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The Value of Asymmetric School Weeks: Lessons Learned from Schools in Wales

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Executive summary

Education in Wales is changing. New curriculum and assessment arrangements underpin a comprehensive reform agenda, involving but not restricted to: developments in the nation's professional learning offer, new educational leadership provision, innovative initial teacher education programmes, and a forthcoming renewal of qualifications. This climate of change is matched by an ambition to do things differently and rethink many facets of existing practice to better meet the needs of all learners in a 21st Century environment.

The value of asymmetric school weeks: Lessons learned from schools in Wales builds on these new and ambitious aspirations for Wales' education system, and offers unique reflections on two pioneering approaches to structuring the school week. Inspired by the establishment in July 2019 of a new commission to 're-imagine schooling', the report considers the impact of asymmetric arrangements on two schools – Treorchy Comprehensive School, in Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Pembroke Dock Community School, in Pembrokeshire – with a view to better understanding the potential challenges and opportunities presented.

The report is able to offer 'lessons learned' from both schools only because of the honesty, integrity and willingness of their school leaders to engage fully in the research process. The support of both Michele Thomas and Rhys Angell Jones is therefore very much appreciated, particularly during what is known to be such a challenging time for educators across Wales and the wider world. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has been hugely significant and its effect on education globally, tremendously damaging.

Recent events have, however, generated space for reflection on the essence of education, and the way in which our school systems will operate in the coming months and years. Asymmetric school weeks offer one such possibility for educators, and while the commissioning of this research was made well in advance of COVID-19, it appears to have taken on a new resonance given the creative adaptations many schools are having to make.

At the request of the National Academy for Educational Leadership (Leadership Academy), which co-funded the research, the paper pays particular attention to the potential impact of asymmetric arrangements on teacher mental health and well-being, as well as the conditions conducive to alternative ways of working. It considers pupil and parent views, as well as those of staff, and draws a series of conclusions based on representation from key members of the school community. It identifies tangible benefits to teacher professional learning, the work-life balance of educators and increased opportunities for social interaction with family and friends.

Broadly speaking, the findings presented in this paper paint a mixed picture with regards to the impact of the asymmetric week, and it is important that any school considering such changes balances carefully the costs and benefits of doing so. The contributions of all those involved in the study serve as a reminder that the asymmetric week will not work for everybody, and what works in one school is not guaranteed to work in another.

What the asymmetric week offers all schools, however, is an opportunity to reconsider existing and more traditional approaches to structuring education and the benefits of creating additional professional learning opportunities for staff, particularly in the context of the new *Curriculum for Wales*. The report's findings have a number of implications for schools seeking to adopt an asymmetric week, and a series of high-level recommendations are offered to those exploring asymmetric arrangements.

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to better understand the practicalities of implementing an asymmetric school week, with a means to supplementing the existing evidence-base on its perceived strengths and weaknesses. Typically involving a combination of longer and shorter days, the asymmetric school week allows schools to break from established timetabling and fundamentally change the way they operate for both staff and pupils. However, the idea of reducing the number of days pupils spend in school is not new.

Also known as the ‘four-day school week’, its origins as a mainstream intervention dates back some 30 or 40 years, when it became prominent in the USA as a way of saving money. Indeed, proponents argue that reducing the number of days pupils attend classes can yield savings in transportation, facilities and personnel costs (Donis-Keller & Silvernail, 2009). Attendance and teacher recruitment are also well-cited incentives, although evidence suggests four-day school weeks have created challenges for families requiring childcare, pupils with additional learning needs and those from deprived backgrounds, and impacted negatively on pupil engagement (Fager, 1997). This paper provides further exploration of these and other issues in a distinctly Welsh context.

In Wales, the emergence of the asymmetric school week can be considered a relatively recent phenomenon and as such, research into its impact remains largely anecdotal. This is, in some part, owing to the fact that so few schools have chosen to consolidate their instructional time in such a formal way. There are, however, alternative practices being employed in a growing number of schools that provide valuable insight into the discussion around more established school structures. That Wales’ education system is currently subject to a process of prolonged, systemic change is further rationale for better understanding the functionality of the asymmetric school week, and its potential value for the wider education community. The licence to innovate and reflect critically on entrenched routines of schooling is a feature of the Welsh Government’s ‘National Mission’ for education in Wales (Welsh Government, 2017), and there is an appetite for revolutionising the way children are taught born out of the country’s ongoing curriculum reform (Donaldson, 2015).

Drawing on the experiences of two schools pioneering asymmetric weeks in Wales, this study benefits from its first-hand perspective of the realities of adopting new timetabling arrangements. Collectively, it considers data from 127 school staff, 140 parents, and 55 pupils and presents a synthesis of their interpretations on the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach. It focusses on the implementation and impact of transitioning to a four-day week and while its findings are not generalisable, they offer insight into two working examples of asymmetric arrangements in the Welsh context. At the request of Leadership Academy, which co-funded the research, the paper pays particular attention to the potential impact on staff mental health and well-being, as well as the conditions conducive to alternative ways of working.

2. Research aims and questions

The Centre for Education Policy Review and Analysis (CEPRA) at Yr Athrofa: Institute of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, was commissioned to explore the value of implementing an asymmetric school week. In order to do this, it sought to respond to the following research questions:

- What are the conditions required for a school to transition to an asymmetric week?
- How can schools prepare for and successfully implement an asymmetric week?
- To what extent does the asymmetric week impact on staff, pupils and parents?
- What is the impact of the asymmetric week on staff mental health and well-being?
- To what extent can changes to the rhythm of the school week support the implementation of the emerging *Curriculum for Wales*?

The report's focus on the asymmetric school week as a possible alternative to more established school structures and timetabling arrangements will add to the limited evidence-based that exists currently, and with a major overhaul of Wales' education system very much ongoing, provide a new perspective on the possibilities afforded by new approaches. As such, the study is designed to paint as rich a picture as possible of the practicalities associated with implementing an asymmetric school week with a means to better-informing school leaders, policymakers, practitioners and parents as to the strengths and weaknesses of these arrangements. All research questions will be considered specifically in the Welsh context, albeit the study will consider carefully the experience of other countries employing similar approaches to school structures.

3. Welsh context

Education in Wales is undergoing a period of sustained and widespread evolution (Evans 2015; Dixon, 2016). Under the leadership of Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams, the change will continue considerably over the coming months and years as Wales and the Welsh Government seek to deliver on its shared ‘National Mission’ and collective goal of raising standards for all (Welsh Government, 2017). A comprehensive reform agenda, outlined in the Welsh Government’s action plan for 2017-2021, *Education in Wales: Our National Mission* (2017), builds on the publication of *Successful Futures* (Donaldson, 2015) and the subsequent adoption of its recommendations in *A Curriculum for Wales – A Curriculum for Life* (Welsh Government, 2015).

Education in Wales: Our National Mission is the latest in a long line of strategic policy documents published since the establishment of Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament) in 1999 and is built around three core objectives, namely: raising standards; reducing the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers; and delivering an education system that is a source of national pride and public confidence (Welsh Government, 2017). It is envisaged that these objectives will be realised by the successful design and implementation of transformational curriculum and assessment arrangements (Welsh Government, 2017).

The development of a new national curriculum for Wales underpins all of the Welsh Government’s education reforms and requires contribution from all levels of the Welsh education system’s three-tier model, as outlined in Diagram 1:

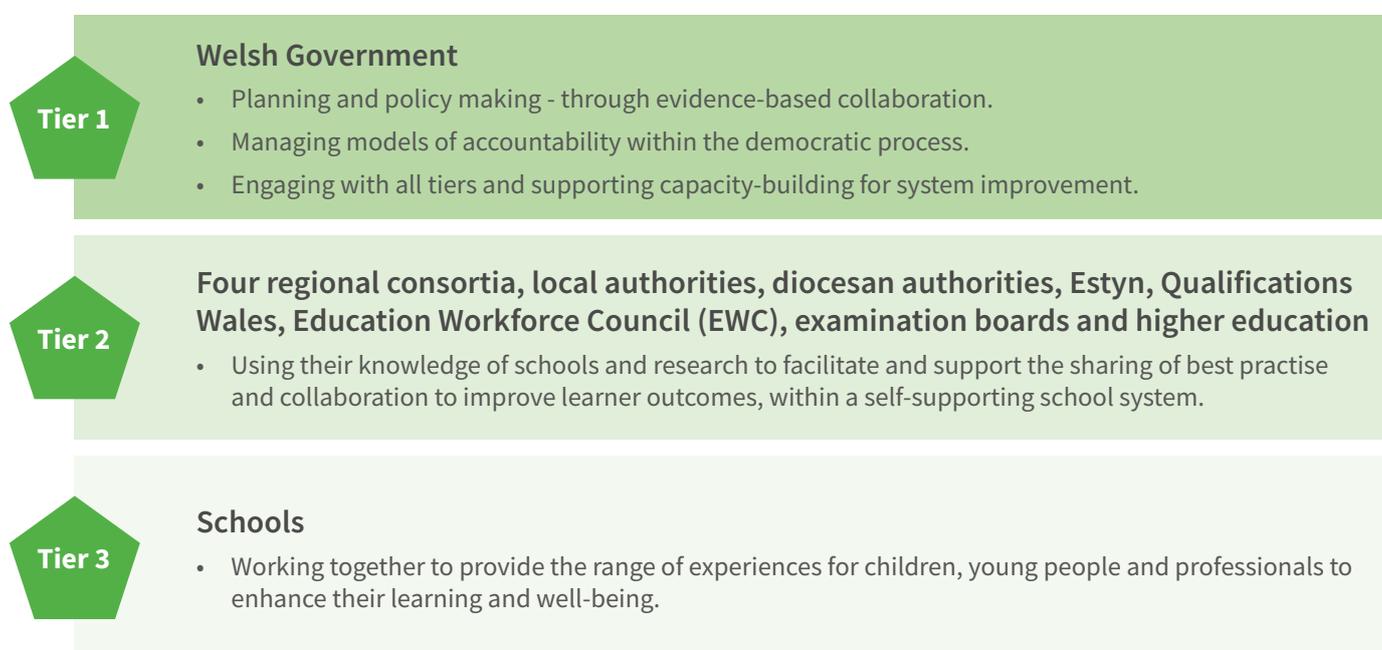


Diagram 1: The Welsh education system’s three-tier model (Welsh Government, 2017, p. 10)

Described as the cornerstone of a collective effort to raise standards, *Education in Wales: Our National Mission* considers the successful implementation of the new curriculum to be reliant upon the alignment of four enabling objectives (Welsh Government, 2017). Developed in collaboration with education professionals, these include: developing a high-quality education profession; inspirational leaders working collaboratively to raise standards; strong and inclusive schools committed to excellence, equity and well-being; and robust assessment, evaluation and accountability arrangements supporting a self-improving system (ibid). Within these inter-connected objectives are a range of actions designed to deliver a better school system for Wales and its learners.

Professor Graham Donaldson’s seminal *Successful Futures* publication provides the blueprint for Wales’ curriculum reform and can be considered one of the paving documents supporting the delivery of *Education in Wales: Our National Mission*. In his report, Donaldson argues that the introduction of ‘progression steps’ will provide a more coherent basis for learning, teaching and assessment. He champions six Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLEs) – expressive arts; health and well-being; humanities; languages, literacy and communication; maths and numeracy; and science and technology – as cross-curricular themes to transcend all learning from the age of three through to 16. In addition, three ‘cross-curriculum responsibilities’ of literacy, numeracy and digital competence would be the domain of all teachers, regardless of subject or age specialism (Donaldson, 2015).

Successful Futures demands that children and young people develop as: ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives; enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work; ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world; and healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society (Donaldson, 2015). In the five years since publication, a national strategy has been employed to build new curriculum, pedagogy and assessment arrangements that are fit for the 21st Century. The development of these new arrangements has been the responsibility of all involved in education in Wales – communities, policymakers, practitioners and researchers – albeit led by a network of Pioneer Schools charged with identifying what matters in the curriculum and how progress might best be described and discerned (University of Glasgow & University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2018). Until recently, the Curriculum Pioneer Schools have been working in national groups related to each of the six AoLEs, and the Welsh Government’s collaborative approach to policy development has been welcomed as a distinctly new and positive way of working (Evans, 2018). Indeed, this process of co-construction aligns with evidence suggesting that collaborative practices shift the drive for change away from the centre to the front lines of schools, helping to make system improvement self-sustaining (Barber et al, 2010).

Fundamentally, *Successful Futures* represents one of several curricula being developed around the world to *guide* educational practice, rather than as a prescriptive recipe to be followed to the letter (Drew & Priestley, 2016). This does of course have implications for the professional workforce and the vision outlined in *Successful Futures* chimes with that presented in *Teaching Tomorrow’s Teachers* (Furlong, 2015). In it, Professor John Furlong argues that the changing nature of schooling in the 21st Century will require teachers to be experts in teaching certain disciplines *and* in teaching their students to ‘learn how to learn’ (ibid, p. 5). His suggestion that Wales needs ‘a new form of professionalism amongst its teachers’ (ibid, p. 6) is shared by Donaldson and will doubtless have implications for the systemic National Approach to Professional Learning (Welsh Government, 2018) moving forward.

The policy reform agenda points to an appetite for change and an exploration of new and innovative approaches to teaching and learning in Wales’ education system. This is further evidenced by the establishment in July 2019 of a new commission to ‘re-imagine schooling’. A panel of five sector experts, led by Professor Mick Waters, was specifically convened to research and assess how schooling works for pupils, their families, teachers and support staff in Wales, and to identify the key themes that need further consideration (Welsh Government, 2019). The commission itself was one of several recommendations deriving from a much wider review of Wales’ education system, published in September 2018. *Teaching: A Valued Profession* (Waters et al, 2018) proposed the drafting of a shared ‘Vision for 2030’ that would offer a plan of gradual transition for schooling to systems and practices fit for the 21st Century. It called on the newly-created commission to reconsider the rhythm of the school year, the pattern of terms and holidays, and the shape of the school day. It offered the following as justification:

So many of the routines of schooling date from the time when schooling for all began, with schools mirroring many aspects of the working life for people of the time. Working routines today are vastly different with careers, piece work, short-term contracts, shift and zero hours work being the part of many families’ routines. Might schools need to re-think their traditional ways of working to be more family friendly? (Waters et al, 2018, p. 27)

The report argued that schools might want to look again at timetables, homework, or the balance between lessons and other experiences, in the context of the new curriculum and its AoLEs. Into this would come consideration about the best ways to develop the skills of teachers and others who work with children and how to best to address their well-being. The commission was also urged to consider the future shape and deployment of those who work in the school system and the sorts of working structures that would be needed to support the re-imagined schooling system. A number of these practices are, of course, already being pursued by a minority of schools, which makes this study into the experiences of two such schools all the more pertinent. As Donaldson himself notes in *Successful Futures* (2015, p. 11), ‘the case for fundamental change is powerful’.

4. Review of literature

A review of educational literature related to the asymmetric week was conducted to consider existing models employed globally. The review incorporates peer-reviewed academic literature, and high-quality grey literature emanating from non-commercial publishers. In this case, grey literature refers specifically to that produced by various levels of government and respected education organisations operating outside of academia. The majority of authors are located in the UK and Europe, but writers in the United States of America are also included to ensure breadth of opinion and experience. Relative to other contemporary educational practices, the asymmetric school week is an area that has attracted very little attention in the field of educational research. There has been little written about alternative approaches to the rhythm of the school day internationally, and quality peer-reviewed articles with a focus in this area are scarce. However, there are some examples from which to draw for the context of this report and each provides useful insight into the potential challenge and opportunity presented by careful manipulation of the school week.

The asymmetric week first came to prominence in the United States during the 1970s, as a way of mitigating increased heating and transportation costs (Cummings, 2015). Its origins, however, can be dated back even further to the Great Depression of the 1930s, when a shortened week was introduced to alleviate financial pressure (Donis-Keller & Silvermail, 2009). Indeed, the move to a four-day week, as it is more commonly known in the United States, is often driven by the need to save money (Anderson & Walker, 2015; Bitton, 2016; Cummings, 2015; Donis-Keller & Silvernail, 2009) and in 2009 'Furlough Fridays' were introduced in the State of Hawaii to offset budget constraints (Herring, 2010). Efficiencies have included, in some cases, turning heating down and electrical equipment off to save on utility costs (Fager, 1997). Other savings relate to the cost of staffing, most notably in schools' diminished reliance on teacher supply (Beesley & Anderson, 2007).

A research review by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory into the asymmetric week in the United States found that some districts had experienced a decline in drop-out rates, improved attendance and more positive attitudes about school as a result of its adoption (Fager, 1997). However, transition to a four-day week had also created issues around childcare, learner engagement and community buy-in (ibid). In Missouri, where legislation enacted in 2009 allowed schools to choose between a four-day week and a more traditional five-day week, the most commonly cited reasons for adopting the shortened calendar have focused on the recruitment and retention of staff (Turner et al, 2019).

A study on school schedules in New Mexico, Colorado, Oregon and the Pacific Island region found that the four-day week worked better in rural areas than more urban areas and that 'teaching smart' and making better use of time had paid dividends (Koki, 1992, p. 6). In general, the four-day week appears to have been employed more often in rural settings in the United States, given the specific challenges schools in those areas face. For example, the recruitment, retention and training of high-quality teachers are three of the most commonly cited challenges for rural schools (Monk, 2007; Parsley & Barton, 2015), which are turning to more innovative practices as a result (Turner et al, 2019). Elsewhere in the State of Idaho, an increasing number of school districts are transitioning to a four-day week to save money on transportation, heating, janitorial and clerical costs. Typically, they do this by running school from Monday-Thursday each week, with between 30-90 minutes added to each day to accommodate a Friday off for enrichment activities, online learning at home and independent project work (Hill & Heyward, 2015). There is no material cost to teachers, who retain the same pay and have a designated day each week to collaborate, plan and take professional enrichment courses (ibid).

Overall, there is variation in what the fifth 'extra' day is used for. In some cases, the day gives teachers opportunity for scheduled professional development and pupils the chance to engage in extra-curricular activities (Wilmoth, 1995). Whereas in other cases, schools are closed altogether to give staff and pupils the chance to do as they see fit. In rural areas, where surgeries and medical facilities are more remote, a non-teaching day gives the school community more time to book appointments and visit their health worker (Dam, 2006). According to Donis-Keller and Silvernail (2009), the impact of the four-day week is generally considered in four areas: financial savings; student achievement; other student and teacher outcomes; and stakeholder satisfaction. Success or failure is commonly assessed through a process of self-evaluation, though the authors note that the switch to a four-day week is rarely straightforward and requires schools to research the practice, examine existing models, and weigh advantages and disadvantages prior to implementation (ibid). In the United States, managing community and parent reaction to the four-day week has been cited as the greatest difficulty encountered by districts adopting new arrangements (Beesley & Anderson, 2007), with concerns ranging from issues with childcare (Keen, 2007) to the perceived loss of instructional teaching time (Harp, 1995).

Scotland is arguably the United Kingdom's strongest advocate of the asymmetric week and, given its close proximity and stronger alignment with the Welsh education system, appears to offer a more appropriate context from which Wales can learn. While there is no national adoption of a shorter school week, a number of Scottish local authorities have trialled different approaches to education delivery over the course of the past three decades. This includes Edinburgh, which has allowed schools the opportunity to organise statutory teaching hours into four-and-a-half days for a number of years (City of Edinburgh Council, 2004). In order for schools to give teachers more training and development time, a number have chosen to close earlier (at lunchtime) on a Wednesday or Friday. A review of new arrangements undertaken in 2003 found that

while additional staff development opportunities had been generated through adoption of the asymmetric week, a lack of consistency across the city had 'limited the most effective use of this time' (City of Edinburgh Council, 2004).

