federation on teaching and learning for each school community.
- The organisation of a range of consultative workshop and dialogue sessions for parents, staff and pupils. Led by local authority officers, governors and senior leaders, this provides an opportunity to explain the rationale for the federation, address misconceptions and gather stakeholder opinion. For example, it allows senior leaders and governors to address any concerns among parents and staff about the absence of the headteacher when they work in other school bases.
- The shaping of the final proposal for federation is based on the outcome of consultations. The local authority places a strong emphasis on using the results of stakeholder engagement to inform its final plans. This helps to ensure a positive reception to federation in each school community.
- The publishing of final federation proposals for formal consultation with parents, pupils, staff, trade unions and the wider community in adherence with the requirements of statutory regulations.
- Monitoring and review of progress by the federated governing body during the early stages of the federation, supported closely by local authority officers.

Developing the federation

- 35 In many federations, the governing body appoints a cross federation, or 'executive', headteacher. Often this is the headteacher of one of the existing schools within the federation. Effective executive headteachers in this situation work hard to ensure that they are seen to pay regard to the strengths, challenges and needs of each school. For example, they ensure that they identify and share good practice from every school in the federation rather than just those that are high performing or the school that they previously had responsibility.

Cameo: The Federated Schools of the Upper Afan Valley – distributing leadership to support the quality of teaching and learning

The Upper Afan Valley is a large federation consisting of Cymer Afan Comprehensive School and the primary schools of Pen Afan, Cymer Afan, Glyncorwg and Croeserw. The federation was established in 2013 at the instigation of the local authority when a vacancy arose for the headship at Pen Afan Primary. The local authority viewed federation as a tool to ensure the sustainability of provision in the area. The federation expanded over the next three years as other primary schools in the Upper Afan Valley joined.

The leadership structure consists of an executive headteacher for the entire federation with two phase leaders overseeing the work of the secondary school and the primary schools. Governors have established 'leaders of learning' in each primary school, who are senior leaders with non-teaching time and who take responsibility for the day-to-day running of each school. They act as a first point of call for parents, staff and pupils. Through a 'matrix management' approach, they also have responsibility for aspects of teaching and learning across all the primary schools. For instance, the leader of learning for Pen Afan Primary School also has responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning in nursery and reception classes across the federation. As a result, staff, parents and pupils feel confident that there is sufficient capacity to deal with any issues that arise and senior leaders are in a good position to identify and share examples of good practice across the federation, as well as being able to address any weaker performance.

The shared cost of a senior leaders and the deployment of a budget manager across the federation helps to achieve financial efficiencies, for example through the purchasing of joint training to support a new approach to the teaching of mathematics and the purchase of a cross federation electronic safeguarding system.

- 36 In most successful federations, senior leaders and governors recognise the importance of maintaining the individual identities of each school, while sensitively creating a shared sense of identity as a federation over time: remaining ‘of their community’ while establishing a sense of being part of something larger. For instance, many pupils in federated schools describe how they feel part of their individual school during some activities and part of the larger organisation when engaged in activities with other schools in the federation, such as residential trips, joint performances or Eisteddfodau.
- 37 A frequent concern about federation for parents, and to a lesser extent staff and pupils, is the lack of a permanent headteacher on site. Their perception is that there is not someone within the school with the experience, expertise and time to deal with specific issues as they arise or to focus on ensuring the quality of provision in the school from day-to-day. For example, in a few federations, parents have initially expressed concerns that a suitably senior member of staff would be unavailable to speak to parents when they have concerns or to deal with any significant behaviour issues. In many cases, governing bodies address this issue well by ensuring a senior leader from each school has sufficient non-teaching time to undertake their leadership and management responsibilities. This extra time enables them to address any issues and also to monitor and help improve the quality of teaching and learning.
- 38 In successful federations, local authorities oversee the disbanding of individual schools’ governing bodies and the establishment of a federated governing body with sensitivity. In these cases, the governing body of the new federation will have equal representation from all schools and their original governing bodies and contain a wide range of skills, experience and expertise. In the most successful federations, governors work with senior leaders and the local authority skilfully and sensitively to ensure this outcome. In a few federations, governors undertake an audit of the skills of its members to ensure that the federated governing body has the capacity to support the work of the federation. Where governing bodies act on the outcomes of audit they secure learning opportunities to address any gaps in their skills. This strengthens their role in supporting successful federation.
- 39 In the most successful federations, leaders highlight pupil voice as an important consideration. Leaders ensure that, at an early stage, pupils develop a good understanding of the process, their part in it and the implications for them. Leaders gauge the views of pupils and ensure they inform aspects of the federation, such as through creating opportunities for joint school council meetings. In the best cases, senior leaders provide opportunities for pupils from the different schools to work together to express their views. They engage them in shaping the vision for the new federation, which they share with all pupils through further meetings and assemblies. In some cases, senior leaders engage pupils in expressing the vision for the federation, for instance by working with them to design a logo that represents the characteristics of all the federation’s communities.
- 40 In nearly all cases, the federation process does not distract schools during the transition period from focusing on achieving high standards and good teaching. The schools ensure that the journey towards federation does not hinder making

improvements to pedagogy or to the curriculum. These priorities help to ensure a strong foundation for the federation to share and build on good practice.

Features of an effective federation process

Governing bodies and local authorities:

- Establish from an early stage, a clear vision for the federation that focuses on outcomes for learners
- Work effectively with all stakeholders, including parents, pupils and staff from all the schools to shape their vision and aims
- Ensure the appointment of an effective and well-informed executive headteacher
- Are sensitive to each community's local context, seeking to maintain each school's identity whilst developing a shared identity as a federation
- Are clear about the meaning of federation, the process and the implications for each school
- Use existing federations as case studies to highlight good practice
- Ensure that the federated governing body has equal representation from all schools

- 41 The quality of support that local authorities provide to schools during the federation process is variable across Wales. Where federation is successful, the local authority supports schools well from the outset. Local authority officers play a key role in ensuring that stakeholders are aware of the requirements of the process. They use their knowledge of good practice to ensure a smooth transition to federation. Where local authorities are most successful in supporting school federation, they gauge its impact on the quality of provision and outcomes for pupils and use the lessons they have learnt to improve their support for other schools undertaking this process. The provision of the same challenge adviser for all schools within a federation helps in developing the local authority and regional consortium's understanding of the strengths, weaknesses and challenges that all the schools face as part of the federation process. It ensures that the local authority and consortium is best placed to assist senior leaders in identifying and sharing areas of strength and providing external support where needed.
- 42 In the few cases where federation is less successful, governing bodies and the local authority do not have a clear vision for the federation process or its outcome. They do not communicate well with stakeholders, gauge their opinions successfully, or

ensure that stakeholders from all schools are treated equally. Where federation is not effective, the composition of the new governing body does not represent a balance of all elements of its community. In unsuccessful federations, senior leaders think that federation, by itself and with no further action, will bring about improvements to the quality of teaching and standards.