In Aberdeen, the city council put forward proposals for reconfiguring the school week from five to four-and-a-half days because of its desire to examine funding levels for education (Aberdeen City Council, 2008). It presented a possible model based on the Edinburgh experience and listed as potential benefits (ibid):

- Structured professional development time;
- Improved equity of opportunity for staff to attend courses;
- Reduced reliance on supply cover (resulting in significant cost saving);
- Greater scope for inter-departmental activities;
- Opportunity to organise collaborative extra-curricular activities;
- Reduction in staff absenteeism.

Among potential drawbacks, it noted:

- Childcare arrangements;
- Volunteers would be required to support half-day activities;
- Half-day activities would not cater to all pupils' needs;
- Reservations of school staff;
- Changing contractual working conditions;
- Pressure on pre-school settings to stay open throughout.

As of 2016, the vast majority of local authorities in Scotland held responsibility for schools employing some form of asymmetric week (Moray Council, 2016). In Highland, the council has made it compulsory for all of its 29 secondary schools to move to a rearranged timetable in order to make collaboration between schools easier, especially for e-learning (Highland Parent Council Partnership, 2017). There is currently no compulsion on primaries to adopt an asymmetric week, though some have chosen to do so anyway.

Schools in the Scottish Borders made the transition to an asymmetric week in 2014, on the grounds that an earlier finish on a Friday would reduce staff costs and increase opportunities for shared teaching (BBC Scotland, 2014). In its guiding document, Scottish Borders Council (2013, p. 2) said a move to an asymmetric week would 'enable secondary schools to align timetables across all nine schools', allowing schools to 'plan curriculum delivery in different and more efficient ways'. It welcomed the increased opportunity for schools to work together in the creation of appropriate courses for e-learning and shared teaching across schools. Equally persuasive was the suggestion by both primary and secondary headteachers that an asymmetric week would allow for greater 3-18 collaboration and joint planning around key aspects of Scotland's new national curriculum (ibid, p. 3). The council's proposal was approved and saw all of the region's primary and secondary schools close at lunchtime on a Friday. To compensate, the schools started earlier and finished later during the first four days of the week. Similar to Aberdeen City Council, the authority listed opportunities for joint working, easier transition for pupils and increased collaboration as potential benefits, while noting challenges associated with managing change and overcoming parental concerns.

There are, however, other considerations that need to be made ahead of transition to asymmetric arrangements that cannot be easily quantified or addressed during initial scoping exercises. For example, evidence suggests that adjusting school timetables is not, by itself, guaranteed to have a positive effect on a school and its community and while there is potential to create more opportunities for professional development or enrichment activities, 'putting a new structure in place is unlikely to have the desired impact unless the school leadership and culture are supportive of the change and overarching objective' (Public Policy Institute for Wales, 2016). Furthermore, there is recognition that existing structures work better for some than others, and not everybody is set to benefit from alternative approaches. Heyward (2017, p. 1) makes the following warning:

Moving to a four-day schedule is a far more complex intervention than shifting bus routes... When a community shifts its school schedule, it affects parents, teachers, classified staff, and local businesses. The schedule change – with longer school days and extended weekends – affects students most of all, and different students react in different ways.

The ease in which teachers, parents and pupils are able to overcome inertia and develop a confidence to break from established norms will be among the themes considered during the course of this research.

5. COVID-19

Having concluded the review of available literature, it is appropriate to acknowledge at this point the unique and unprecedented situation in which the world's education systems currently find themselves. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted what we know as 'traditional' approaches to education, and a UK-wide 'lockdown' in March 2020 resulted in the closure of all publicly-funded schools to full-time, face-to-face teaching. The change to fundamental pillars of our society, such as those pertaining to education, has been profound. Indeed, the commissioning of this research was made well in advance of these dramatic events, which do have implications for the findings presented.

The immediacy of the challenges presented by COVID-19 has demanded speed in the implementation of creative responses of education ministries and educational establishments to ensure the continuation of learning, regardless of location (OECD, 2020). Many students around the world, including those in Wales and the UK, have moved to distance (or remote) learning from home, and involved blended approaches to delivery whether synchronous or asynchronous. External, end-of-year assessments were cancelled and replaced with a temporary mechanism for the awarding of qualifications, based on teacher assessment and localised moderation (Qualifications Wales, 2020). The learning loss to pupils has been significant and evidence suggests the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers could have widened by as much as 75% since the pandemic took hold (EEF, 2020). As the COVID-19 situation eases, countries like Wales have sought to reopen schools to larger numbers of pupils in-line with medical advice (BBC Wales, 2020). However, there is recognition that blended learning models will likely become more of a feature of education systems for at least the short-to-medium term, and as such policymakers are continuing to explore new ways of providing education to pupils that transcend the borders of physical school sites through use of technology.

In Wales, operational guidance produced by the Welsh Government for the 2020 autumn term determined that 'there cannot be a one size fits all approach' to delivery and every school setting will have its localised challenges (Welsh Government, 2020a). Indeed, its recommendation that schools should consider staggering start and finish times, whilst not reducing the amount of overall teaching time available to pupils, presents a unique opportunity to challenge existing practices and explore viable alternatives.

The balance between learning in schools and settings and time spent learning elsewhere may well change at particular points in response to the pandemic. This challenge requires schools to adapt their curriculum planning to be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances. (Welsh Government, 2020b, p. 2)

The challenges presented by the pandemic have been extensive, and on a scale unimaginable just a few short months ago. However, from a period characterised by uncertainty and speculation has begun to emerge a picture of greater stability, and a sense that all key stakeholders in education are becoming increasingly accustomed to new ways of working. New routines are being adopted, and makeshift structures put in place out of necessity are evolving into something more sustainable and potentially lasting. Learning the lessons of these experiences will be vital if we are to maximise the opportunities presented by COVID-19 disruption.

As we look to the next school year and beyond, system leaders, educators, faculty, students, and families will apply what they've learned throughout the process, and work together to plan and shape the future of education. (Fullan et al, 2020, p. 2)

The response of education systems to the COVID-19 crisis has proven that students can learn and demonstrate their learning without bricks and mortar or bell times (ibid). It will be interesting to see the extent to which systems leaders across the world are prepared to grasp the chance to do something truly radical as a result. Indeed, the pivotal question according to Fullan and colleagues (2020) is whether seizing the opportunity to create a new, powerful learning system is more appealing than slipping back into a status quo. Novel approaches to the structure of the school week, and more traditional school timetables, present one such opportunity.

6. Methodology

This study is born out of a constructivist ontology, in that it believes in the construction of multiple realities by individuals, and is crafted using an interpretivist paradigm that relies on the subjective experiences of individuals to develop meaning (Arthur et al, 2012). Indeed, its research aims are themselves interpretive in nature, given they are interested in making connections between what school leaders and staff did in order to implement an asymmetric week, and their subsequent actions/behaviours.

The report draws on the experience of two schools, purposively sampled and acting as case studies. The case study approach was appropriate as the contextual conditions and ‘real world setting’ of working schools were of particular interest to this research (Yin, 2014, p. 76). The schools themselves were chosen because of their early adoption of the asymmetric week, and their ability to document the changes that have occurred across multiple school years. A mixed-method approach to data collection was employed to inform each case study, using the following sources of evidence:

- Semi-structured interviews with school leaders at both:
 - Treorchy Comprehensive School, Rhondda Cynon Taf and;
 - Pembroke Dock Community School, Pembrokeshire.
- Online surveys (Qualtrics) of staff, pupils and parents at both schools.

The school leaders of both schools were approached to ensure participation prior to the initial gathering of primary data, and multiple methods of data collection were used in order to support triangulation and ensure study validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Interviews and surveys were chosen to ensure as rich and as candid a portrayal of participants’ views as possible, and because they are reputable methods of research most often used in the social sciences (Taylor, 2005). The school leaders who agreed to participate in the study did so voluntarily and interviews took place at a time and date convenient to them.

Standard interview questions were determined in advance and remained consistent for both sessions (i.e. both participants were required to answer the same questions). Questions were open-ended and allowed new ideas to be recognised and noted during the interview process. Supplementary questions emerged naturally as conversations developed and were employed to better ‘understand the experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience’ (Seidman, 1991, p. 3). Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were recorded using the built-in recording mechanism on Microsoft Teams, the platform chosen to undertake the interview process, in order to capture data more effectively and support transcription. Field notes and extracts from the transcription enabled a rapid recording of key themes and emerging viewpoints, and helped meet the needs of a short deadline. Examples were drawn out and cited as appropriate. Given the nature of semi-structured interviews and the limitations of taking field notes, some subjectivity and personal interpretation of the findings has to be recognised. However, this was mitigated by adopting a simplified thematic analysis, used to identify emerging patterns and trends, as they appear in the report.

The online surveys of staff, pupils and parents at both schools was undertaken using Qualtrics, the university’s preferred online platform. The surveys were distributed at the discretion of the school leaders, in order to gauge as rich an understanding of the asymmetric week from a range of different perspectives, and included a mix of closed and open-ended questions to allow for a fuller range of responses. Different surveys were used for each group of participants (i.e. one for staff, one for pupils and another for parents), with questions relating to the specific interests and characteristics of respondents. Participants were asked about their experiences and a series of questions related to the asymmetric school week and its adoption by their school. The surveys were disseminated between June and September 2020 and designed to take between 5-15 minutes to complete, dependent on respondent.

The surveys were completed anonymously via an online web link, sent via email, and there is no risk that respondents will be identifiable, as no information that might lead to their identification was requested. The right of participants to withdraw from the study at any point was made clear to them in the survey information sheet prior to completion. School leaders participating in interviews *will* be identified, as their schools will be, but this was made clear to them at the outset. Surveys of a sample of parents and pupils from both schools was delayed from June to August/September 2020, based on the recommendation of school leaders and researchers who considered it inappropriate to involve these stakeholders earlier in the data collection process, given the sensitivities surrounding the developing COVID-19 situation and related priorities.

Headline data collected from both the semi-structured interviews and online surveys is presented in the following pages, with a thematic analysis (involving a coding and review process) employed to provide key findings and conclusions. See Appendix for interview questions.

7. Ethical considerations

Care was taken to ensure that the research adhered to BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines for educational research. Similarly, the study was undertaken in accordance with the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice and Research Data Management Policy. Ethical approval was granted by the university's education ethics committee prior to research commencement. In addition to these general principles, consideration was also given to a number of ethical issues specific to this study. One of the most significant related to the anonymity of survey participants, and ensuring no staff member, pupil or parent could be identified at any point during the course of the research. To mitigate this risk, no requests for contextual details were made and any information that could have led to their identification was omitted.

The right of participants to withdraw at any point, without the need for explanation, was made clear in writing and orally to both school leaders in advance of the study taking place. As such, both school leaders understood the process in which they were taking part and the research aims. They were told that the interviews would be transcribed and all recordings of what was said (verbal and written) would be stored securely, accessible only to the researcher. It was explained that excerpts of the transcription would be published in the research report, and that identifying details would be included. Written consent to participate in the study was obtained from both school leaders and every effort was made to ensure that data was generated and presented in a fair and reasonable manner.

8. Findings

For ease of reference, the findings of each case study are presented consecutively. Evidence from the semi-structured interviews with school leaders is offered first, followed by findings arising from the online surveys of staff, pupils and parents at each school.

8.1 Case study: Pembroke Dock Community School

Pembroke Dock Community School is a large primary school of 720 pupils in Pembrokeshire. The school has 30 teaching staff and 70 support staff, and around 31% of its pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is well above the all-Wales average. In its last Estyn inspection report, published in 2017, both the school's current performance was rated 'good' and its prospects for improvement rated 'excellent'.

Pembroke Dock Community School adopted an asymmetric week in September 2018 after a written and online consultation process involving staff, pupils, parents and the wider school community. A proposal to extend the school day, Monday to Thursday, by 15 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes in the afternoon to help free up time on a Friday was first put to staff, and then to other key stakeholders. Feedback from parents suggested that requiring pupils to attend school earlier was not preferable, although there was broad consensus that a later finish time would be workable. As a result, the school resolved to extend its regular school day by 10 minutes for all year groups, Monday to Thursday, and shorten break times by five minutes to allow for a shorter Friday. All pupils now start school at 9am, but different year groups finish at different times, from 3pm-3.10pm. Parents are able to collect their children at 12.15pm on a Friday, or at 12.45pm if their child is staying for lunch (although there is flexibility for those wanting to collect their children later). This has freed up time on a Friday afternoon for either staff professional learning or well-being sessions, which are broadly timetabled on alternate weeks. This means that at any given time on a Friday afternoon, staff are either in school undertaking activities related to professional learning, or outside of school enjoying their own leisure time. Pupils who decline the opportunity to leave early and stay in school until 3pm on a Friday, are looked after by the school's learning support assistants (LSAs), who have their own two-week rota. The LSAs in school on any given Friday split between supporting children and their own professional learning, while the rest leave school early for their well-being session. There is a weekly changeover and staff are given at least a year's notice of their forthcoming timetable.

The additional two hours (1pm-3pm, every other Friday) made available as a result of the restructure, has enabled the school's senior leadership team to treble the amount of training time available to staff over the course of a year. Included in the staff timetable is a broad range of activities, including seminars on coaching and mentoring, dedicated time for action research, and sessions on creativity and entrepreneurship, evidence-informed teaching and mindfulness. Friday afternoons have also been used to introduce staff to the demands of the new national curriculum.

a) Headline interview findings: School leader

Pembroke Dock Community School's headteacher, Michele Thomas, was appointed in April 2010. She agreed to take part in an online, semi-structured interview that lasted approximately 60 minutes and was designed to elicit her views on and experiences of transitioning to an asymmetric school week. The interview took place in April 2020 via Microsoft Teams. The interviews yielded a mass of qualitative data and the questions posed are listed in the Appendix. The results of the interview findings are presented in written form, under a series of thematic headings for ease of reference. Direct quotes have been extracted to demonstrate specific points and Mrs Thomas was aware that her interview responses would be made public and attributed to her.

Motive

The school's senior leadership team was becoming increasingly conscious of the limited time staff had to consider their own practice and professional development, particularly in the context of Wales' new national curriculum. The school looked to schools employing an asymmetric week in Midlothian, Scotland, for inspiration and the headteacher had drawn on her experiences of education in Ontario, Canada, following a study visit. Mrs Thomas cited a disappointing lack of evidence from which to draw albeit she was keen to explore the possibilities afforded by an asymmetric week. Mrs Thomas said her primary motive for redefining the school day was enhancing the school's professional learning offer, although a growing emphasis on mental health and well-being nationally was also an important factor and something she was keen to focus more attention on.

‘I wanted to continue to raise standards of teaching and learning within the school, and obviously professional development is part of that process. If you’re not developing your teachers, how are you going to develop your children?’

The headteacher was very keen that introduction of the asymmetric week should be ‘cost neutral’, and not hamper the school financially in any way. For Mrs Thomas, the new arrangements were ‘purely about making the time to upskill’ and there was no financial imperative.

Staff well-being and development

Mrs Thomas said staff at Pembroke Dock had responded positively to the fortnightly Friday afternoon off, and had enjoyed participating in a number of different activities they would not ordinarily have been able to do. The school has reported improved staff morale (via internal staff surveys) and, in the main, teacher absence from school is low. Mrs Thomas said staff had enjoyed spending more time with their own children, long weekends away with the family, and quieter time at local beauty spots and tourist attractions. Indeed, she said some staff had reported that as a ‘Pioneer school’ charged with early development of the new curriculum, the school had been ‘practicing what it preached’ in terms of staff well-being and professional development. On well-being Fridays, staff are encouraged to ‘down tools and zone out’, according to Mrs Thomas.

‘We made a big deal of it initially because it was so alien to us... actually being allowed to leave school for an afternoon. So we encouraged people to do something they wouldn’t be able to normally. Some people went for a walk and they felt guilty, not wanting to be seen by anybody because they felt they should be in school. Some people went on dates with their partner and had lunch; I had one senior leadership member who went and got married on a Friday afternoon! Some staff go and pick up their children from their schools on a Friday – as a teacher, you never get to see your child dropped off in school and picked up, so that’s a real treat.’

Mrs Thomas said staff had enjoyed having extra time to consider their own development, and the school’s investment in professional learning had not gone unnoticed. Giving both teachers *and* support staff the opportunity to upskill has been hugely rewarding, she said, and given all school staff a feeling of being valued. All teachers are undertaking their own professional enquiry, and use dedicated professional learning time to engage in research. Staff and pupils have also benefitted in other ways.

The ring-fencing of time at the end of the week has allowed staff to meet more regularly in professional learning communities (PLCs) and to discuss the development of AoLEs, in line with the requirements of the new national curriculum. Whereas previously these meetings would be held at various times during the working week, they are now held on a Friday afternoon, meaning teaching staff can stay in their classes. Mrs Thomas is confident that the asymmetric week has reduced the amount of time teachers are away from their children.

There has been greater collaboration of staff within the school, and between schools, as a result of transition to an asymmetric week. As such, Mrs Thomas argued that teaching and learning is developing for the better due in large part to the broadening of staff knowledge and understanding of key educational developments. This, she said, had only been possible because of the additional time afforded by the asymmetric week.

‘I’ve been on learning walks where I’ve heard the LSAs doing Welsh activities and games with the children – they wouldn’t have had the skills to have done that previously... I’ve seen them leading ICT that they wouldn’t have done previously.’

Mrs Thomas is excited by the possibility of staff from more schools training together in clusters as a result of the asymmetric week’s growing popularity in the area. Staff from neighbouring schools have already been invited to Pembroke Dock on a Friday afternoon to join in collaborative professional learning sessions.

Leadership

Leadership was key to the adoption of the asymmetric week, given the headteacher is also responsible for professional learning within the school. Mrs Thomas said it was important to demonstrate recognition of the importance of staff well-being and professional development, as well as the need for teachers to become research-engaged and research-informed. This, she said, was 'a complete change in culture', especially for more experienced teachers who had not written an assignment or engaged in research for many years.

Challenges

Mrs Thomas said there was resistance to the asymmetric week from a small number of parents who worked and considered it unfair that some children would be able to go home early on a Friday, when others would not. She said it was important in this instance to shift the perception that school was a 'bad' thing, and that no child would be disadvantaged if they were to remain in school for the duration of the week. Open meetings were held to give parents the opportunity to discuss the new arrangements in person, and a follow-up survey was conducted by the school to gauge opinion after the asymmetric week was fully operational. Feedback was even more positive after implementation, said Mrs Thomas, because parents had become used to the new arrangements and knew that its flexibility allowed them to leave their child in school if something important arose.

'In the main it's been positive, because we ensured that there would be no change if they didn't want to change... [and] if they didn't want to collect their children on a Friday afternoon, they could leave them in to do those activities.'

Consultation

Mrs Thomas put a proposal to change the structure of the school week to staff, before sharing more widely. She invited feedback on plans to extend the school day, Monday to Thursday, in order to free up time on a Friday, as part of a formal consultation process. Questions were not limited to 'yes' or 'no' answers in order to gain a fuller, more detailed understanding of what stakeholders thought of the proposal.

Coincidentally, the local press took an interest in the consultation and ran an online poll asking readers whether they supported the change or not. The poll found that 87% of the 2,026 respondents agreed that the asymmetric week would work (Western Telegraph, 2018). Mrs Thomas said it was important to sell the new arrangements on the basis of its improved professional development opportunities for staff and their corresponding knock-on effect on pupil outcomes, because of the popular perception that teachers already had a good deal of time off.