4. Realising the benefits of federation

- 43 In schools that maintain successful federations, leaders focus sharply on identifying where efficiencies and improved provision may arise over time from sharing resources, systems, and practice. They use the opportunity of federation to extend the leadership structure to develop the experience and capacity of senior and middle leaders, for example by providing middle leaders with the opportunity to lead larger teams across more than one school and allowing senior leaders to take responsibility for leading and managing a school site in the headteacher's absence. In all cases, federation results in a greater number of pupils and families for executive headteachers to become familiar with. A few executive headteachers in larger federations suggest that their knowledge of individual pupils and their family contexts is more limited than they previously experienced as head of an individual school, but in most cases they mitigate this well through establishing leadership structures where named senior leaders take pastoral responsibility for pupils within specific schools.
- 44 The speed and extent to which schools realise the benefits of federation rely on the success of the federation process and the effectiveness of senior leaders, particularly the executive headteacher, in creating an ethos of collaborative working. In the best cases, senior leaders adopt cross-school policies and systems to improve and standardise practice across the federation. The impact on the quality of provision and outcomes for pupils is likely to be greater where leadership is strong. The appointment of an effective executive headteacher with the skills and experience to lead a federation is therefore a key factor in ensuring its success. However, there are currently few opportunities for headteachers to engage in professional learning that will prepare them for executive headship and few chances for executive headteachers or their staff to network with other federated schools across Wales.
- 45 The most effective federated governing bodies ensure that they have equal representation from each of their schools. They create an ethos where governors recognise their responsibility to consider the interests of all schools in the federation. Successful federated governing bodies adopt a firm and collegiate approach to leadership while respecting and promoting the individual context and needs of each school. Current regulations relating to the constitution and membership of governing bodies in Wales make it difficult to ensure equal representation from all types of governors from all of a federation's communities. This is particularly the case for federations consisting of several small schools. In these situations, successful governing bodies attempt to overcome these difficulties by rotating representation of, for example, teacher governors, between the schools over a period of years.
- 46 The federation of several smaller schools may result in a substantial reduction in the teaching commitment of the headteacher. In many cases, this allows the headteacher's role to change to that of a non-teaching head, providing them with more time to focus on improving standards of teaching and learning. In the best examples, economies of scale allow governors to increase the role of administrative staff in managing budgetary matters, and in improving the efficiency of spending

decisions. In a few cases, in larger federations, this includes the employment of a business manager who oversees the budgets of all schools in the federation. This is often helps in identifying budget efficiencies and can result in substantial savings for schools. However, in smaller federations, where there is not the capacity to extend the responsibilities of administrative staff, the management of two or three school budgets can be challenging for governing bodies and headteachers. In nearly all federations in Wales, the employment of an executive headteacher reduces overall payroll expenditure, as the cost of a single executive headteacher is less than the combined cost of employing separate headteachers for each school.

- 47 Federation leads to larger overall teams of teachers and teaching assistants. In successful federations, senior leaders use this wider pool of expertise and experience to develop professional learning opportunities for all staff by identifying and sharing good practice. For example, teachers work in small groups to improve their practice through a process of observation, reflection and refinement. This is particularly useful in cross-sector federations when, for instance, foundation phase teachers share aspects of their child-centred practice with key stage 2 and 3 colleagues, or secondary schools teachers share subject specific skills in art, design technology or music with their primary phase peers.
- 48 Once the federation process is completed, staff remain employed by their individual school rather than the federation as a whole. In successful federations, senior leaders work sensitively with teachers and teaching assistants to negotiate their deployment across other schools where practicable. For instance, a teacher may provide PPA (planning, preparation and assessment) cover across the federation. In a few cases, staff with strong skills in specific areas, such as in the Welsh language, work with pupils in all the schools in a federation. In the longer term, senior leaders employ newly appointed staff as federation employees rather than of specific schools. This arrangement allows easier deployment of staff across the federation. In these cases, senior leaders arrange for salary costs to be shared between individual school budgets, while the employee is contracted to work for the federation as a whole. However, in a majority of federations, senior leaders do not make sufficient use of individual staff expertise to enhance learning experiences across all schools within the federation.
- 49 In most cases, where federation involves combining a high performing school with one or more schools causing concern, successful leaders use the good practice in one school to nurture improvements in the quality of provision, teaching and learning across the federation. In particular, where there are weaknesses in teaching, effective leaders provide opportunities for staff to learn from the practice of the best teachers and teaching assistants. For these measures to be successful, senior leaders must act with sensitivity to the context of the school and adapt practice to suit the specific needs of each school's pupils.
- 50 Over time, the self-evaluation and improvement arrangements of the schools within a federation begin to harmonise. This helps to support the development of the quality of teaching and learning. From the outset of the federation process, effective school leaders look for overlaps in the priorities of their schools and to find common ways to address these through using staff expertise or organising joint professional learning