'It's important to sell the asymmetric week on professional development for the teachers and improved outcomes for the children, because as soon as you start talking about teacher well-being, unless you're in the profession people don't want to know. They think teachers get enough time off as it is.'

Another important development saw Pembroke Dock join forces with the local secondary school, Ysgol Harri Tudur, to switch to an asymmetric week at the same time. Both went to consultation together, which given they were feeding the same catchment area, strengthened the schools' case for change. Since then, more schools in the area have consulted on an asymmetric week, which allows teachers from different schools to train together at the same time.

Mrs Thomas said that the majority of questions raised by pupils in consultation, related to 'chip day' and whether or not children would be able to enjoy chips for lunch on a Friday as usual. Most pupils at Pembroke Dock benefit from school dinners and so catering staff serve chips in a takeaway box so pupils can take them home with them if they choose not to say in school. Pupils also reported being tired on a Friday afternoon and, said Mrs Thomas, welcomed the thought of leaving early as 'they never used to learn anything then anyway'.

Benefits to pupils

According to Mrs Thomas, one of the most significant positive effects of the asymmetric week for pupils is that they will benefit from better trained and upskilled staff. Both teachers and LSAs are receiving more development opportunities as a result of the Friday afternoon professional learning sessions, and staff are already employing what they have learned to good effect in the classroom. Nevertheless, Mrs Thomas said it was difficult to evidence exactly what impact the asymmetric week has had on pupil performance and while end of phase outcomes improved slightly last year, it was not possible to determine the direct impact of the asymmetric week on attainment. She suggested that a longer period of time would be needed to compare and contrast pupil performance, before and after transition to new arrangements. Attendance and behaviour has not changed meaningfully either way.

Sharing experiences

The school has presented its development of the asymmetric week to local school clusters, the local authority, and nationally at government-run conferences. Pembroke Dock has welcomed a number of interested visitors to the school, including governing bodies from other schools curious as to how the school is operated on a Friday, in particular.

Mrs Thomas said the school's Challenge Adviser (appointed by the regional education consortium) had been very supportive of the school's transition to an asymmetric week, and the opportunity to increase staff professional learning time had gone down well with external colleagues. She said the local authority had also offered its support and agreed to change school transport and school crossing patrols free of charge to accommodate the new arrangements. She said the local authority was so taken with the idea, it has since produced a leaflet for schools interested in the asymmetric week, with practical detail on how to go about changing timetables. Indeed, Mrs Thomas noted that it was important schools knew that they could only implement such changes at the start of the school year, and that the same safeguarding and first aid arrangements would be required on a reduced staff at the end of the week.

National approach

Mrs Thomas endorsed a national approach to the asymmetric week, and pointed to a growing number of schools adopting new timetabling arrangements. She was not convinced by the suggestion that an asymmetric week is only compatible in certain circumstances, and believes all schools could employ a variation on the same theme. She has offered all of her relevant documentation to other schools wishing to explore similar arrangements, and said the fact so many schools were now employing an asymmetric week ensures 'people don't have to start from scratch'.

'Some schools have said "oh no, we couldn't do that because our parents absolutely wouldn't like it" – but do they want the best-trained teachers? I mean, would you take your child to a doctor who hadn't looked at the most recent research in the last 10 years? I always think, you've got to look for ways to do something, [and] get over the hurdles rather than putting up barriers.'

Mrs Thomas said the asymmetric week would be scalable across Wales, and many school leaders would welcome the opportunity to reconsider their daily practices. She suggested, however, that they would benefit from more flexibility to do so and 'if there was the nod from the top, it would give schools a little bit more support when they're approaching their governing body'. Mrs Thomas said the asymmetric week had given her school 'a new lease of life' and it would be a major disappointment if the school were to return to old ways of working.

Curriculum for Wales

Mrs Thomas is confident that her school is well placed to tackle the challenges of designing and implementing a new curriculum in-line with Welsh Government expectations, least not because of the additional time her staff have had to engage in its guiding documentation. Indeed, she plans to review the impact of training on staff as the emerging *Curriculum for Wales* developments.

'When we are fully into the new curriculum, I think we will probably see that my staff have got a really good understanding and grounding of some of the new principles behind it all, compared to others... because they have been immersed in it for so long and recognise that is what the purpose of all the training is.'

b) Headline survey findings: Staff

A survey was developed using the Qualtrics survey tool and distributed to all staff at Pembroke Dock Community School by email, for completion during June and July 2020. The results of the survey findings are presented graphically and the proportion of respondents as a percentage, for ease of reference. Percentages have been rounded and so may not sum to 100. To support accessibility, the wordings of some survey questions and items have been abbreviated. It is important to note that while everyone in the quoted sample submitted their survey for consideration, not all participants completed all questions; this is made clear in the following pages.

Characteristics of respondents

Over the course of data collection, 60 staff from Pembroke Dock Community School (n=60) responded to the online survey. Of these, 55 (92%) were female and five (8%) were male. The majority (63%) were aged between 30-50, with 27% aged 51 and over, and a further 10% aged under 30. In addition to their gender and age, staff were asked two other initial questions about their roles and careers at the school.

More than half of those who responded to the survey (52%) identified as support staff, with a further 32% as being on the teaching staff. The school's senior leadership team (8%) also took part, as highlighted in Figure 1.

As outlined in Figure 2, a large proportion of respondents (59%) had more than 10 years' experience of working at the school. Just 15% of those who took part in the survey had been at the school for fewer than six years.

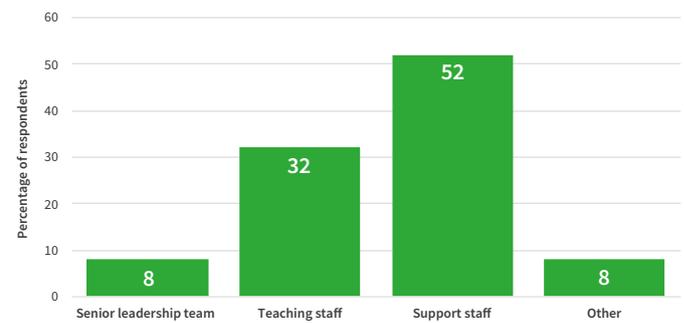
Impact on staff

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on them as staff. The first related to the effect of working longer school days, with shorter breaks and a later finish time, four days a week, and the extent to which they found this manageable. The results are presented in Figure 3.

Very few respondents found managing the longer school days either 'slightly worse' or 'much worse' (2%) than managing old arrangements. The majority found the new arrangements 'about the same' to manage (57%), while 41% said they were either 'much better' or 'slightly better' than the old ways of working. The response to this question suggests that almost all staff found the longer school days no more difficult to manage than the standard school days to which they had previously been accustomed.

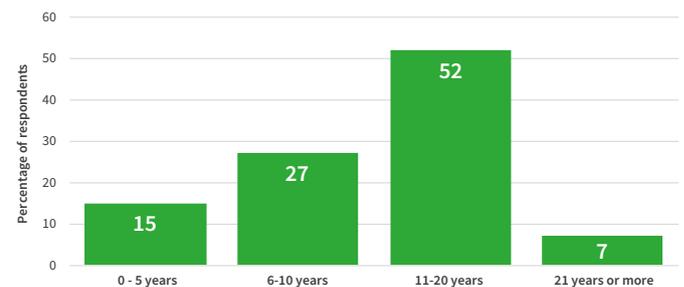
Recognising that there could be a number of reasons for the data collected in Figure 3, staff were asked whether specific factors pertinent to the asymmetric week had been challenging for them. This was based on the difficulty of some parents in other contexts to source suitable childcare arrangements, school transport and extra-curricular activities (for, most notably in this case, Friday afternoons). The figure below provides the results.

Figure 1 - Which of the following best describes your role?



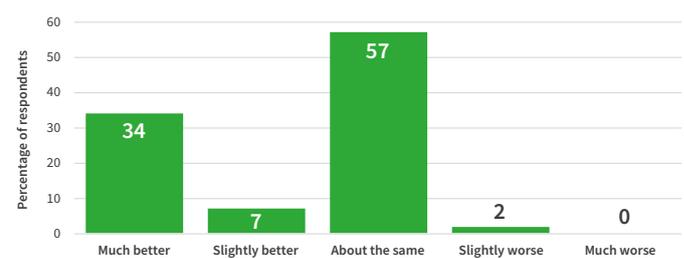
60 respondents answered this question

Figure 2 - How long have you worked at the school?



60 respondents answered this question

Figure 3 - How manageable have you found the longer school days, introduced as a result of the asymmetric week?



58 respondents answered this question

Figure 4 suggests that the majority of staff at the school has found arranging childcare, school transport and extra-curricular activities straightforward since moving to an asymmetric week. Almost nine in 10 (87%) staff found organising childcare ‘not challenging at all’, while just 3% considered it ‘extremely challenging’ or ‘very challenging’. Organising school transport was deemed ‘not challenging at all’ by 83% of respondents, while around seven in 10 (72%) found no issue sourcing extra-curricular activities. A quarter of respondents (25%) said organising extra-curricular activities was either ‘moderately challenging’ or ‘slightly challenging’.

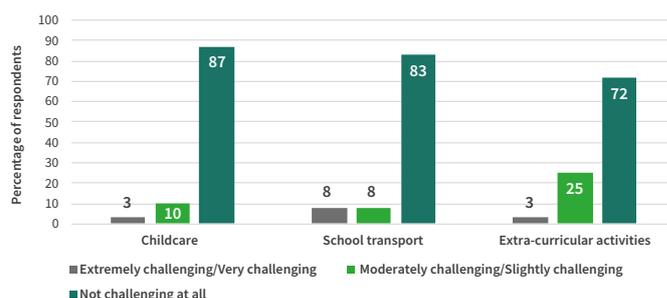
Overall, these responses paint a broadly positive picture of the additional demands on staff in relation to their out-of-work responsibilities. They suggest that some of the more prominent, practical changes resulting from the asymmetric week had been fairly well accommodated, allowing staff to focus on school-based activities.

Figure 5 is key to the research foci as it relates very specifically to the impact of the asymmetric week on respondents themselves. Staff were asked whether or not asymmetric adaptations had impacted positively on their professional development, workload, mental health and well-being, family/home life, teaching and morale. Not all respondents answered each item, though response rates were high for the most part.

The results, as demonstrated in Figure 5, are broadly encouraging, in that the majority of respondents either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the asymmetric week had impacted positively on each aspect. The most promising development appears to have been staff’s improved family/home life, with 76% of 58 respondents agreeing or agreeing strongly that the asymmetric week had had a positive impact. Improvements to staff mental health and well-being were also noticeably high, with 74% of 58 who responded agreeing or strongly agreeing changes had made a positive difference, and 72% of 57 saying the same of their morale. Almost seven in 10 (68% of 57 respondents) agreed that their professional development had benefitted, although as many who said they ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’ said they ‘disagreed’ or ‘disagreed strongly’ (16%).

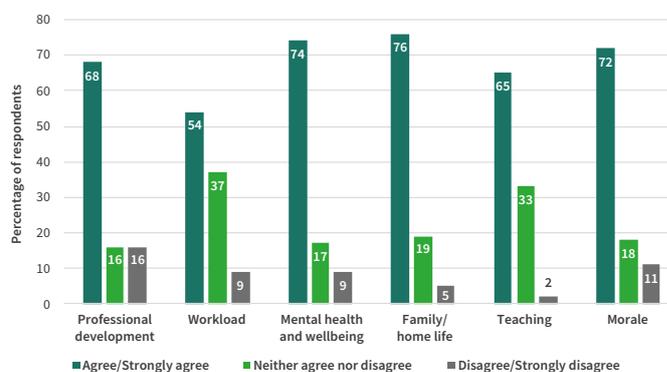
The impact of the asymmetric week on workload was slightly less conclusive, though the majority (54% of 54 respondents) still felt that the changes had made a positive difference. Almost four in 10 (37%) ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’, while 9% ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’. It is not possible to identify precisely what of their teaching practice respondents felt had been positively impacted, though the majority (65% of 49 who responded) ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the asymmetric week had been more a help than a hindrance. A further 33% did not have strong feelings either way.

Figure 4 - Since moving to the asymmetric week, to what extent has organising the following been challenging for you:



The response rate to this question varied, from 24 to 32

Figure 5 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the asymmetric week has impacted positively on your:



The response rate to this question varied, from 49 to 58

Further to Figure 5, staff were invited to rank what they considered to be the most and least beneficial aspects of the asymmetric week. The majority (43%) of respondents felt that improved mental health and well-being was the most beneficial consequence of the transition to new arrangements, while the advent of more leisure time was considered the least beneficial (71%). Having more time for professional learning was also deemed an important development, while spending more time at home/with family was less so.

Together, the data presented in figures 5 and 6 suggests that improvements to the mental health and well-being of staff has been significant, following introduction of the asymmetric week. Indeed, the statistics would suggest that improved mental health and well-being has made the biggest difference to staff in the school. Increased opportunities for professional development and professional learning also feature prominently as being beneficial to staff. These outcomes are promising and, from the perspective of staff, appear to validate the headteacher’s decision to pursue asymmetric changes.

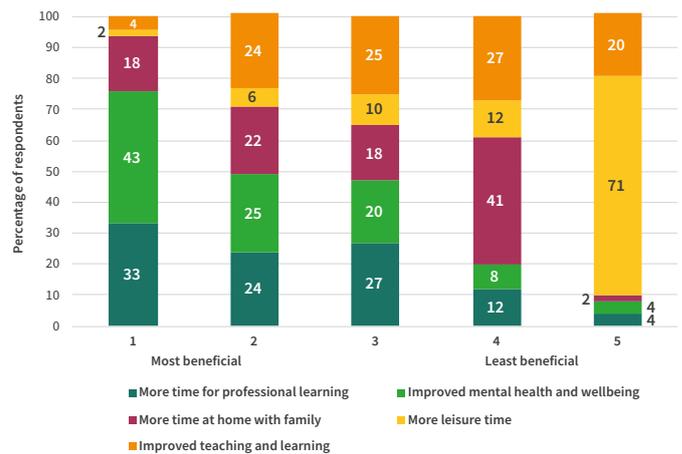
Impact on pupils

As well as the impact of the asymmetric week on themselves as staff, respondents were also asked about the impact of new arrangements on pupils. Working on the assumption that school staff have a good understanding of pupils’ wants and needs, they were asked to consider the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the asymmetric week had impacted positively on pupils’ learning, mental health and well-being, workload, attendance and behaviour. The results are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7 presents an interesting range of results. Similar to their positive interpretation of their own mental health and well-being, staff said the asymmetric week had made the biggest positive impact on pupils’ mental health and well-being. The overwhelming majority (80%) of the 55 respondents to this particular item ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the asymmetric week had impacted positively on pupils’ mental health and well-being, compared to just 5% who ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’.

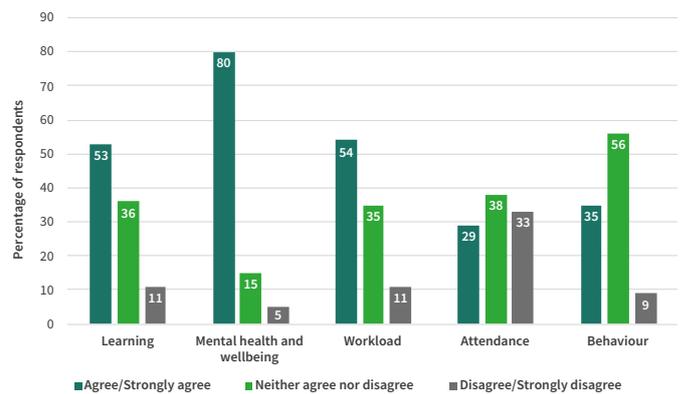
More respondents than not felt that the asymmetric week had impacted positively on pupils’ learning (53% of 55 who answered) and workload (54% of 54 who answered), although a significant minority ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’ that either item had resulted in a positive impact. The impact on pupil attendance is far more inconclusive, according to staff, with the majority (38% of 55 respondents) neither agreeing nor disagreeing that the asymmetric week had had a positive effect. In fact, more people ‘disagreed’ or ‘disagreed strongly’ (33%) than ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ (29%). Similarly, staff appeared less convinced that the asymmetric arrangements had impacted positively on pupils’ behaviour, with the majority (56% of 55 who answered) neither agreeing nor disagreeing that new patterns had made a significant difference.

Figure 6 - Rank the following benefits of the asymmetric week in order, where 1 is the most beneficial and 5 is the least beneficial:



51 respondents answered this question

Figure 7 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the asymmetric week has impacted positively on pupils':



The response rate to this question varied, from 54 to 55

While the data presented in Figure 7 is somewhat varied, it does nonetheless indicate that in all but one of the items (attendance) considered, more staff agreed or strongly agreed that there had been a positive impact on pupils than those who disagreed or disagreed strongly. This is an important observation, as it suggests the positive benefits of the asymmetric week outweigh the negative for pupils as well as staff, at least from the perspective of staff.

Impact on school

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on their school, and schools more generally. The first presents an overall view of the impact of the asymmetric week on Pembroke Dock Community School. The results are presented in Figure 8.

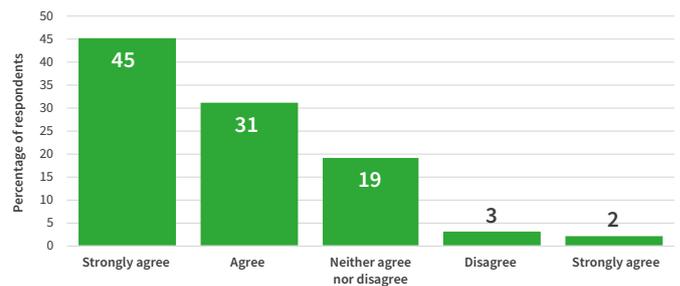
Figure 8 presents a broadly positive picture of the impact of the asymmetric week on Pembroke Dock Community School. Overall, 76% of respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the asymmetric week had had a positive impact, with just 5% disagreeing or disagreeing strongly. More than four in 10 (45%) ‘strongly agreed’ that the school’s transition to an asymmetric week had impacted positively on the school. Overall, this is a positive outcome as it suggests that the school’s adoption of the asymmetric week has paid dividends, according to its staff.

In view of the perceived benefits to professional learning resulting from the asymmetric arrangements, staff were invited to consider the extent to which collaboration both within their own school and between schools had improved since new structures were implemented. As presented in Figure 9, 43% of respondents felt that collaboration *within* Pembroke Dock Community School had been supported ‘a great deal’ as a result of the new professional learning opportunities created by the asymmetric week. A further 36% felt that new opportunities for professional learning had supported collaboration across the school ‘a lot’.

Collectively, the data shows that 79% of respondents believed the asymmetric week had supported collaboration at least ‘a lot’ across the school, with just 7% believing it had not supported collaboration at all.

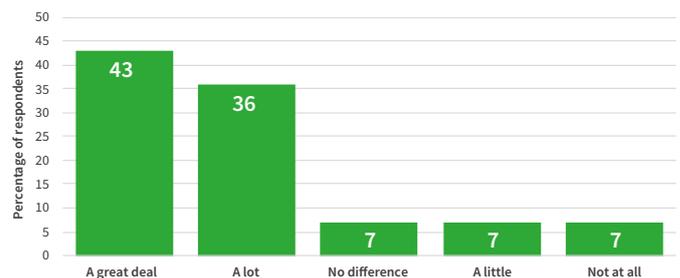
Figure 10, shows that more staff than not felt that the asymmetric week had supported collaboration *between* schools, albeit the strength of opinion in favour of its positive impact is slightly weaker. A fifth of respondents (20%) said the asymmetric week had made no difference to collaboration between schools, while 63% believed it had supported collaboration at least ‘a lot’ between schools. Figures 9 and 10 suggest improved collaboration within and between schools is, at least in this case, a genuine benefit of asymmetric arrangements, albeit that the collaborative benefits appear to be stronger within schools themselves.

Figure 8 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the school's transition to an asymmetric week has had a positive impact on the school?



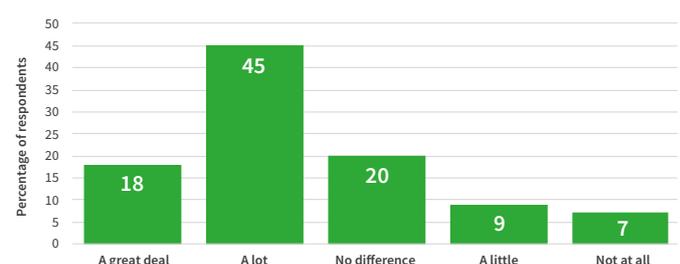
58 respondents answered this question

Figure 9 - To what extent do you feel that new opportunities for professional learning created by the asymmetric week have supported collaboration within the school?



56 respondents answered this question

Figure 10 - To what extent do you feel that the new opportunities for professional learning created by the asymmetric week have supported collaboration between schools?



55 respondents answered this question

In the next part of the survey, staff were asked two questions with the intention of supporting other schools that are considering introducing asymmetric arrangements. The first, presented in Figure 11, invited respondents to rank in order five potential challenges to the adoption of an asymmetric week.

The challenges were selected on the basis of contributions by both school leaders during the interview process, and of insight garnered during the report’s contextual literature review. As such, staff were asked which of the following five challenges to introducing an asymmetric week were the most challenging:

- Changing staff mindset;
- Gaining buy-in from school community;
- Arranging childcare;
- Agreeing new timetable;
- Preparing for new arrangements.

The first two in this list (changing staff mindset and gaining buy-in from school community) are based largely around staff’s social interactions and shifting culture, while the latter three relate more specifically to the practical and logistical arrangements required to transition from a more traditional structure to that of the asymmetric week.

Overall, staff considered gaining buy-in from the school community the most challenging aspect of introducing an asymmetric week, with 42% identifying buy-in as the foremost challenge. Preparing for new arrangements was also considered a more significant challenge, with 19% ranking it as the most challenging and a further 31% the second most challenging.

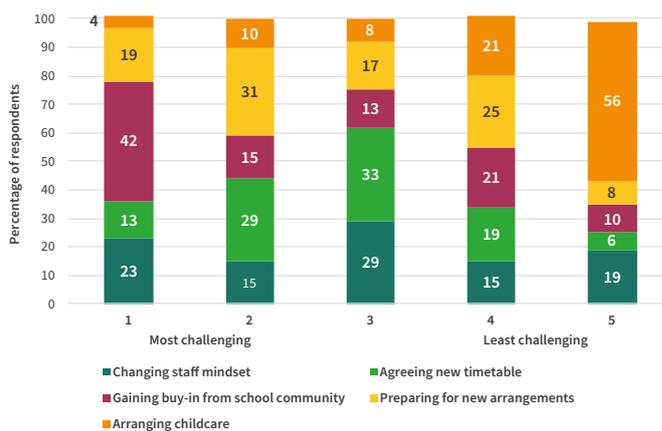
Arranging childcare was the least problematic for staff, with 56% ranking it fifth out of five and 21% fourth out of five. Changing staff mindset and agreeing a new timetable were fairly evenly spread across the range of challenges.

Figure 11 is useful as it gives schools in similar contexts an idea of what aspects of school life they are likely to have to consider in adopting an asymmetric week, and the extent of challenge presented by certain items. For example, data presented in Figure 11 would suggest that schools might be inclined to spend more time developing ways to gain buy-in from the school community, than they might childcare arrangements. The caveat, of course, is that different schools in different contexts are likely to have to respond to their own challenges in different ways.

Figure 12, is interested in the factors that are most important to the successful implementation of an asymmetric week.

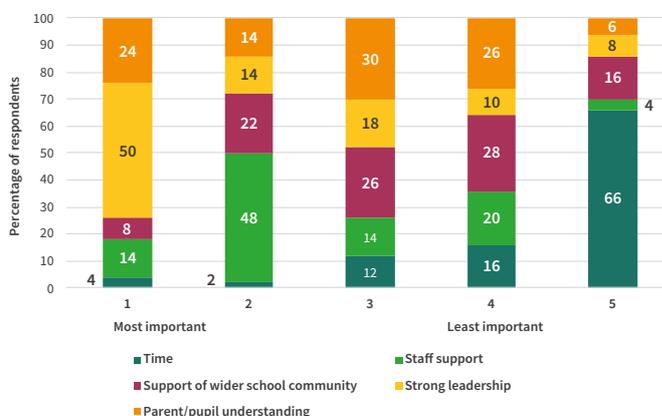
As highlighted above, the data is more conclusive for Figure 12 than Figure 11, with a greater proportion of respondents identifying strong leadership (50%) their most important and time (66%) their least important factors needed to successfully implement an asymmetric week. Garnering staff support is also considered one of the more important factors overall, while there appears to be contrasting

Figure 11 - Rank the following challenges to introducing an asymmetric week in order, where 1 is the most challenging and 5 is the least challenging:



48 respondents answered this question

Figure 12 - What are the most important factors needed to successfully implement an asymmetric week? (where 1 is the most important and 5 is the least important)



50 respondents answered this question

views as to the perceived importance of parent/pupil understanding and attaining support of the wider school community.

Figure 13, is fairly straightforward in that it asked respondents whether or not they would recommend the asymmetric week to other schools in Wales, in light of their experiences. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with 63% saying they definitely would, and a further 22% saying they probably would. Overall, just 10% said they would 'probably not' or 'definitely not' recommend the asymmetric week to others.

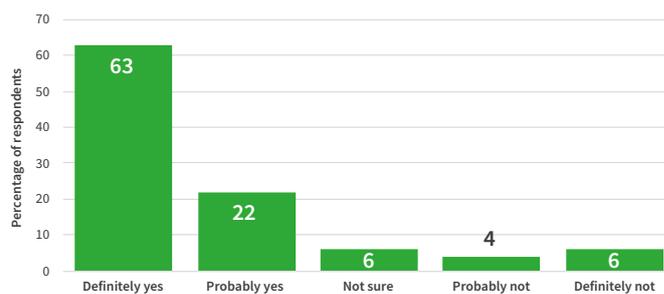
In addition, staff were invited to respond to an open-ended question, asking them to identify 'what could have been done differently to make transition to the asymmetric week more effective?' There was a sense of satisfaction that nothing could have been improved in many of the responses submitted, though some considered the pace of transition an issue worthy of further exploration. One staff member suggested 'a gradual implementation, rather than a sudden change' would have been preferable, as it would have given people more time to adapt to new ways of working. Other comments relating to stronger communication and manageability included:

'A great deal was done to educate the community, but some still didn't understand what exactly was happening. More face-to-face presentations with parents maybe?'

'Provision for children who stay in school should be just for parents who are working, or [introduce a] small fee to keep numbers more manageable.'

'Equality of staff organisation so that both 'teams' have [an] equal number of staff from each wing. Imbalance has led to some weeks being heavily staffed and others struggling.'

Figure 13 - Would you recommend the asymmetric week to other schools in Wales?



51 respondents answered this question

Implications for Curriculum for Wales

This section was interested in the possible relationship between asymmetric arrangements and the new *Curriculum for Wales*. It is hoped that data presented in this section might develop thinking around restructuring education to meet the needs of the new curriculum, and better inform possible adaptations to more established classroom practices in the best interests of the education system more generally.

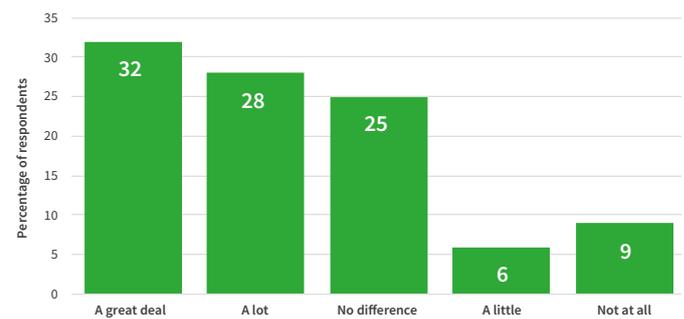
First and foremost, respondents were asked the extent to which moving to an asymmetric week had increased their opportunities to consider the implications of the new *Curriculum for Wales*. This question was designed on the basis that new timetabling arrangements had created additional professional learning opportunities, cited by headteachers as being useful for developing understanding of the new curriculum and wider educational reforms. Therefore, having taken into consideration the views of both headteachers, it would be interesting to determine what if any impact staff felt the asymmetric arrangements had had on their preparations for the *Curriculum for Wales*.

As presented in Figure 14, the majority of respondents (60%) felt that moving to an asymmetric week had increased their opportunities to consider the implications of the new *Curriculum for Wales* ‘a great deal’ or ‘a lot’. A quarter of staff (25%) said there had been ‘no difference’ in the opportunities created to consider the curriculum as a result of transition to the asymmetric week, while 9% said it had made no difference at all.

If Figure 14 considered the *actual* impact of the asymmetric week on their consideration of and familiarity with the new curriculum, Figure 15 presents a more speculative portrayal of respondents’ views on the asymmetric week being of benefit. Overall, 54 members of staff responded to the question of whether or not moving to an asymmetric week would be beneficial to the implementation of the *Curriculum for Wales*.

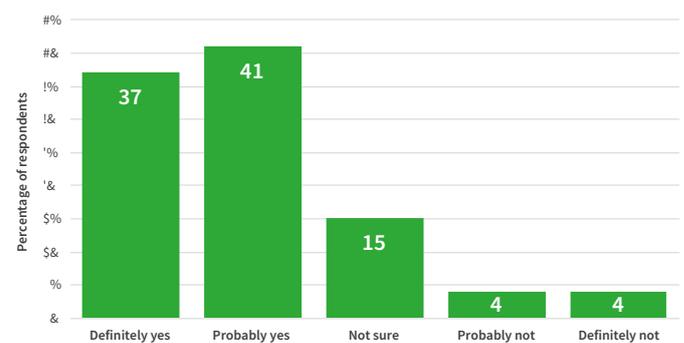
The findings are broadly positive, and suggest that more staff than not thought that the asymmetric week would be beneficial to the curriculum’s implementation. As highlighted in Figure 15, 37% of respondents said that there was definitely a correlation between the two, while a further 41% thought the asymmetric week would ‘probably’ be beneficial. A small minority (8%) thought asymmetric arrangements would ‘probably not’ or ‘definitely not’ be beneficial to implementation of the new curriculum.

Figure 14 - To what extent has moving to an asymmetric week increased your opportunities to consider the implications of the new Curriculum for Wales?



53 respondents answered this question

Figure 15 - Do you think that moving to an asymmetric week would be beneficial to the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales?



54 respondents answered this question

Impact of COVID-19

The survey concluded with a topical question, related specifically to the impact of COVID-19 on education in Wales and the system's response to the pandemic. Staff were asked, given the unprecedented nature of the current situation and probability that there will be significant changes ahead, the extent to which they thought that employing an asymmetric week would be useful on the return to school after the enforced closures. The results are presented in Figure 16.

Of the 50 respondents to this question, 60% definitely believed the asymmetric week would be 'extremely useful' on the return to school post-COVID-19. A further 16% thought it would be 'quite useful', while 18% were unsure. Just 6% felt that the asymmetric week would be 'not useful at all' to schools after the pandemic.

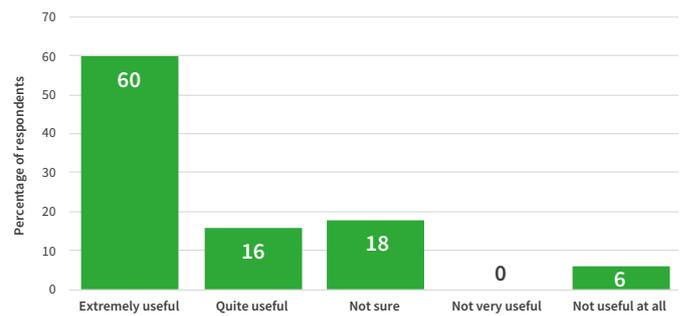
Other, general comments invited at the end of the survey included those expressing gratitude for the new freedoms afforded by the asymmetric arrangements, as well as two highlighting the more specific challenges facing support staff.

'As support staff, we have alternate Friday afternoons off. [There is] no time to plan activities and children who are in have very different interests. The Fridays off are lovely and relaxing [and] I do love them, but the ones in school are stressful and [it's] difficult to please everyone.'

'Personally, [it] has helped workload and well-being immensely. Fridays used to be so hectic and I actually look forward to them more now.'

'As a school and staff we have greatly benefited from the additional training, both internally and from external agencies.'

Figure 16 - How useful do you think employing an asymmetric week will be on the return to school after the COVID-19 pandemic?



50 respondents answered this question

c) **Headline survey findings: Pupils**

A short survey was developed using the Qualtrics survey tool and distributed to pupils in years 3 to 6 at Pembroke Dock Community School by email, for completion during September 2020. The results of the survey findings are presented graphically and the proportion of respondents as a percentage, for ease of reference. Percentages have been rounded and so may not sum to 100. To support accessibility, the wordings of some survey questions and items have been abbreviated. It is important to note that while everyone in the quoted sample submitted their survey for consideration, not all participants completed all questions; this is made clear in the following pages. Steps were taken to ensure the survey was accessible to pupils in all year groups of the school.

Characteristics of respondents

Over the course of data collection, 25 pupils from Pembroke Dock Community School (n=25) responded to the online survey. Of these, 14 (56%) were female and 11 (44%) were male. All of the pupils were in years 5 or 6.

Impact on pupils

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to an asymmetric week on them as pupils. The first related to the effect of working longer school days, with shorter breaks and a later finish time, four days a week, and the extent to which they found this manageable. The results are presented in Figure 17.

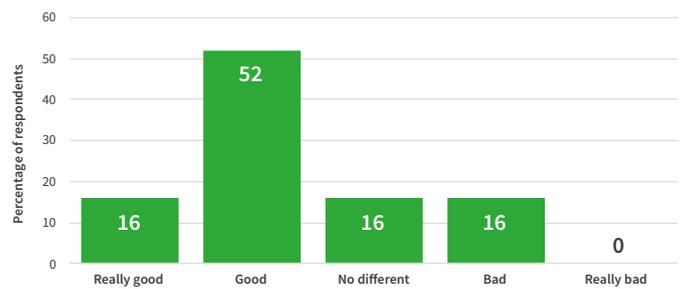
A small minority of respondents found managing the longer school days either 'bad' or 'really bad' (16%). Most (52%) found the new arrangements 'good' to manage, while 16% said having longer school days was 'really good' and a further 16% said it was 'no different'. The response to this question suggests that the vast majority of pupils found the longer school days no more difficult to manage than the standard school days to which they had previously been accustomed.

Further to Figure 17, pupils were asked whether they thought the new school timetable had been a good or a bad thing. The results, presented in Figure 18, are fairly conclusive.

As identified in Figure 18, the majority of respondents (72%) felt that the new school timetable had been a 'good' thing, while 28% said they were 'not sure'. None of the pupils questioned thought the new arrangements had been 'bad'.

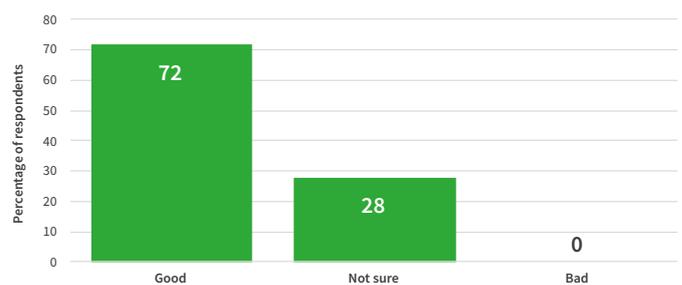
Interested in what the pupils made of finishing early on a Friday, in particular, respondents were asked to consider the extent to which they looked forward to an earlier finish to the school week. The results are presented in Figure 19.

Figure 17 - What has it been like having longer school days Monday-Thursday?



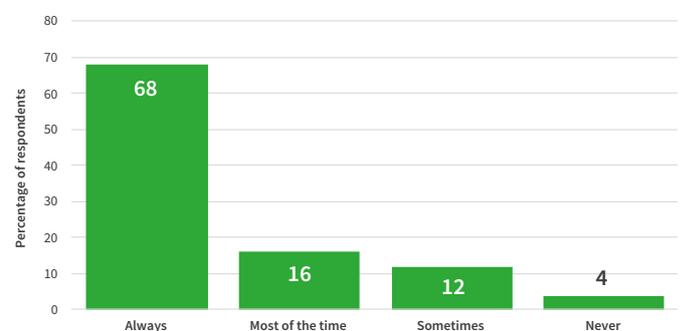
25 respondents answered this question

Figure 18 - Do you think that the new school timetable (with longer school days Monday-Thursday and an earlier finish on a Friday) has been a good or a bad thing?



25 respondents answered this question

Figure 19 - Do you look forward to finishing early on a Friday?



25 respondents answered this question

The vast majority of respondents said they ‘always’ (68%) or ‘most of the time’ (16%) looked forward to finishing early on a Friday, although a small minority said they ‘sometimes’ (12%) or ‘never’ (4%) looked forward to it. These results suggest that while most pupils considered an earlier finish appealing, some did not and it is important to consider why that might have been the case.

Expanding on the reasons behind their views of the earlier finish, most respondents (48%) said that having ‘more time to play with friends’ was the best thing about leaving school early on a Friday. As highlighted in Figure 20, a further 44% felt that ‘spending more time with family’ was the most appealing thing about a shortened school week, while a smaller proportion felt that having ‘more time to have a rest’ (8%) was the most important factor. No pupils found that having ‘more time to catch up on schoolwork’ was of most benefit.

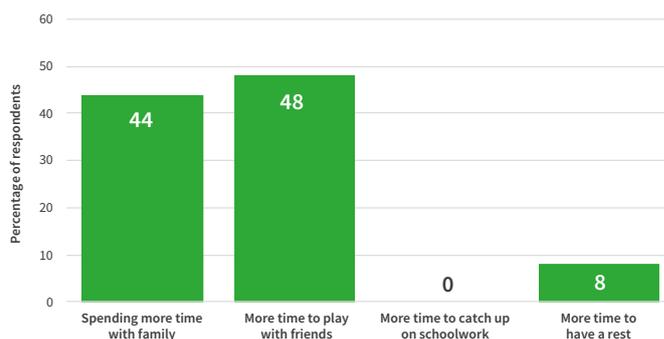
Further to figures 19 and 20, respondents were asked if they preferred school more now, after changes to the school timetable, or before the alterations were made. Most pupils (48%), as identified in Figure 21, said they ‘enjoy it about the same’, compared to a fifth (20%) who said they preferred it more before. Overall, 32% said they ‘prefer school now’, after the changes to the school timetable.

Other, general comments invited at the end of the survey were largely positive and the majority favoured new arrangements introduced by the school. Respondents added:

‘It’s fun going home on a Friday but when you have a lot to do it is tiring.’