opportunities. In more established federations, self-evaluation and improvement planning often becomes closely aligned with most school improvement actions being applicable to all schools in the federation with a few priorities that are specific to each school. In many cases, where senior leaders ensure good opportunities for staff to build their knowledge and experience by observing practice within the federation and other schools, federation impacts positively upon the accuracy of self-evaluation as all staff have a wider pool of professional practice to reflect upon. This enables them to judge more accurately what constitutes effective practice.

- 51 In most federations, schools use ICT suitably to support cross-federation working. For example, many federations use shared server space for staff to access policies, schemes of work, and other documentation. Most use email well to ensure clear communication between and across schools. In a minority of federations, schools use electronic systems appropriately to allow teachers to work collaboratively on the planning of lessons and activities. However, most federations do not use the benefits of digital technology to support cross-federation working sufficiently. In particular, the use of ICT to support pupil collaboration is underdeveloped. For example, very few federations enable pupils to work together through the use of shared online documents or video conferencing.

Cameo: The federation of Ysgol Carwe, Ysgol Ponthenri and Ysgol Gwynfryn – making the most of a wider pool of staff

Ysgol Carwe, Ysgol Ponthenri and Ysgol Gwynfryn established their federation in 2012. Estyn inspected all three schools jointly in March 2018.

Senior leaders have successfully created an ethos of co-operation across the three schools. As a result, all staff view themselves as the federation's staff, rather than the employee of a particular school. This means that staff are able and willing to teach at short notice at any of the schools in the federation. This minimises any disruption to pupils' education resulting from teacher absence. The federation's staffing structure enables teachers and assistants to develop a sound understanding of the work of all three schools. The federation's leaders and staff share and develop their strategic vision and aims with the federation's community.

The headteacher and assistant headteachers have strong leadership skills. They have high expectations and support and guide others effectively to raise standards and promote pupils' wellbeing. Robust leadership across the federation has succeeded in creating an ethos of successful co-operation among the staff of three schools. This includes effective co-operation when planning, assessing and standardising jointly as one body of staff. The Hwb digital network is used well to share documents across the federation.

- 52 Where federation is less successful, governors and senior leaders do not use the benefits of a wider pool of skills and expertise to identify and share good practice. They do not evaluate the improvement needs of all schools sufficiently and impose existing systems from one school on others in the federation without considering whether they are fit for purpose. They do not use economies of scale to allow for senior leaders to focus on teaching and learning or to enable middle leaders to develop their experience. They fail to take advantage of potential budget efficiencies to improve the quality of provision for pupils.

Appendix 1: Self-evaluation questions for federation

When engaging in the federation process, governors, the local authority and senior leaders should consider the following key questions:

- Are they clear about the long-term aims of the federation and how these will secure good outcomes for learners?
- How will they work with all stakeholders, including parents, learners and staff from all schools, to shape the vision and aims for the federation?
- How will they ensure a balance between maintaining each school's individual identity and developing a sense of a larger, combined learning community?
- What arrangements will they put in place to ensure that stakeholders are clear about the meaning of federation, the process and the implications for each school?
- How will they use existing federations to illustrate existing good practice?
- Have they considered the success of any previous collaboration between the schools?
- Have they gauged whether the schools are in close enough proximity to support effective collaborative working?
- How will they use federation to generate financial efficiencies to improve outcomes for pupils?
- How will they share existing good practice from all schools to support improvements in standards of teaching and learning?
- How will they use the opportunity of federation to improve leadership at all levels?
- What arrangements will they put in place to ensure the appointment of an effective and well-informed executive headteacher?
- How will governors and senior leaders ensure effective arrangements for the leadership and management of each school in the headteacher's absence?