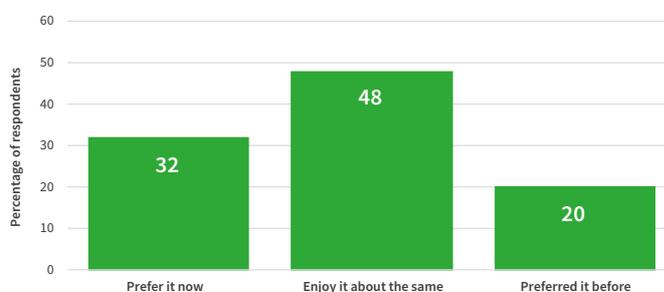
‘It is fun to finish early on Friday so I can sometimes have play dates and that I can see my family.’

Figure 20 - What is the best thing about finishing early on a Friday (please choose one)?



25 respondents answered this question

Figure 21 - Do you prefer school more now, after the changes to the school timetable, or did you prefer it before?



25 respondents answered this question

d) Headline survey findings: Parents

A short survey was developed using the Qualtrics survey tool and distributed to a random sample of parents at Pembroke Dock Community School by email, for completion during September 2020. The results of the survey findings are presented graphically and the proportion of respondents as a percentage, for ease of reference. Percentages have been rounded and so may not sum to 100. To support accessibility, the wordings of some survey questions and items have been abbreviated. It is important to note that while everyone in the quoted sample submitted their survey for consideration, not all participants completed all questions; this is made clear in the following pages.

Characteristics of respondents

Over the course of data collection, 13 parents of pupils at Pembroke Dock Community School (n=13) responded to the online survey. Of these, eight (62%) were female and five (39%) were male. The majority identified as having two children at the school (77%), while 23% said they had one. Parents of children in reception and years 1 to 6 participated in the survey.

Impact on parents

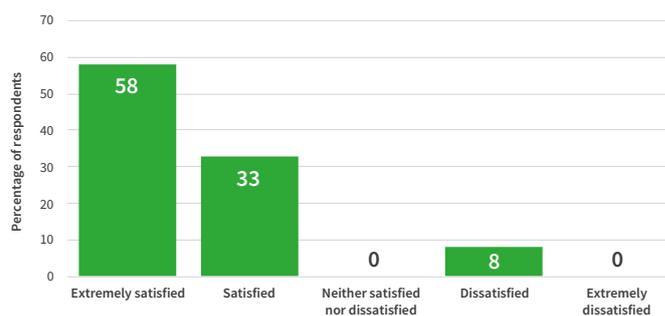
Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on them as parents. The first related to the way in which they were consulted ahead of the changes, and whether they felt they had been given sufficient opportunity to input into the new arrangements. The results are presented in Figure 22.

As outlined above, the majority of respondents (91%) said they were either 'extremely satisfied' or 'satisfied' that they had been consulted enough ahead of the school's transition to an asymmetric week. Just 8% said they were 'dissatisfied', while no respondents said they were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied' or 'extremely dissatisfied' at the level the school had consulted with them.

In Figure 23, parents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the school's decision to close earlier on a Friday afternoon. The majority (82%) said they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the school's decision, while a further 9% said they 'neither agreed nor disagreed'. Overall, less than one in 10 (9%) respondents said they 'disagreed' and none 'disagreed strongly' with the earlier end to the school week. Collectively, the responses presented in Figure 23 suggest strong support for the school's decision to curtail the school week by a few hours on a Friday afternoon.

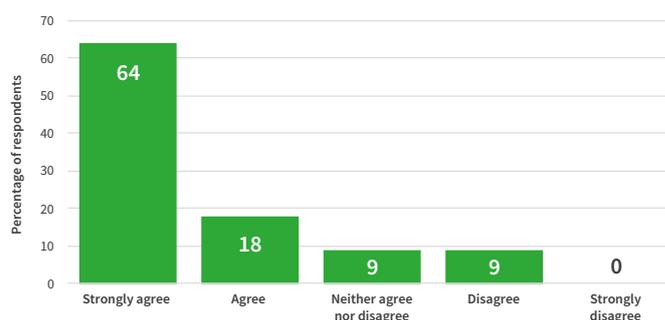
Respondents were asked, as outlined in Figure 24, the extent to which organising childcare, school transport, extra-curricular activities and shifts/work patterns had been challenging for them since the school moved to an asymmetric week. The question was designed to determine what area relating to the new arrangements had proven most and least challenging for parents.

Figure 22 - How satisfied are you that the school consulted with you enough ahead of the transition to an asymmetric week?



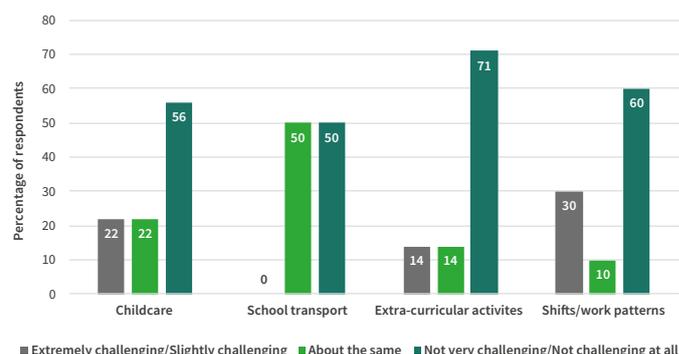
12 respondents answered this question

Figure 23 - To what extent do you agree/disagree with the school's decision to close earlier on a Friday afternoon?



11 respondents answered this question

Figure 24 - Since moving to the asymmetric week, to what extent has organising the following been challenging for you:



The response rate to this question varied, from 6 to 10

According to parents, organising extra-curricular activities was the least challenging aspect of the asymmetric week, with 71% confirming that making new arrangements were 'not very challenging/not challenging at all'. Overall, 60% said the same about shifts/work patterns and a further 56% said the same of childcare. Half (50%) of respondents said organising school transport was 'about the same', while 30% said shifts/work patterns was 'extremely challenging/ slightly challenging'.

As identified in Figure 24, respondents' views on childcare proved the most inconclusive, with as many parents believing they were 'about the same' to organise as those who felt they were 'extremely challenging/slightly challenging'. Childcare was, however, not very challenging or no challenge at all to the majority, which suggests every parent faced their own unique situation.

Impact on pupils

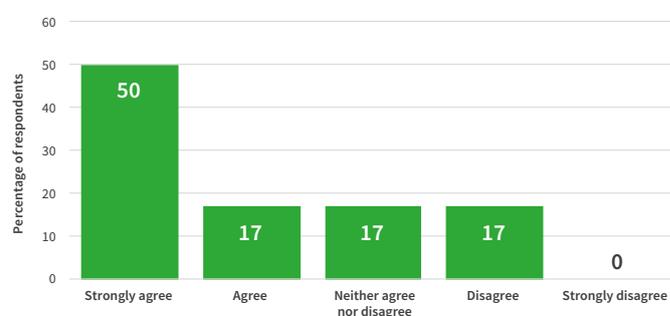
Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on their child/children. The first related to the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the school's transition had had a positive impact on their child/children. The results are presented in Figure 25.

As identified in Figure 25, half of respondents (50%) 'strongly agreed' that the school's transition to an asymmetric week had impacted positively on their child/children. A further 17% said they 'agreed', while 17% more parents said they 'neither agreed nor disagreed' that this was the case. Overall, just 17% said they 'disagreed' and no parent said they 'strongly disagreed' that the timetabling changes had had a positive impact.

Next, parents were asked specifically about the extent to which they agreed that the asymmetric week had impacted positively on their child's/children's mental health and well-being, learning, behaviour and family/home life. The results are presented in Figure 26.

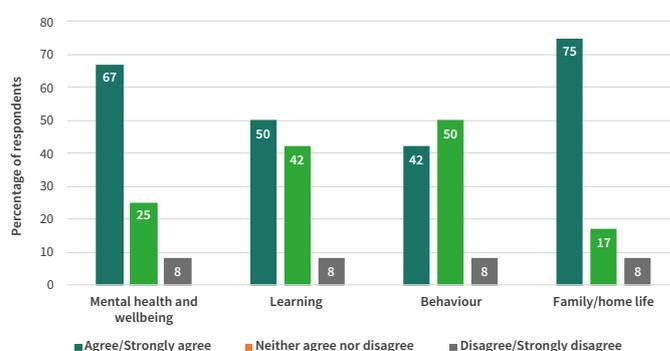
In relation to each of the four areas of interest, more respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the asymmetric week had impacted positively than those who 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. The vast majority said they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their child/children had benefitted from the asymmetric arrangements with regards to family/home life (75%) and mental health and well-being (67%). The proportion was also high for learning (50%) and behavior (42%), albeit more parents found it harder to determine whether they agreed or disagreed that the asymmetric week had impacted positively. The number of parents who 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the positive impact of the asymmetric week was comparatively low across all four domains.

Figure 25 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the school's transition to an asymmetric week has had a positive impact on your child/children?



12 respondents answered this question

Figure 26 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the asymmetric week has impacted positively on your child's/children's:



12 respondents answered this question

Impact on school

To conclude, respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on their school, and schools more generally. The first presents an overall view of the impact of the asymmetric week on Pembroke Dock Community School. The results are presented in Figure 27.

Figure 27 presents a largely positive picture of the impact of the asymmetric week on Pembroke Dock Community School, in the eyes of parents. The majority (66%) said they 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the asymmetric week had had a positive impact, with just 17% stating that they 'disagreed'. No parent said they 'strongly disagreed' that the school's transition to an asymmetric week had impacted positively on the school. The data shows that far more parents than not felt that the school's adoption of the asymmetric week had been a good thing.

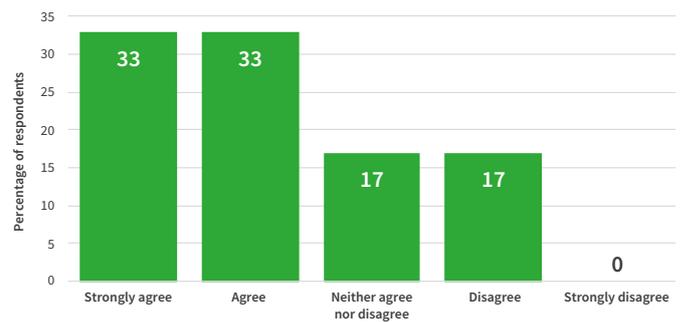
Parents were asked, as identified in Figure 28, whether they would recommend the asymmetric week to other schools in Wales. The majority of parents responded positively, suggesting that they would either 'probably' or 'definitely' (90%) recommend the asymmetric week, while a further 10% were 'not sure'. No parent said they 'probably' or 'definitely' would not recommend the new timetabling structure.

Other, general comments invited at the end of the survey, raised a number of important issues facing parents and their pupils. Several related to the impact of the asymmetric week on specific groups of learners, as well as suggestions as to how current arrangements might be developed for the better. A range of responses have been collated below:

'My shift pattern means my children finish early on a Friday every other week. They look forward to an early finish on a Friday but also enjoy being able to choose activities when they attend the wrap-around Friday sessions. I myself find the asymmetric very beneficial for us as a family as it gives... [us] extra time together.'

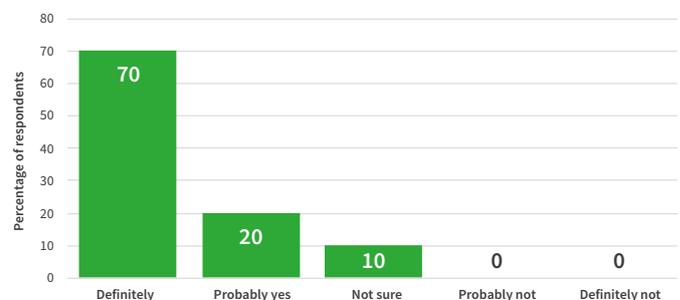
'My kids love the short day Friday and it's a real help with my child who is not a happy school attender. When we get to Thursday morning it feels like we are "almost there" with the week and it's much easier for us to manage the reluctance to attend. I feel The Friday afternoon to relax/recover from the school week is really beneficial for my kids; we can start Saturday morning in a much more positive place, having already 'shaken off' the school week.'

Figure 27 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the school's transition to an asymmetric week has had a positive impact on the school?



12 respondents answered this question

Figure 28 - Would you recommend the asymmetric week to other schools in Wales?



12 respondents answered this question

'I am only happy with it as I have a supportive employer who lets me work from home on a Friday. If they didn't, they would have to stay in school until normal finishing time for collection.'

8.2 Case study: Treorchy Comprehensive School

Treorchy Comprehensive School is a large school of approximately 1,600 pupils in Rhondda Cynon Taf. The school has 100 teaching staff and 80 support staff, and around 25% of its pupils are eligible for free school meals, which is above the all-Wales average. In its last Estyn inspection report, published in 2016, both the school's current performance and prospects for improvement were rated 'good'.

Treorchy Comprehensive School adopted an asymmetric week in September 2017 after a lengthy consultation process spanning 16 months. A range of options on the structure of the school week were presented to staff, pupils, parents and the wider school community before changes were implemented. Involving pupils in all year groups, the approved structure involved transitioning from five one-hour lessons a day for five days, to six 55 minute lessons Monday to Thursday, and four 55 minute lessons on Friday. There has been no change to the start time of the school day, but lunchtime and morning registration have been reduced by five minutes, and the end of the school day has been extended by 15 minutes, Monday to Thursday. This has freed up time on Friday afternoon for either staff professional learning or well-being sessions, in the form of an early release from school.

Staff work on a two-week rota, with professional learning and well-being sessions taking place on alternate weeks. Professional learning activities are directed by the school's senior leadership team and relate specifically to areas of interest identified in its school improvement plan. This session also allows staff to attend organised departmental meetings, that might otherwise have taken place outside of school hours. The second Friday offers staff the opportunity to leave school at 1.30pm to undertake activities of their own choosing. Pupils leave school at 1.30pm every Friday, although free enrichment activities are provided on-site until 3.30pm for those who wish to stay at school. Transport provided by the local authority is available to pupils leaving at 1.30pm, as it is on every other day of the week.

The other notable change to the school timetable relates to the introduction of dedicated 'Prep' time. Designed to build resilience and help pupils prepare properly for lessons, Prep takes place during the three additional lessons created through the reduction in time allocated to individual lessons. Prep sessions run first thing every Monday, mid-way through Wednesday and last lesson on a Friday. Prep activities include silent reading, completing homework, circle time, group work and a standard plenary session. These sessions are co-ordinated by the senior leadership team, which issues a 'blueprint' of Prep to staff periodically.

a) **Headline interview findings: School leader**

Treorchy Comprehensive School's headteacher, Rhys Angell Jones, was appointed in January 2011. He agreed to take part in an online, semi-structured interview that lasted approximately 60 minutes and was designed to elicit his views on and experiences of transitioning to an asymmetric school week. The interview took place in April 2020 via Microsoft Teams. The interviews yielded a mass of qualitative data and the questions posed are listed in the Appendix. The results of the interview findings are presented in written form, under a series of thematic headings for ease of reference. Direct quotes have been extracted to demonstrate specific points and Mr Jones was aware that his interview responses would be made public and attributed to him.

Motive

External exam results had been fluctuating year-on-year at Treorchy Comprehensive School, and while the school's senior leadership team was confident that teaching and learning was sound, evaluations had shown that pupils displayed a lack of independence and were almost totally dependent on staff. The school, under the leadership of Mr Jones, sought to develop this independence so that pupils would be more inclined to continue their learning beyond the classroom.

Inspired by a visit to a school in Cambridge, Mr Jones and his team considered changing the school timetable the most efficient way of building in additional time to support the development of new independent skills. The perceived additional benefit of transitioning to an asymmetric week was that staff would be given more time to undertake professional learning in school, and the opportunity to leave school early every other Friday. While lessons would be shorter in length under the new arrangements, every subject would still have the same number of lessons and, over the course of a year, every child would benefit from an additional 26 hours' contact time with their teacher. Mr Jones said Treorchy's move to an asymmetric week was not financially motivated and, if anything, ended up costing the school a small amount of money.

Leadership

Leadership across the school was crucial to implementation of the asymmetric week. Senior leaders, middle leaders and all teachers besides were needed to help market and promote benefits associated with the new arrangements, in order to garner wider support from the school community. Mr Jones said that without the support of his leadership team, he would not have been able to introduce changes to the school timetable, and that it was crucial to 'bring people with you'

Well-being

For pupils, Prep lessons were deliberately timetabled to allow regular check-ins with staff. The sessions run at key points during the week – first thing every Monday, mid-way through Wednesday and last lesson on a Friday (i.e. the beginning, middle and end of the week) to ensure pupils have structured opportunities to ask questions of teachers and benefit from their advice and support on a more one-to-one basis. In effect, the design of Prep provides 'wrap around' support for pastoral needs within each year group, with 'learning coaches' (form tutors) assigned to support different groups of children.

Consultation

The school's senior leadership team consulted with staff over a period of 16 months. In all, there were 22 versions of the new timetable considered. An online and written survey was distributed, and governors, pupils, local authority and regional consortium representatives, the Welsh Government and trade unions were contacted and fully briefed. A parents' open evening was held and Mr Jones shared his plans with local primary schools. For him, consultation with all key stakeholders was a very important part of the process.

'I found out that I only had to give six weeks' notice to change the school day by statute... but that would have been very foolish because I'd have lost everyone right at the start.'

The consultation process was stopped and started at key points in the school year (e.g. examination season), so as not to distract staff from their important classroom commitments. As such, it was recognised that transition would not take place overnight, and due time and consideration would be required. Mr Jones was keen to note that tangible benefits from the asymmetric week would take time to feed through.

'The consultation process was a bit of a slog, but putting in those hard yards and consulting for so long with so many people removed a lot of barriers.'

Staff well-being and development

There has been no requirement to change the working contracts of teaching staff, though support staff contracts have been adjusted to take account of the additional time spent in school. This has meant that these members of staff are financially better-off under the new arrangements.

Some teachers have found the move from five to six lessons per day, plus the extended finishing time, tiring. There have also been concerns raised regarding workload and the practical challenges that having more lessons in a school week bring. Responding to these concerns, Mr Jones said he was considering further changes to the school timetable, given that 'teaching six lessons in a day seems to be a barrier for some teachers'. He noted that any adjustments would be based on feedback from staff and pupils.

Mr Jones said staff have enjoyed the fortnightly freedom to do as they wish on a Friday afternoon. Some attend the gym, leave for a long weekend away, do their weekly family shop, or collect their own children from school. Others use the time to complete any outstanding schoolwork before the weekend. One of the biggest benefits, however, has been allowing opportunities for whole-staff and departmental meetings to take place during the school day, and not after school as was previously the case. This has, according to Mr Jones, ensured that Friday professional learning sessions are put to better use and that meetings themselves are better structured and more valuable. So as well benefitting from extra time on a Friday afternoon, Mr Jones said teachers also benefit from having to spend less time on the premises after school during the week

Opportunities for collaboration amongst staff have increased significantly as a result of the asymmetric week. Previously, Mr Jones said teachers had been so busy in their own classrooms, they did not have chance to meet regularly with colleagues. However, collaboration within departments is currently stronger than collaboration evident between departments.

Benefits to pupils

It is difficult to tell what impact the asymmetric week has had on pupil performance. However, the school was predicting its best ever GCSE results prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent cancelling of exams. Mr Jones is confident that the new arrangements are having a positive impact on pupil well-being, and their development as more independent learners. Pupils are learning new skills that they would not otherwise have learned, and the advent of more structured pastoral time has improved their overall well-being.

‘Those two things immediately translate into benefits for staff as well, because if pupils are happy to be in school and are happy to work, they will be more inclined to work with staff.’

In addition to the extra contact time with their learning coaches, the Prep sessions ensure that those pupils who have not got access to quiet space conducive to working at home, have the opportunity to work in a more appropriate working environment during school hours.

Sharing experiences

Treorchy has shared its asymmetric week model with local schools. It has also shared what it has learned with colleagues in schools further afield, in Pembrokeshire and Swansea. As well as other school leaders, the school has been visited by leading advisers to the Welsh Government. Mr Jones said he would thoroughly recommend that schools consider the asymmetric week, and if more schools were to adopt new ways of working it would be easier to explore cross-phase and cross-departmental practices. Furthermore, he argued that it would be more straightforward when releasing staff for professional learning workshops and events taking place on a regional or national basis. Mr Jones is also confident that the transition to an asymmetric week has helped to better-prepare his staff for the demands of the new *Curriculum for Wales*.

‘We’ve had to change mindsets... from being more fixated on existing structures and systems, people have had to be creative and more open-minded to new possibilities. It meant that we had the right mindset when we started work on the new curriculum – and those same people are doing really well in developing it.’

b) **Headline survey findings: Staff**

A survey was developed using the Qualtrics survey tool and distributed to all staff at Treorchy Comprehensive School by email, for completion during July and August 2020. The results of the survey findings are presented graphically and the proportion of respondents as a percentage, for ease of reference. Percentages have been rounded and so may not sum to 100. To support accessibility, the wordings of some survey questions and items have been abbreviated. It is important to note that while everyone in the quoted sample submitted their survey for consideration, not all participants completed all questions; this is made clear in the following pages.

Characteristics of respondents

Over the course of data collection, 67 staff from Treorchy Comprehensive School (n=67) responded to the online survey. Of these, 42 (63%) were female and 25 (37%) were male. The majority (69%) were aged between 30-50, with 9% aged 51 and over, and a further 22% aged under 30. In addition to their gender and age, staff were asked two other initial questions about their roles and careers at the school.

The vast majority of those who responded to the survey (73%) identified as teaching staff, with a further 15% as being on the senior leadership team. The school's support staff also took part and constituted 9% of total respondents, as highlighted in Figure 29.

As outlined in Figure 30, a high proportion of those who took part in the survey had been at the school for a relatively short period of time, with 38% having worked there for five years and under. A further 20% had been at the school for between six and 10 years, while 38% had spent 11-20 years at Treorchy Comprehensive. Just 5% of respondents had more than two decades' experience at the school.

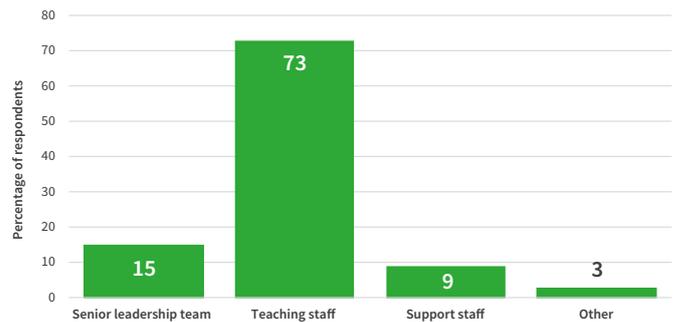
Impact on staff

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on them as staff. The first related to the effect of working longer school days, with shorter breaks and a later finish time, four days a week, and the extent to which they found this manageable. The results are presented in Figure 31.

Very few respondents found managing the longer school days either 'much better' or 'slightly better' (4%) than managing old arrangements. The overwhelming majority found the new arrangements either 'slightly worse' or 'much worse' to manage (74%), while around a fifth (21%) said they were 'about the same' as the old ways of working. The response to this question suggests that more than seven in 10 staff found the longer school days more difficult to manage than the standard school days to which they had previously been accustomed.

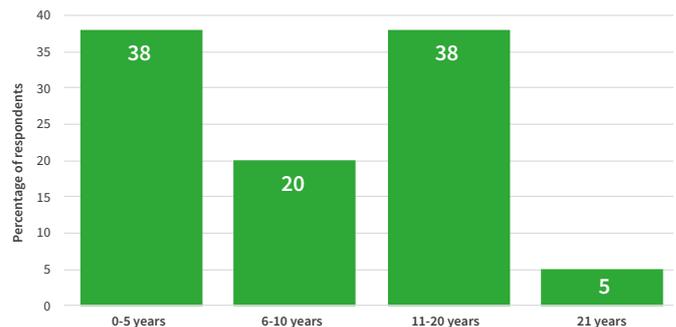
Recognising that there could be a number of reasons for the data collected in Figure 31, staff were asked whether specific factors pertinent to the asymmetric week had been

Figure 29 - Which of the following best describes your role?



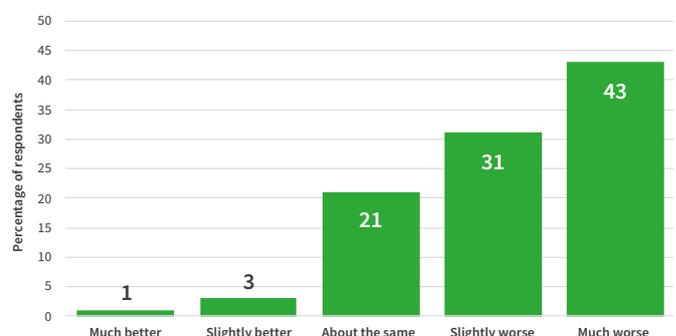
67 respondents answered this question

Figure 30 - How long have you worked at the school?



66 respondents answered this question

Figure 31 - How manageable have you found the longer school days, introduced as a result of the asymmetric week?



67 respondents answered this question

challenging for them. This was based on the difficulty of some parents in other contexts to source suitable childcare arrangements, school transport and extra-curricular activities (for, most notably in this case, Friday afternoons). The figure below provides the results.

Figure 32 suggests that more staff than not found arranging childcare, school transport and extra-curricular activities relatively straightforward since moving to an asymmetric week. More than eight in 10 (83% of 18 respondents) found organising school transport ‘not challenging at all’, while just 11% considered it ‘extremely challenging’ or ‘very challenging’. Organising extra-curricular activities was deemed ‘not challenging at all’ by 42% of 36 respondents, while a quarter (25%) found it ‘extremely challenging’ or ‘very challenging’. Some 33% said organising extra-curricular activities was either ‘moderately challenging’ or ‘slightly challenging’.

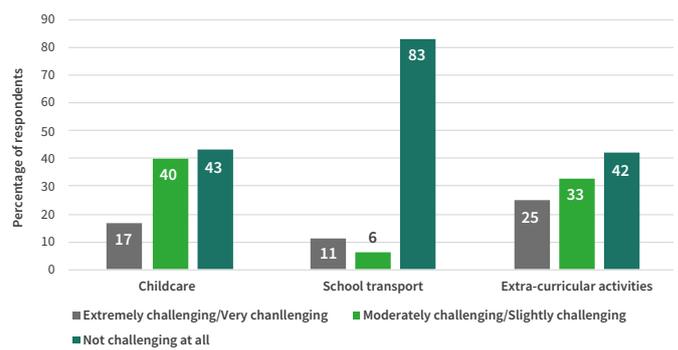
A larger proportion found sourcing childcare more of an issue, with 40% (of 30 respondents) finding it ‘moderately challenging’ or ‘slightly challenging’. However, most respondents (43%) believed that making new childcare arrangements to accommodate the asymmetric week was ‘not challenging at all’. A smaller proportion (17%) found childcare either ‘extremely challenging’ or ‘very challenging’.

Overall, these responses paint a largely positive picture of the additional demands on staff in relation to their out-of-work responsibilities, albeit there have been some challenges. The figures suggest that some of the more prominent practical changes resulting from the asymmetric week had been fairly well accommodated, allowing staff to focus more energy on school-based activities. Arranging extra-curricular activities appears to have been the biggest issue for staff, although only a minority found each item ‘extremely challenging’ or ‘very challenging’. School transport was less of a concern for staff, while sourcing childcare appears to have been more of a challenge for some than others.

Figure 33 is key to the research foci as it relates very specifically to the impact of the asymmetric week on respondents themselves. Staff were asked whether or not asymmetric adaptations had impacted positively on their professional development, workload, mental health and well-being, family/home life, teaching and morale. Not all respondents answered each item, though response rates were high for the most part.

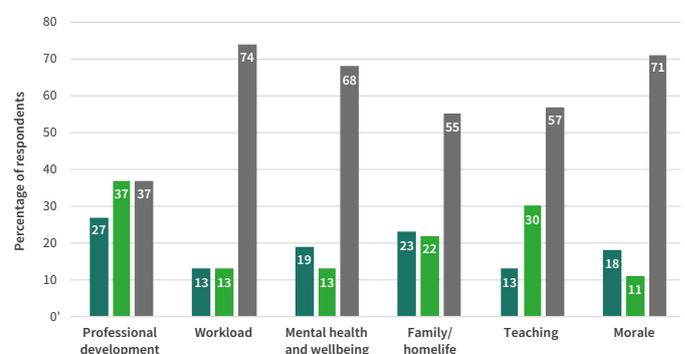
The results, as demonstrated in Figure 33, paint a largely negative picture of the impact of the asymmetric week on respondents, in that the majority of respondents either ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that changes had impacted positively on most aspects relating to their professional and personal lives. The most promising aspect appears to have been staff’s professional development, with 27% of 60 respondents ‘agreeing’ or ‘agreeing strongly’ that the asymmetric week had had a positive impact. However, a further 37% ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that the asymmetric week had impacted positively on their

Figure 32 - Since moving to the asymmetric week, to what extent has organising the following been challenging for you:



The response rate to this question varied, from 18 to 36

Figure 33 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the asymmetric week has impacted positively on your:



The response rate to this question varied, from 60 to 62

professional development. The proportion of respondents who 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that their workload (74% of 62 staff), morale (71% of 62 staff) and mental health and well-being (68% of 62 respondents) had been positively effected was noticeably high, while the majority felt the same about their family/home life (55% of 64) and teaching (57% of 61).

The impact of the asymmetric week on respondents' family/home life suggests there have been some benefits to some staff, with around a quarter (23%) 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' that the alterations had brought about positive changes. A further 23% 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the sentiment.

Further to Figure 34, staff were invited to rank what they considered to be the most and least beneficial aspects of the asymmetric week. The majority (58%) of respondents felt that more time for professional learning was the most beneficial consequence of the transition to new arrangements, while the advent of more leisure time was considered the least beneficial (30%). Having more time at home/with family was also deemed an important development, while improved mental health and well-being was less so.

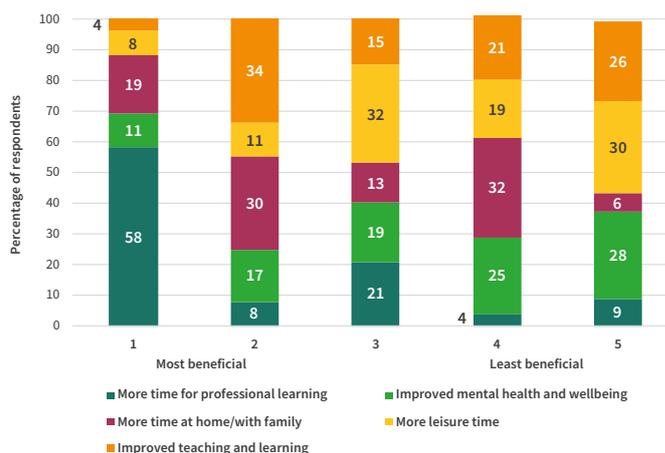
Together, the data presented in figures 33 and 34 suggests that opportunities for more professional learning has been of most value to staff, following introduction of the asymmetric week. Conversely, staff appear to have benefitted less in terms of mental health and well-being. Respondents also considered 'more leisure time' to be comparatively less beneficial than some other aspects arising from asymmetric week adoption.

Impact on pupils

As well as the impact of the asymmetric week on themselves as staff, respondents were also asked about the impact of new arrangements on pupils. Working on the assumption that school staff have a good understanding of pupils' wants and needs, they were asked to consider the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the asymmetric week had impacted positively on pupils' learning, mental health and well-being, workload, attendance and behaviour. The results are presented in Figure 35.

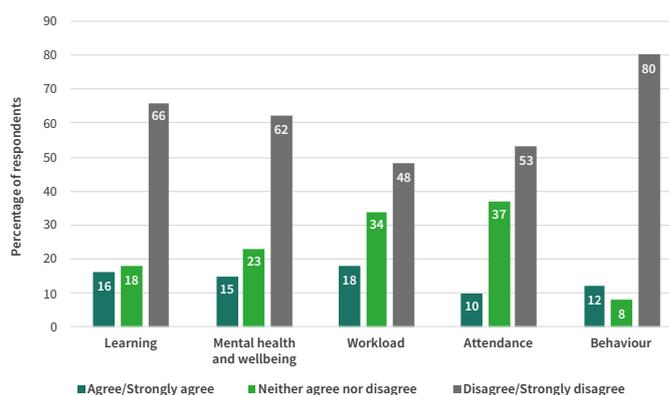
Figure 35 presents a disappointing picture, with more respondents than not 'disagreeing' or 'strongly disagreeing' that the asymmetric week had impacted positively on pupils against all key indicators. The impact of the asymmetric week on pupils' behaviour appears most conclusive, with 80% (of 61 respondents) 'disagreeing' or 'disagreeing strongly' that there had been a positive impact, compared to just 12% who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed'. The overwhelming majority of respondents felt that pupils' learning (66% of 61 staff) and mental health and well-being (62% of 61 staff) had not been positively impacted by the changes, either.

Figure 34 - Rank the following benefits of the asymmetric week in order, where 1 is the most beneficial and 5 is the least beneficial:



53 respondents answered this question

Figure 35 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the asymmetric week has impacted positively on pupils':



The response rate to this question varied, from 59 to 61

Respondents' interpretation of the asymmetric week's impact on pupils' workload and attendance was more mixed, though almost half (48% of 61 staff) 'disagreed' or 'disagreed strongly' that workload had been impacted positively, compared to 18% who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that it had. A further 34% 'neither agreed nor disagreed' that this was the case. And while more than half (53% of 59 respondents) 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that attendance had been positively effected by the asymmetric week, nearly four in 10 (37%) had no strong feelings either way.

The data presented in Figure 35 is somewhat concerning, in that it suggests that the majority of staff are not convinced that the asymmetric week has had a positive impact on a range of aspects pertinent to pupils. This is an important observation, albeit the extent to which staff believe the asymmetric changes have had a distinctly *negative* impact is not clear.

Impact on school

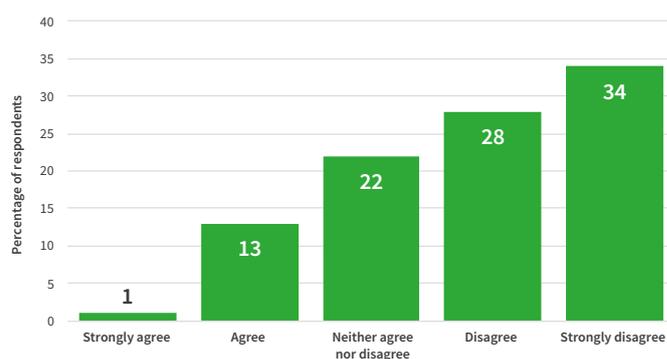
Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on their school, and schools more generally. The first presents respondents' overall view of the impact of the asymmetric week on Treorchy Comprehensive School. The results are presented in Figure 36.

Figure 36 presents a broadly negative picture of the impact of the asymmetric week on Treorchy Comprehensive School. Overall, 62% of respondents 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that the asymmetric week had had a positive impact, with just 13% 'agreeing' or 'agreeing strongly'. At the opposite ends of the spectrum, 34% 'strongly disagreed' and only 1% 'strongly agreed' that the school's transition to an asymmetric week had impacted positively on the school. The key conclusion is that the school's adoption of the asymmetric week does not appear to have been overwhelmingly positive for the school, according to its staff.

In view of the perceived benefits to professional learning resulting from the asymmetric arrangements, staff were invited to consider the extent to which collaboration both within their own school and between schools had improved since new structures were implemented. As presented in Figure 37, 31% of respondents felt there had been 'no difference' in the level of collaboration *within* Treorchy Comprehensive School as a result of the new professional learning opportunities created by the asymmetric week. A further 26% felt that new opportunities for professional learning had supported collaboration within the school 'a little', while around a fifth (21%) said 'not at all'.

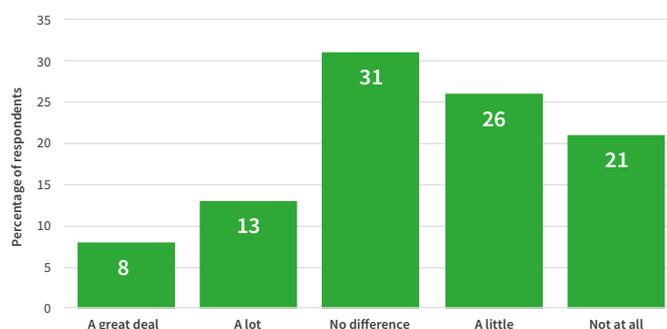
The data shows that 21% of respondents believed the asymmetric week had supported collaboration at least 'a lot' within the school. Collectively, the responses to Figure 37 suggest that around half of staff felt that new opportunities for professional learning had supported internal collaboration, while the other half did not.

Figure 36 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the school's transition to an asymmetric week has had a positive impact on the school?



67 respondents answered this question

Figure 37 - To what extent do you feel that new opportunities for professional learning created by the asymmetric week have supported collaboration within the school?



61 respondents answered this question

Figure 38, shows that most staff (37%) felt that the new professional learning opportunities afforded by the asymmetric week had not supported collaboration *between* schools at all, while a similar amount (35%) felt there had been no noticeable difference. Around one in 10 respondents (12%) said the asymmetric week had supported collaboration between schools at least ‘a lot’ through its new opportunities for professional learning, while a further 17% felt it had made ‘a little’ difference.

Figures 37 and 38 suggest the asymmetric week brought about limited opportunities for improved collaboration within and between schools, as a result of the new professional learning offer, according to staff.

In the next part of the survey, staff were asked two questions with the intention of guiding other schools that are considering introducing asymmetric arrangements. The first, presented in Figure 39, invited respondents to rank in order five potential challenges to the adoption of an asymmetric week.

The challenges were selected on the basis of contributions by both school leaders during the interview process, and of insight garnered during the report’s contextual literature review. As such, staff were asked which of the following five challenges to introducing an asymmetric week were the most challenging:

- Changing staff mindset
- Gaining buy-in from school community
- Arranging childcare
- Agreeing new timetable
- Preparing for new arrangements

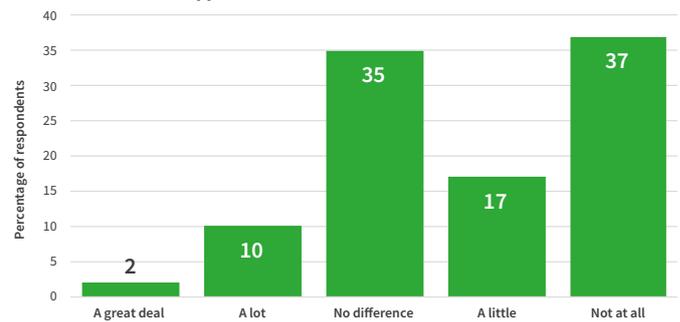
The first two in this list (changing staff mindset and gaining buy-in from school community) are based largely around staff’s social interactions and shifting culture, while the latter three relate more specifically to practical and logistical arrangements required to transition from a more traditional structure to that of the asymmetric week.

Overall, staff considered changing staff mindset the most challenging aspect of introducing an asymmetric week, with 43% identifying staff mindset as the foremost challenge. Agreeing a new timetable was also considered a more significant challenge, with 26% ranking it as the most challenging and a further 26% the second most challenging.