Appendix 2: How Estyn inspects federations

Estyn is required by law to inspect and report on each individual school. For schools working in federation Estyn aims to inspect all schools within a federation at the same time using the common inspection framework. During these inspections, inspectors are likely to inspect activities across all schools within a federation. Each school within a federation receives its own distinct inspection report. However, some features may be common to the federation as a whole. It is likely that inspection reports for all schools within a federation will include common evaluations for leadership.

Further guidance on Estyn's approach to inspecting federations can be found on Estyn's website:

<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/document/when-will-next-school-or-pupil-referral-unit-pru-inspection-take-place>

Appendix 3: Evidence base

The findings and recommendations in this report draw on:

- a range of primary and secondary school inspection evidence
- visits to a range of federated primary, secondary and special schools
- the outcomes of questionnaires and follow up telephone conversations with local authorities
- attendance at a local authority education scrutiny meeting where federation proposals were being considered
- evidence drawn from a national stakeholder meeting with senior leaders from federated schools
- a literature review

Schools have been selected following consideration of their linguistic context, geographical location, the types of schools in the federation and socio-economic factors. When visiting schools, inspectors:

- interviewed senior leaders from all schools in each federations
- obtained the views of governors through interview
- interviewed teachers and teaching assistants
- interviewed pupils to gather their views on the impact of federation

Federations and schools visited:

Cwmaman Primary School, Rhondda Cynon Taff

The Federation of the Upper Afan Valley, Neath Port Talbot

- Cymer Afan Primary School
- Glyncorrwg Primary School
- Croeserw Primary School
- Pen Afan Primary School
- Cymer Afan Comprehensive School

The Dee Valley Federation, Wrexham

- Froncysyllte C.P. School
- Garth C.P. School
- Pentre Church in Wales Controlled Primary School

The federation of Ysgol Bro Alun and Ysgol Plas Coch, Wrexham

- Ysgol Plas Coch
- Ysgol Bro Alun

The federation of Ysgol Carwe, Ysgol Ponthenri and Ysgol Gwynfryn, Carmarthenshire

- Gwynfryn CP School
- Carway C.P. School
- Ysgol Gynradd Ponthenri

The Western Learning Campus, Cardiff

- Woodlands High School
- Ty Gwyn Special School
- Riverbank Special School

Participants in the federated schools stakeholder forum:

The Pear Tree Federation, Cardiff

- Coryton Primary School
- Tongwynlais Primary School

The Llechyfedach and Tumble Federation, Carmarthenshire

- Llechyfedach C.P. School
- Ysgol Gynradd Y Tymbl

The Federation of Ysgol Bryn Clwyd and Ysgol Gellifor, Denbighshire

- Ysgol Bryn Clwyd
- Gellifor C.P. School

The Point of Ayr Federation, Flintshire

- Ysgol Gynradd Trelogan
- Ysgol Gronant

Ffederasiwn Cysgod Y Foel, Gwynedd

- Ysgol Bro Tryweryn
- Ysgol Ffridd Y Llyn

Federation of Schools in the Ceiriog Valley, Wrexham

- Ysgol Cynddelw
- Ysgol Llanarmon Dyffryn Ceiriog
- Pontfadog C.P. School

The Maelor Church Schools Federation, Wrexham

- Borderbrook AVC School
- St Paul's Voluntary Aided Primary School

Ffederasiwn Carno, Glantwymyn a Llanbryn-mair, Powys

- Ysgol Gynradd Carno
- Ysgol Llanbryn-mair
- Ysgol Glantwymyn

Local authority consultees:

Cardiff City Council
Wrexham County Borough Council
Caerphilly County Borough Council
Carmarthenshire County Council