Arranging childcare was comfortably the least problematic for staff, with 57% ranking it fifth out of five and 15% fourth out of five. Preparing for new arrangements and gaining buy-in from the school community were more evenly spread across the range of challenges.

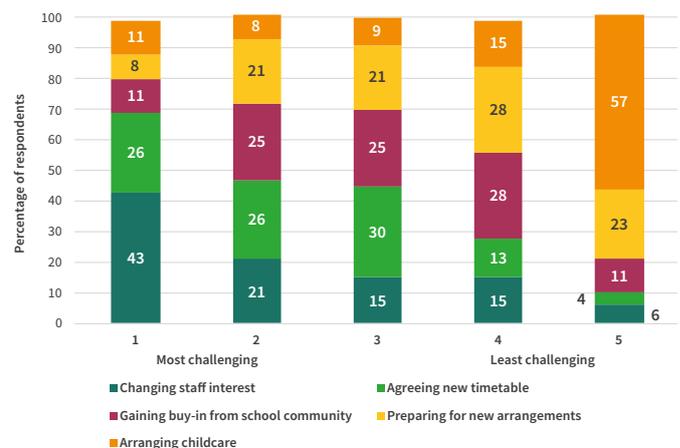
Figure 39 is useful as it gives schools in similar contexts an idea of what aspects of school life they are likely to have to prioritise in adopting an asymmetric week, and the extent of the challenge presented by certain items. For example, data presented in Figure 39 would suggest that

Figure 38 - To what extent do you feel that the new opportunities for professional learning created by the asymmetric week have supported collaboration between schools?



60 respondents answered this question

Figure 39 - Rank the following challenges to introducing an asymmetric week in order, where 1 is the most challenging and 5 is the least challenging:



53 respondents answered this question

schools might be inclined to spend more time focussing on changing staff mindset, than they might potential issues relating to childcare arrangements.

Figure 40, is interested in the factors that are most important to the successful implementation of an asymmetric week.

The range of data presented in Figure 40 appears more varied than that presented in Figure 39, with a large proportion of respondents identifying strong leadership (42%) and staff support (33%) as being integral to the successful implementation of an asymmetric week. Both areas score highly across the scale of importance. Conversely, garnering the support of the wider school community (35%) and developing parent/pupil understanding (31%) were considered least important of the factors needed to properly implement an asymmetric week. The trend for both of these areas is from ‘least important’, to ‘most important’.

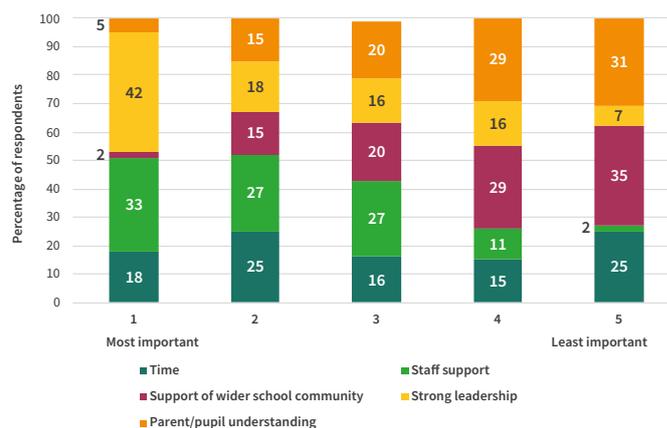
There appears to be some uncertainty around the importance of time in the successful implementation of an asymmetric week, with almost as many considering it most important (18%) than those who identifying it as least important (25%). Indeed, 43% ranked time first or second, while 40% ranked it fourth or fifth.

Figure 41, is fairly straightforward in that it asked respondents whether or not they would recommend the asymmetric week to other schools in Wales, in light of their experiences. The response was largely negative, with 49% saying they definitely would not, and a further 25% saying they probably would not. Overall, just 18% said they definitely would or probably would recommend the asymmetric week to others.

In addition, staff were invited to respond to an open-ended question, asking them to identify ‘what could have been done differently to make transition to the asymmetric week more effective?’ A range of views were presented, with some concern about the level of consultation with staff and the impact of longer school days on workload. There was, on the other hand, a sense of satisfaction that nothing could have been improved in some of the responses submitted, though the pace of change was a recurring theme. One staff member suggested ‘a trial period’ might have been beneficial in order to better understand and iron out potential problems. Other comments relating to timescales and consultation with staff included:

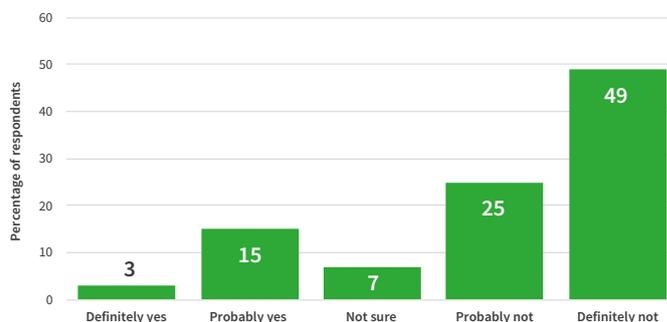
‘The principle of an asymmetrical week is appealing if done properly. The extension of the school [day] by 20 minutes doesn’t sound much, but it has huge implications. Staff and pupils are tired and therefore two sessions after lunch are very difficult to teach and to engage pupils in.’

Figure 40 - What are the most important factors needed to successfully implement an asymmetric week? (where 1 is the most important and 5 is the least important)



55 respondents answered this question

Figure 41 - Would you recommend the asymmetric week to other schools in Wales?



59 respondents answered this question

‘A trial period should have been implemented with a possibility of returning to [the] initial timetable if staff are unhappy.’

‘Implementation over a longer timescale to give things a chance to embed fully, and consultation opportunities after each step of the change.’

In the main, responses to the question were constructive, though there was a suggestion from some respondents that the asymmetric week should not have been introduced at all.

Implications for Curriculum for Wales

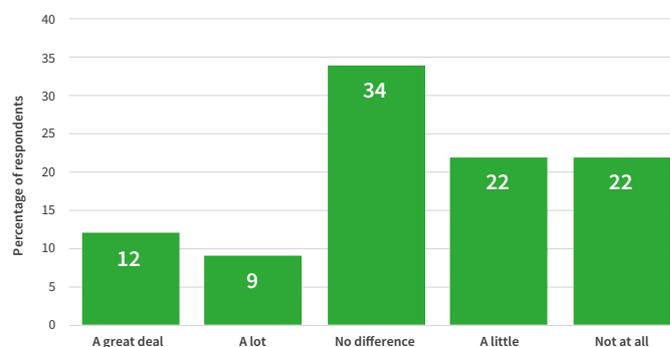
This section was interested in the possible relationship between asymmetric arrangements and the new *Curriculum for Wales*. It is hoped that data presented in this section might develop system and school thinking around the restructuring of education to meet the needs of the new curriculum, and better inform possible adaptations to more established classroom practices in the best interests of the education system more generally.

First and foremost, respondents were asked about the extent to which moving to an asymmetric week had increased their opportunities to consider the implications of the new *Curriculum for Wales*. This question was designed on the basis that new timetabling arrangements had created additional professional learning opportunities, cited by headteachers as being useful for developing understanding of the new curriculum and wider educational reforms. Therefore, having taken into consideration the views of both headteachers, it would be interesting to determine what if any impact staff felt the asymmetric arrangements had had on their preparations for the *Curriculum for Wales*.

As presented in Figure 42, most respondents (43%) felt that moving to an asymmetric week had increased their opportunities to consider the implications of the new *Curriculum for Wales* to some extent. More specifically, 22% considered it had increased opportunities ‘a little’, 12% ‘a great deal’ and 9% ‘a lot’. Around a third of staff (34%) said there had been ‘no difference’ in the opportunities created to consider the curriculum as a result of transition to the asymmetric week, while a total of 22% of staff said it had had no impact at all.

If Figure 42 considered the *actual* impact of the asymmetric week on their consideration of and familiarity with the new curriculum, Figure 43 presents a more speculative portrayal of respondents’ views on the asymmetric week being of benefit. Overall, 60 members of staff responded to the question of whether or not moving to an asymmetric week would be beneficial to the implementation of the *Curriculum for Wales*.

Figure 42 - To what extent has moving to an asymmetric week increased your opportunities to consider the implications of the new Curriculum for Wales?



58 respondents answered this question

The findings are broadly negative, and suggest that the majority of staff thought that the asymmetric week was unlikely to be beneficial to the curriculum's implementation. As highlighted in Figure 43, just 7% of respondents said that there was definitely a correlation between the two, while a further 8% thought the asymmetric week would 'probably' be beneficial. The highest proportion of staff (38%) thought asymmetric arrangements would 'definitely not' be beneficial to implementation of the new curriculum, while 22% said they would 'probably not' be helpful. A quarter (25%) were 'not sure' what difference the asymmetric week would make to the new curriculum.

Impact of COVID-19

The survey concluded with a topical question, related specifically to the impact of COVID-19 on education in Wales and the system's response to the pandemic. Staff were asked, given the unprecedented nature of the current situation and probability that there will be significant structural changes ahead, the extent to which they thought that employing an asymmetric week would be useful on the return to school after the enforced closures. The results are presented in Figure 44.

Of the 55 respondents to this question, 5% felt the asymmetric week would be 'extremely useful' on the return to school after the COVID-19 pandemic. A further 16% thought it would be 'quite useful', while 29% were unsure. Around a third of staff (33%) felt that the asymmetric week would not be useful at all to schools after the pandemic

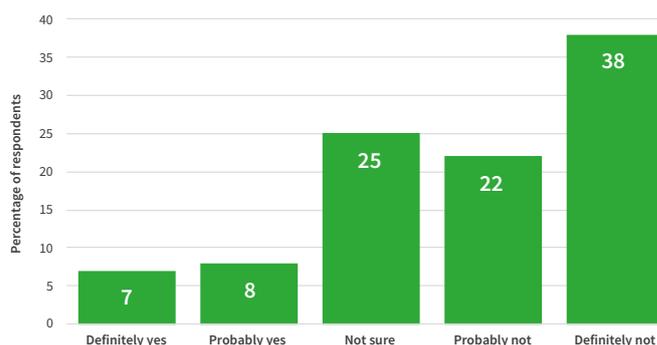
Other, general comments invited at the end of the survey, included a number expressing concern that pupil behaviour is more challenging as a result of the asymmetric week and its longer days:

'While the asymmetrical week is a good resource for enabling Friday afternoon staff training and meeting time, the demands of a six-lesson day have had a negative impact on our school setting.'

'If the asymmetric week could be changed in any way, I would prefer to have five than six lessons per day.'

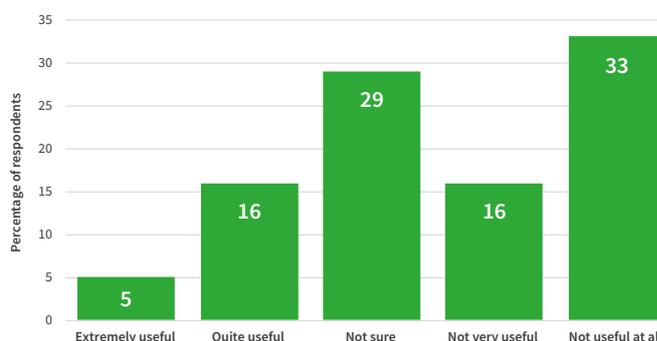
'Pupil behaviour, engagement and progress is worse in the longer afternoon session than previously. Shorter, sharper, more academically-focussed days are the way to go.'

Figure 43 - Do you think that moving to an asymmetric week would be beneficial to the implementation of the new Curriculum for Wales?



60 respondents answered this question

Figure 44 - How useful do you think employing an asymmetric week will be on the return to school after the COVID-19 pandemic?



55 respondents answered this question

'An asymmetric week is a good idea in theory and has helped with the ability to schedule department meetings and professional learning. But in shortening the day once a week it has led to lengthening of the day four times a week. This extra 20 minutes a day adds up to two more weeks in work every year.'

c) **Headline survey findings: Pupils**

A short survey was developed using the Qualtrics survey tool and distributed to the majority of pupils at Treorchy Comprehensive School by email, for completion during August and September 2020. The results of the survey findings are presented graphically and the proportion of respondents as a percentage, for ease of reference. Percentages have been rounded and so may not sum to 100. To support accessibility, the wordings of some survey questions and items have been abbreviated. It is important to note that while everyone in the quoted sample submitted their survey for consideration, not all participants completed all questions; this is made clear in the following pages. Steps were taken to ensure the survey was accessible to pupils in all year groups of the school.

Characteristics of respondents

Over the course of data collection, 30 pupils from Treorchy Comprehensive School (n=30) responded to the online survey. Of these, 20 (67%) were female and 10 (33%) were male. The majority were in year 11 or 12 (22% each), although each of the seven secondary year groups were represented.

Impact on pupils

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to an asymmetric week on them as pupils. The first related to the effect of working longer school days, with shorter breaks and a later finish time, four days a week, and the extent to which they found this manageable. The results are presented in Figure 45.

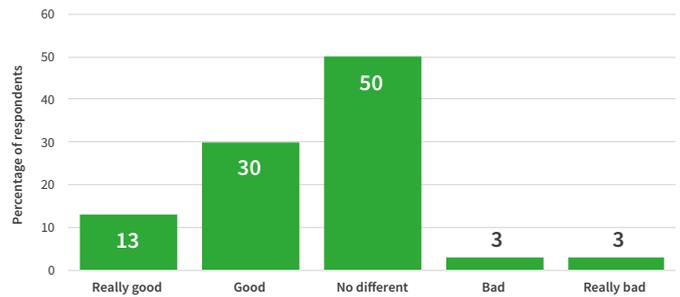
Very few respondents found managing the longer school days either 'bad' or 'really bad' (6%). Most (50%) found the new arrangements 'no different' to manage, while 43% said having longer school days was either 'good' or 'really good'. The response to this question suggests that almost all pupils found the longer school days no more difficult to manage than the standard school days to which they had previously been accustomed.

Further to Figure 45, pupils were asked whether they thought the new school timetable had been a good or a bad thing. The results, presented in Figure 46, are fairly conclusive.

As identified in Figure 46, the majority of respondents (75%) felt that the new school timetable had been a 'good' thing, while 18% said they were 'not sure'. Just 7% of pupils thought the new arrangements were a 'bad' thing.

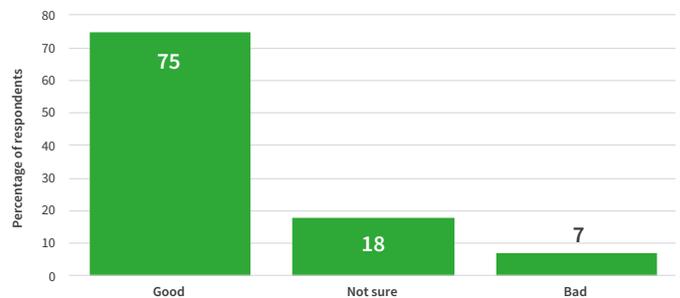
Interested in what the pupils made of finishing early on a Friday, in particular, respondents were asked to consider the extent to which they looked forward to an earlier finish to the school week. The results are presented in Figure 47.

Figure 45 - What has it been like having longer school days Monday-Thursday?



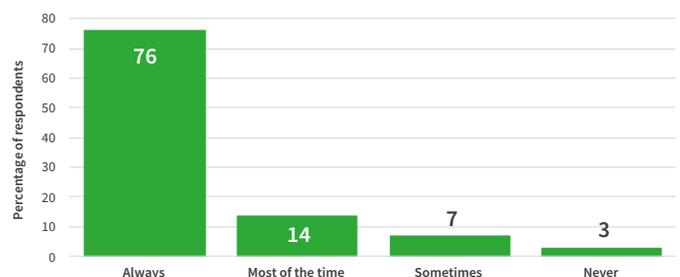
30 respondents answered this question

Figure 46 - Do you think that the new school timetable (with longer school days Monday-Thursday and an earlier finish on a Friday) has been a good or a bad thing?



28 respondents answered this question

Figure 47 - Do you look forward to finishing early on a Friday?



29 respondents answered this question

The vast majority of respondents said they ‘always’ (76%) or ‘most of the time’ (14%) looked forward to finishing early on a Friday, although a small minority said they ‘sometimes’ (7%) or ‘never’ (3%) looked forward to it. These results suggest that while most pupils considered an earlier finish appealing, some did not – all of the time – and it is important to consider why that might have been the case

Expanding on the reasons behind their views of the earlier finish, most respondents (43%) said that having ‘more time to have a rest’ was the best thing about leaving school early on a Friday. As highlighted in Figure 48, a further 32% felt that ‘spending more time with family’ was the most appealing thing about a shortened school week, while a smaller proportion felt that having ‘more time to play with friends’ (14%) was the most important factor. Around one in 10 (11%) pupils found that having ‘more time to catch up on schoolwork’ was of most benefit.

Further to figures 47 and 48, respondents were asked if they preferred school more now, after changes to the school timetable, or before the alterations were made. Most pupils (54%), as identified in Figure 49, said they ‘prefer it now’, compared to 36% who said they enjoy it about the same. Overall, around one in 10 (11%) said they ‘preferred it before’ changes to the school timetable were made.

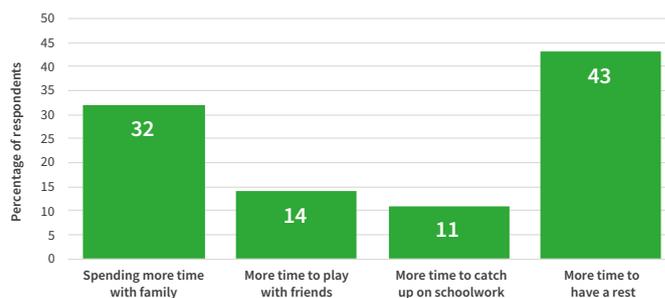
Other, general comments invited at the end of the survey were largely positive and the majority favoured new arrangements introduced by the school. Respondents added:

‘I much prefer the timetable now as I am able to finish homework or projects on a Friday giving me weekends free to socialise with friends and family without worrying about rushing to finish schoolwork.’

‘An early finish on a Friday gives me quality time with my mother when she’s not cooking, cleaning or looking after my baby sister; we have time to go for a walk, get an ice cream and have a catch-up; usual days are busy and we don’t have time to do nice things – Friday afternoons are special for us.’

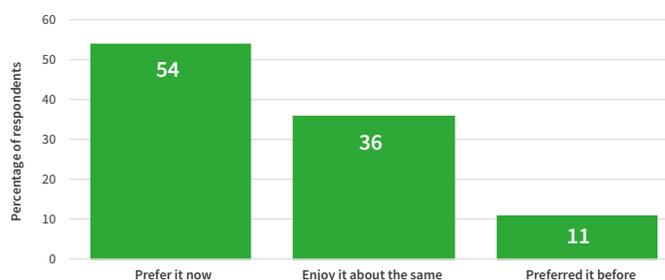
‘I work harder during the week (Mon-Thurs) so I can rest on Friday. I am more motivated during the week as I work for the goal.’

Figure 48 - What is the best thing about finishing early on a Friday (please choose one)?



28 respondents answered this question

Figure 49 - Do you prefer school more now, after the changes to the school timetable, or did you prefer it before?



28 respondents answered this question

d) Headline survey findings: Parents

A short survey was developed using the Qualtrics survey tool and distributed to the majority of parents at Treorchy Comprehensive School by email, for completion during August and September 2020. The results of the survey findings are presented graphically and the proportion of respondents as a percentage, for ease of reference. Percentages have been rounded and so may not sum to 100. To support accessibility, the wordings of some survey questions and items have been abbreviated. It is important to note that while everyone in the quoted sample submitted their survey for consideration, not all participants completed all questions; this is made clear in the following pages.

Characteristics of respondents

Over the course of data collection, 127 parents of pupils at Treorchy Comprehensive School (n=127) responded to the online survey. Of these, 115 (91%) were female and 12 (9%) were male. The majority identified as having one child at the school (76%), while 21% said they had two and 2% said they had three. One respondent had four or more children at the school. Parents of children in all seven secondary year groups participated in the survey.

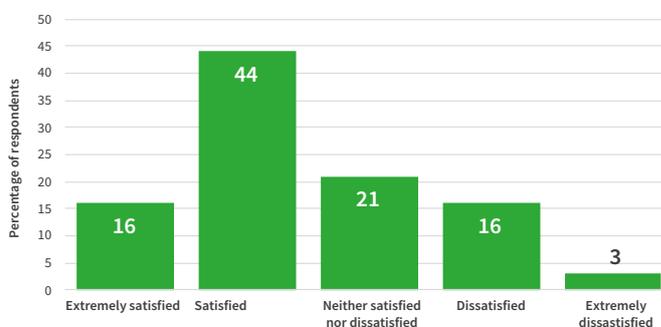
Impact on parents

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on them as parents. The first related to the way in which they were consulted ahead of the changes, and whether they felt they had been given sufficient opportunity to input into the new arrangements. The results are presented in Figure 50.

As outlined above, the majority of respondents (60%) said they were either 'extremely satisfied' or 'satisfied' that they had been consulted enough ahead of the school's transition to an asymmetric week. Around two in 10 (21%) said they were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied', while a further 19% said they were either 'dissatisfied' or 'extremely dissatisfied' that the school had consulted with them enough.

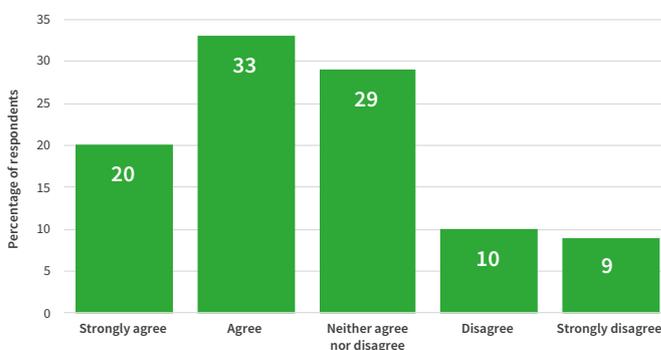
In Figure 51, parents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the school's decision to close earlier on a Friday afternoon. The majority (53%) said they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the school's decision, while a further 29% said they 'neither agreed nor disagreed'. Far fewer respondents (19%) said they 'disagreed' or 'disagreed strongly' with the earlier end to the school week. Collectively, the responses presented in Figure 51 suggest strong support for the school's decision to curtail the school week by a few hours on a Friday afternoon.

Figure 50 - How satisfied are you that the school consulted with you enough ahead of the transition to an asymmetric week?



94 respondents answered this question

Figure 51 - To what extent do you agree/disagree with the school's decision to close earlier on a Friday afternoon?



80 respondents answered this question

Respondents were asked, as outlined in Figure 52, the extent to which organising childcare, school transport, extra-curricular activities and shifts/work patterns had been challenging for them since the school moved to an asymmetric week. The question was designed to determine what area relating to the new arrangements had proven most and least challenging for parents.

According to parents, organising childcare and school transport were the least challenging aspects of the asymmetric week, with 46% confirming that childcare arrangements were ‘not very challenging/not challenging at all’ and 48% saying the same about school transport. Around a third of respondents said organising childcare (32%) and school transport (35%) was ‘about the same’, while around a fifth (21% childcare/17% school transport) said each was ‘extremely challenging/slightly challenging’.

Most respondents (41%) felt that organising extra-curricular activities had resulted in ‘about the same’ level of challenge under new arrangements, while 39% felt they had been ‘not very challenging/not challenging at all’ to organise. One in five respondents (20%) believed that organising extra-curricular activities had been ‘extremely challenging/slightly challenging’ since moving to the asymmetric week.

Respondents’ views on arranging shifts/work patterns proved the most inconclusive, with as many parents believing they were ‘about the same’ to organise as those who felt they were ‘not very challenging/not challenging at all’ (35%). Around a third (30%) thought that organising shifts/work patterns was ‘extremely challenging/slightly challenging’. This suggests that the ease in which shifts/work patterns could be arranged was largely dependent on the individual parent’s circumstances.

Impact on pupils

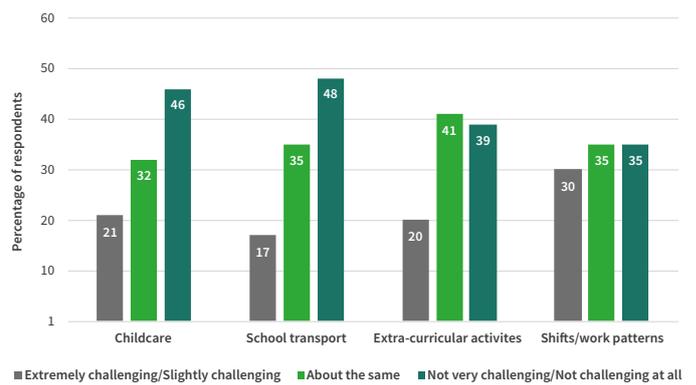
Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on their children. The first related to the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the school’s transition had had a positive impact on their child/children. The results are presented in Figure 53.

As identified in Figure 53, most respondents (45%) ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’ that the school’s transition to an asymmetric week had impacted positively on their child/children. However, more parents either ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ (40%) that this was the case, than those who ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ (15%).

Next, parents were asked specifically about the extent to which they agreed that the asymmetric week had impacted positively on their child’s/children’s mental health and wellbeing, learning, behaviour and family/home life. The results are presented in Figure 54.

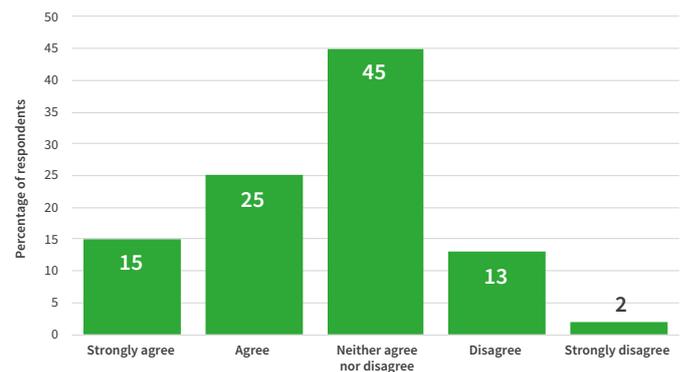
In relation to each of the four areas of interest, more respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that the asymmetric week had impacted positively than those who ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’. However, in three of the

Figure 52 - Since moving to the asymmetric week, to what extent has organising the following been challenging for you:



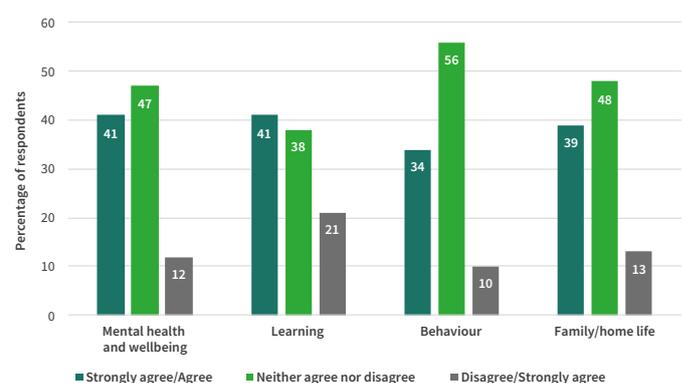
The response rate to this question varied, from 54 to 64

Figure 53 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the school’s transition to an asymmetric week has had a positive impact on your child/children?



93 respondents answered this question

Figure 54 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the asymmetric week has impacted positively on your child’s/children’s:



The response rate to this question varied, from 79 to 81

four aspects (mental health and well-being, behavior and family/home life), more parents than not ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’ that their child/children had benefitted from the asymmetric arrangements. At least a third of respondents felt that their child’s/children’s mental health and well-being (41%), learning (41%), behavior (34%) and family/home life (39%) had been impacted positively by the asymmetric week. Around a fifth of parents (21%) ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that learning had been positively effected, while around one in 10 parents said the same with regards to their child’s/children’s mental health and well-being, behavior and family/home life.

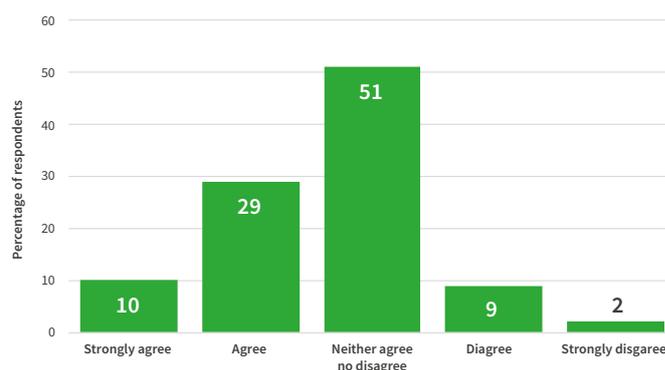
Impact on school

To conclude, respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the impact of transitioning to the asymmetric week on their school, and schools more generally. The first presents an overall view of the impact of the asymmetric week on Treorchy Comprehensive School. The results are presented in Figure 55.

Figure 55 presents a broadly positive picture of the impact of the asymmetric week on Treorchy Comprehensive School. While the majority (51%) of respondents ‘neither agreed nor disagreed’ that the asymmetric week had had a positive impact on the school, almost four in 10 (39%) ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that it had. At the opposite end of the spectrum, just 11% ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that the school’s transition to an asymmetric week had impacted positively on the school. The data shows that more parents than not felt that the school’s adoption of the asymmetric week had been a good thing.

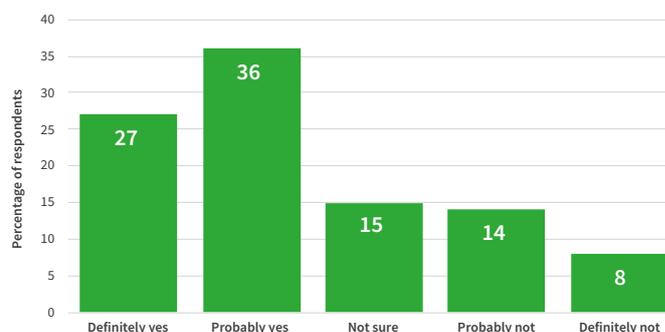
Parents were asked, as identified in Figure 56, whether they would recommend the asymmetric week to other schools in Wales. The majority of parents responded positively, suggesting that they would either ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ (63%) recommend the asymmetric week, while a further 15% were ‘not sure’ if they would recommend it to others and 14% said they ‘probably’ would not. Overall, 8% of respondents said they ‘definitely’ would not recommend the asymmetric week to other schools.

Figure 55 - To what extent do you agree/disagree that the school's transition to an asymmetric week has had a positive impact on the school?



93 respondents answered this question

Figure 56 - Would you recommend the asymmetric week to other schools in Wales?



78 respondents answered this question

Other, general comments invited at the end of the survey, raised a number of important issues facing parents and their pupils. Several related to the impact of the asymmetric week on specific groups of learners, as well as suggestions as to how current arrangements might be developed for the better. A range of responses have been collated below:

‘I think that asymmetric now needs to be further developed to include a blended mix of home learning via digital platforms, as well as school-based activities wherever possible within families and schools that can support this. Getting children prepared for more agile and flexible working practices is essential for the future.’

‘It does not effect me much because my daughter is 17. I would have found it very difficult when she was younger to juggle work and the school pick-up, however. I can understand how parents with younger children would find the early school finish on a Friday a real inconvenience.’

‘I feel that due the shorter lesson times, my daughter doesn’t settle into a lesson; by the time she gets into her work it’s time to pack up and move onto the next. Too much is being crammed into a school day.’

‘If you have a child that finds it difficult to motivate themselves, they just think that they are finishing early on a Friday, not that it is an opportunity to do additional work.’

‘My child finds the longer days and shorter lunchtimes tiring. Six lessons per day is too much. [They are] home alone on a Friday afternoon.’

‘I feel that my daughter found the longer days more tiring and didn’t concentrate as much during the afternoon lessons. Loved the early finish on a Friday, but [it] was detrimental the rest of the week.’

9. Conclusion

This report provides two contrasting illustrations of how an asymmetric school week can be designed, implemented and subsequently received by staff. It shows there are potential benefits to changing established routines and timetables, but that these benefits are not guaranteed and dependent on individual school contexts.

Indeed, the report serves as a reminder that novel approaches to timetabling will work better for some members of the school community than others, and the potential impact on all key stakeholders should be considered carefully before new arrangements are introduced. Broadly speaking, pupils and parents were more supportive of the changes than staff, with a marked difference in their responses across the two schools.

Thorough consultation with all groups appeared crucial to the schools' transition to asymmetric arrangements, and a number of timetable configurations were explored in both cases. This helped to build confidence in the new proposals, and ensured all groups were given input into final school structures. The asymmetric week is a policy involving the entire school community, and therefore requires whole-school action. There was broad agreement from staff at both schools that strong leadership is the most important factor required to successfully implement an asymmetric week.

The report demonstrates that there are very clear benefits to staff mental health and well-being, born out of a school's transition to an asymmetric week. However, this is not true in every case, and for some, new timetabling arrangements have impacted negatively on both staff mental health and well-being, and morale. The advent of longer school days appears to have been particularly challenging for some. There were also contrasting views as to the impact of the asymmetric week on pupils, with staff split as to the benefits of new timetabling on learners themselves.

On the whole, the professional learning opportunities generated by the asymmetric week were considered a positive consequence of asymmetric arrangements for staff in both schools. This is a significant finding, particularly in the context of the new *Curriculum for Wales*; for if one assumes that having the time and space to reflect on existing practice will become a necessity rather than an ambition, creative timetabling could provide a workable solution to challenging budgetary constraints.

Organising childcare, school transport and extra-curricular activities has been challenging for far fewer staff than it has. The same was true of parents who, by and large, acknowledged the positive effect of asymmetric arrangements on their child's/ children's mental health and well-being, learning, behaviour and family/home life. Indeed, pupils at both schools identified spending more time with family as a major benefit associated with finishing early on a Friday.

However, the curtailing of the school week and lengthening of the weekend, whilst popular with the vast majority of pupils, was not as appealing for some as others and schools might wish to consider factors contributing to pupils' reticence about finishing school earlier on a Friday. It is for this and several other reasons that asymmetric arrangements should be subject to ongoing review and evaluation, particularly during the early stages of adoption.

Overall, *The value of asymmetric school weeks: Lessons learned from schools in Wales* is useful as it adds to the limited evidence-based that exists currently, and with a major overhaul of Wales' education system still very much ongoing, provides fresh perspective on the possibilities afforded by asymmetric approaches. It serves to highlight that any school considering moving to a shortened week should balance carefully the costs and benefits of such a move, as well as its potential impact on different members of the school community.

The report offers schools an opportunity to rethink established practices to best meet the needs of learners and staff. In light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and enforced changes to more traditional school structures, it could be argued that now is as good a time as any to consider the opportunities presented by the asymmetric school week.

The successful adoption of these approaches is, however, dependent on having an environment conducive to change. This begins at a school-level, built on a vision of what can be achieved in lockstep with the positive engagement of staff and the wider school community, but extends to a whole-system-level, requiring a commitment to innovation that transcends the school itself. It is the extent to which this system-wide thinking, and its implications for school accountability and performance measures, can be shifted that will likely dictate the future of asymmetric arrangements in Wales.

Radical change such as that explored here necessitates an open mindset and, if the asymmetric week were to become a truly national endeavour, a change in culture across all tiers of Wales' education system.

10. Recommendations

The report's findings have a number of implications for schools considering the adoption of an asymmetric week. Drawing on the experiences of both case study schools, the following are offered as recommendations for those seeking to explore asymmetric arrangements:

- Schools should have a sound rationale for wanting to implement an asymmetric week, based on the potential benefits to staff and pupils;
- A full and thorough consultation process must be conducted prior to adoption, to allow key stakeholders an opportunity to input into and feedback on proposals;
- Schools must explore with their local authority the scope for changing school transport and school crossing patrols, and the potential costs associated with such adjustments;
- Changes to staff contracts and managing of human resources to accommodate pupils who wish to stay in school all week (in accordance with normal procedures) should be considered;
- Schools should acknowledge the many different asymmetric options available to them, and settle on a structure that works for them and their wider school community. Changes to existing timetables can be subtle or more radical, and must be introduced only on the basis of need;
- If changes are made to generate more professional learning opportunities, schools must ensure relevant sessions/activities are identified, so as to remain meaningful and of genuine value;
- Similarly, steps must be taken to guarantee that pupils who wish to stay in school beyond 'traditional' opening hours have appropriate activities to be undertaking, with requisite staff able to support;
- Schools must ensure a strong line of communication to parents and the wider community, providing rationale for change and ongoing opportunities for reflection. Regular updates, particularly in the early stages of asymmetric transition, are encouraged;
- Strong leadership is required to drive through asymmetric change, and to build a culture of curiosity and innovation necessary to embrace and adopt new ways of working;
- Schools must be willing to adapt their asymmetric arrangements as appropriate. A trial period should be considered to iron out potential pitfalls and address any unforeseen issues;
- New arrangements should be subject to ongoing evaluation and schools should build in structured opportunities to review asymmetric developments and progress, ensuring representation from across the school community;
- Legal and legislative requirements should be well understood, and schools must consider fully the restrictions in place to limit what they can change and when;
- As appropriate, schools should engage with nearby schools and explore the possibility of a more collaborative approach to the asymmetric week involving clusters of schools, in order to create more opportunities for shared professional learning activities;
- Schools should consider the pace of change, and whether a more staggered transition to new arrangements is preferable to a 'big bang' approach.

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12. Appendix

School leader interview questions

- Why did you move to an asymmetric school week and what was your justification for making the change?
- Did you undertake any research into the asymmetric school week before implementation? If so, what work were you particularly interested in? Were there any specific examples you drew from?
- To what extent were staff, pupils and the wider school community involved in the decision to change to an asymmetric school week?
- What, if any, structural changes were required as part of your transition to an asymmetric school week?
- Were there financial costs incurred as a result of transition to the asymmetric school week?
- How important do you consider school leadership in the adoption and implementation of the asymmetric school week?
- What do you consider the benefits of the asymmetric approach for staff?
- What do you consider the benefits of the asymmetric approach for pupils?
- To what extent has the transition to an asymmetric school week impacted on pupil performance?
- To what extent has the asymmetric school week impacted on staff mental health and well-being?
- Do you feel that the additional professional learning time, resulting from the asymmetric school week, has brought staff closer together and supported within-school collaboration between departments/phases?
- Similarly, do you feel that it has brought staff from different schools closer together and supported collaboration between schools?
- To what extent have you shared what you have done with colleagues in other schools, and have colleagues sought your advice?
- What were the main challenges to implementing the asymmetric school week?
- Have you any plans to further develop the asymmetric structure to better meet the needs of the school and its staff/pupils?
- Would you support a national approach to restructuring the school week?
- Would you recommend asymmetric school week to other schools in Wales?
- Has the asymmetric school week been helpful in developing your school's approach to the *Curriculum for Wales*?
- Do you have any further comments you would like to add?



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