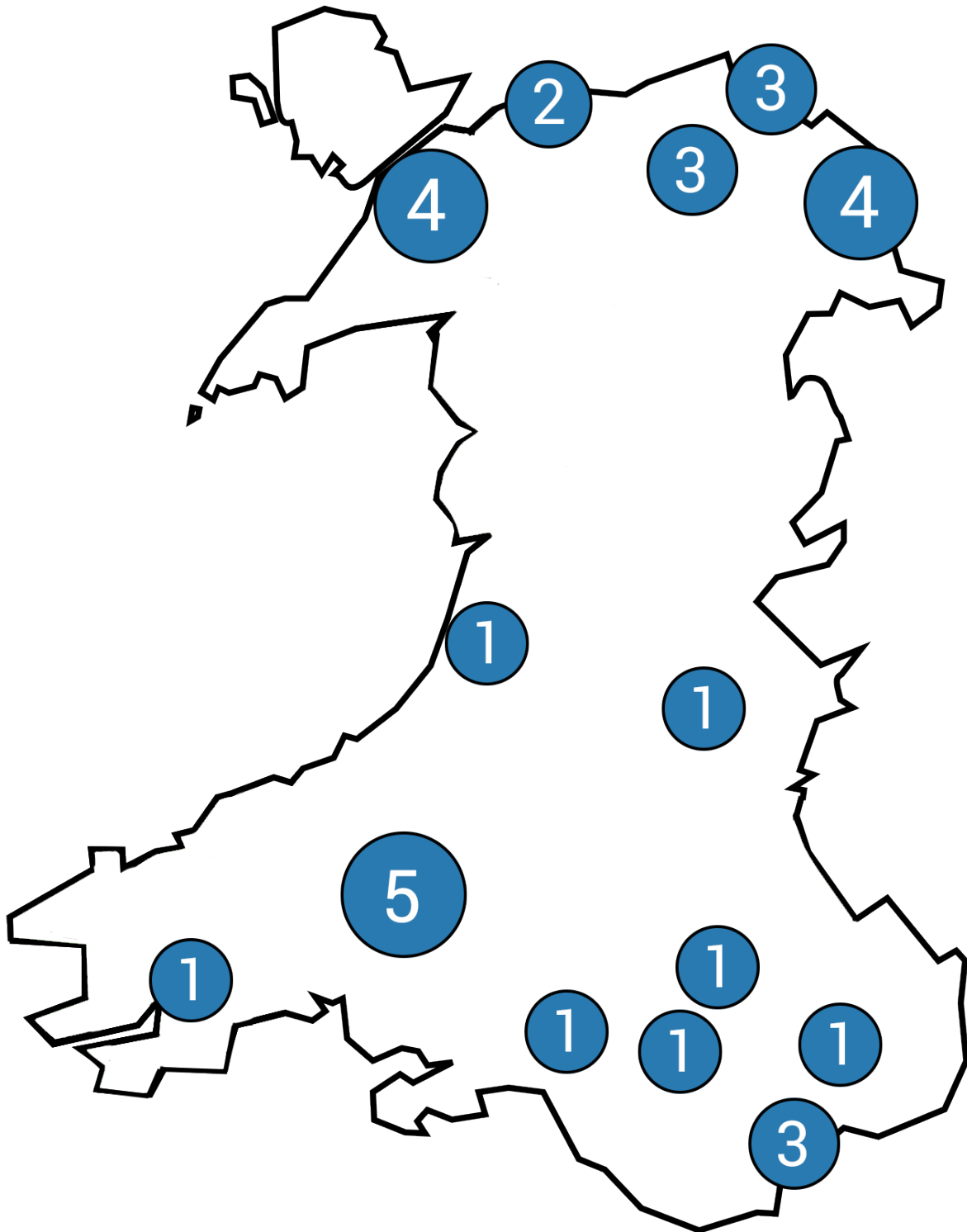
Appendix 4: List of federations in Wales

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| Gwynedd | Ffederasiwn Bro Ddewi Ffederasiwn Ysgolion Dyffryn Dulas Corris a Pennal Ffederasiwn Pen-Y-Bryn ac Abercaseg Federasiwn Cysgod Y Foel |
| Conwy | Ysgolion Ffederasiwn Capel Coed-Elan Federation of Mochdre Schools |
| Denbighshire | The Federation of Ysgol Caer Drewyn and Ysgol Carrog The Federation of Ysgol Betws Gwerful Goch and Ysgol Bro Elwern The Federation of Ysgol Bryn Clwyd & Ysgol Gellifor |
| Flintshire | Cwlwm Federation* The Point Of Ayr Federation Hafod Federation |
| Wrexham | Dee Valley Federation Federation of Schools between Ysgol Plas Goch, Wrexham and Ysgol Bro Alun, Gwersyllt Federation of Schools in the Ceiriog Valley The Maelor Church Schools Federation |
| Powys | Ffederasiwn Carno, Glantwymyn A Llanbrynmair |
| Ceredigion | Penrhyncoch and Penllwyn Community Primary Schools |
| Pembrokeshire | The Federation of Tavernspite and Templeton Community Primary Schools |
| Carmarthenshire | Bryngwyn Glan Y Mor Federation* Carwe, Gwynfryn and Ponthenri Federation The Federation of Cross Hands and Drefach Primary Schools Llechyfedach – Tumble Federation Abernant, Cynwyl Elfed and Llanpumsaint Primary Schools Federation |
| Neath Port Talbot | The Federated Schools of the Upper Afan Valley* |
| Rhondda Cynon Taf | Cefn Primary School and Graig Yr Hesg Primary School |
| Merthyr Tydfil | Federation of St Mary's and St Illtyd's Catholic Primary School |
| Torfaen | Blenheim and Coed Eva Federation |
| Cardiff | The Western Learning Campus* The Pear Tree Federation The Oaks Federation |

*Federations containing schools other than only primary schools

The list of federations is accurate at the time of publication. More federations are in the process of being formed.

Number and location of federations across local authorities in Wales



Glossary

| | |
|--|--|
| ALN (additional learning needs) | Children and young people with learning, physical or sensory needs that make it harder to learn than most children of the same age |
| Child centred practice | Ways of teaching and treating children in which the child's needs and wishes are the main focus |
| Executive headteacher | A headteacher that leads two or more schools |
| Hwb | A collection of digital tools and resources provided by the Welsh Government to all schools to support learning and teaching |
| Federation process | Federation in Wales is a formal and legal agreement by which between two and six schools share governance arrangements and have a single governing body. Federations can involve a mix of maintained schools which are either nursery, primary, special or secondary schools. |
| Matrix management | The practice of managing elements of a school's work with more than one reporting line |
| Pedagogy | The method and practice of teaching |
| PPA | Planning, preparation and assessment. The time set aside for teachers during their timetabled teaching day to allow them to carry out planning, preparation and assessment activities. |
| Professional learning | Professional learning is a generic term for the activities that education professionals engage in to ensure their practice is critically informed and up-to-date. It can include attendance at training events and observation and reflection on the effective practice of their colleagues. |
| Self-improving systems | A system of school improvement that is led by schools and practitioners themselves |
| Transition | The process of pupils moving from one phase of their education to the next, such as from foundation phase to key stage 2, or key stage 2 to key stage 3 |

Voluntary aided school A state-funded school in which a foundation or trust (usually a Christian denomination), contributes to building costs and has a substantial influence in the running of the school

Voluntary controlled school A state-funded school in which a foundation or trust (usually a Christian denomination) has some formal influence in the running of the school

Numbers – quantities and proportions

| | |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| nearly all = | with very few exceptions |
| most = | 90% or more |
| many = | 70% or more |
| a majority = | over 60% |
| half = | 50% |
| around half = | close to 50% |
| a minority = | below 40% |
| few = | below 20% |
| very few = | less than 10% |

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