

Recruitment and retention

In this report we have looked at both the pool of teachers in Wales and the recruitment of teachers into the profession. Whilst EWC figures suggest that the retention of teachers in the profession is relatively stable, recruitment has faced particular issues particularly in secondary schools.

The findings and conclusions are drawn from inspection evidence, meetings with school leaders, meetings with local authority representatives and data from the EWC, the Welsh Government and initial teacher education providers.

Recruitment to secondary initial teacher education programmes*.

Since 2014, the number of students on secondary programmes has declined by nearly a half. While there was a temporary increase in recruitment during 2020-2021 and 2021-2022, this was mainly due to prospective students seeking relatively more secure professions and applications from those who lost their jobs during the pandemic. Over the last two years, recruitment has declined sharply and there are significant issues in key subject areas, namely maths, science and Welsh. In the most recent year, recruitment is well below pre-pandemic levels. While there has been little research on the reasons for this in Wales, potential reasons for the lack of interest in teaching in secondary schools may include:

- perceived challenges associated with behaviour and the fact that schools are having to pick up many of the duties formerly provided by partner agencies through local authorities, CAMHS etc
- the relative buoyancy in recruitment in other graduate professions
- a perception that the arrangements for the new curriculum may lead to teaching outside one's area of interest/expertise

Some of these issues are discussed in the following paper: [Research study on the attractiveness of teaching and retention of teachers | GOV.WALES](#). There are similar challenges in England as highlighted in this recent [report by the education committee of the UK parliament](#).

This decline in recruitment is a significant concern.

Figures across the partnerships show that recruitment varies considerably from provider to provider. Over the last decade, none of the partnerships have succeeded in recruiting to their overall targets. These figures are particularly stark in the last two years. As a result, there are substantial shortfalls in the number of newly qualified teachers.

Recruitment to shortage subject areas, which include the Welsh language, mathematics, science (especially chemistry and physics), ICT, geography and modern foreign languages, is of particular concern. These shortages often result in teachers delivering subjects outside of their main area of expertise. The most significant shortage is in students training to be teachers of Welsh language, where the number recruited across all ITE provision has been below 25 students in each of the last

four years, which is less than a third of the target figures.

The low number of students training to teach through the medium of Welsh across secondary subjects is particularly worrying. Over the last ten years, there has been a notable decline in the number of students training to teach individual subjects through the medium of Welsh in secondary schools. The most recent recruitment figures are exceptionally low. This trend presents a significant challenge for the Welsh Government's ambition to reach a million speakers by 2050 through the expansion of Welsh-medium education and the realisation of the [Welsh Language and Education Bill](#).

Recruitment to primary programmes

Overall, recruitment to primary programmes has remained buoyant over the last four years.

Partnerships have over-recruited primary teaching during this period. Inspection evidence suggests that one reason for this is to off-set the falling numbers of secondary students applying for ITE, to ensure the financial sustainability across the range of ITE programmes. Increasingly, the excess primary students are being recruited by secondary or all age schools. While this practice ensures that pupils have a class teacher, these newly qualified teachers (NQT) will not have been prepared specifically to teach in the secondary sector. A few of these teachers are used as supply cover and therefore do not have a very good experience as an NQT as a result.

The recruitment of students training to teach through the medium of Welsh, although more positive than in secondary provision, is still a concern with only a few students following Welsh-medium pathways.

Teacher recruitment challenges

Over time, approaches to improving recruitment have been too narrow and mainly focused on finding more recruits, rather than a more comprehensive evaluation of the system as a whole. Potential solutions should consider more varied routes into teaching as well as aspects of retention to ensure that we have enough high-quality teachers across Wales to meet the needs of our schools and their pupils. Possible approaches include:

- Ensuring that recruitment and retention strategies are considered holistically and system wide, so that programmes attract the brightest and best candidates and support them to stay in the profession.
- Changes to the design of programmes to make sure that not only do they support the development of students in the best way, but also provide enriching and exciting opportunities, such as working in a range of contexts and international placements.
- Increasing the range of routes into teaching. These need to be more flexible and varied to attract a wider range of applicants. The low recruitment to secondary subjects, especially to shortage subjects and those in the medium of Welsh, is a concern. The Open University programmes are designed to widen participation, and, although helpful, this does not go far enough to help the recruitment to shortage secondary subject areas. Alternative routes into teaching could be considered in Wales, such as degree apprenticeships (where students earn while they work towards a degree with QTS), undergraduate secondary provision and assessment-only routes.
- Create more attractive incentives, particularly for Welsh-medium applicants. Bursaries and incentives have improved recruitment, but not extensively, and the number of students recruited do not always translate into new teachers entering the profession in Wales. There may be

imaginative solutions to reimbursing degree fees for those who enter the teaching profession, or completely abolishing student fees for initial teacher education programmes. However, these have significant financial implications.

- Conditions for teachers new to the profession, especially in secondary schools, need to be more attractive. There needs to be creative solutions to ensure working in a school is seen as attractive proposition. These may include such initiatives as:
 - ‘Retention payments’, which have been implemented successfully in England
 - Data collected and shared centrally on reasons for teachers leaving the profession in order to inform retention strategies
 - ‘Lead schools’ with a track record of securing exemplary pupil behaviour to collaborate with ‘partner schools’ to help them diagnose issues and develop new strategies
- This combined with a rich and differentiated programme of professional learning and mentoring for teachers in their first three years of teaching is essential to retention.

Recruitment challenges for schools

During our inspections, schools across the whole of Wales reported that there has been a decline in the number of applicants for teaching posts. Secondary schools are finding recruitment especially challenging. The average number of applicants per vacancy has more than halved since 2011, while the situation in primary schools has remained relatively buoyant, [see data from the Welsh Government here](#). This situation is particularly problematic in Welsh second language, science, mathematics, modern foreign languages, English in Welsh-medium schools and music. It is especially acute in more rural areas and in Welsh-medium and bilingual schools. Often, schools have needed to advertise multiple times to fill teaching positions. Schools and local authorities reported that there may be subtle differences in why they need to re-advertise posts.

Headteachers in secondary schools reported during inspection and in additional meetings, that in recent times, the quality of candidates is too often not up to the required standard. As a result, there are situations where schools have managed to fill positions but often needed to put additional support in place to secure an acceptable standard of teaching. In an increasing number of cases, failure to recruit teachers means that schools have to deploy staff to teach outside of their area of expertise. In the best examples, these teachers have been offered extensive professional learning, subject mentors and opportunities to observe experienced practitioners teach. Departmental leaders offer these staff high levels of support, monitor their work closely and involve them in discussions around how best to teach different aspects of the subject. In many cases, this support means that pupils receive at least suitable provision. In a minority of cases, however, the support offered by leaders was not comprehensive enough and pupils received poorly delivered, uninspiring lessons as a result.

The number of teachers leaving the profession in the first years of teaching has fluctuated over time but has never been as high as in [2022 when 127 secondary teachers left within five years of entering the profession](#) (this has not been the case in primary schools). Worryingly, the highest number of teachers leaving the profession are teachers of English, mathematics, science and Welsh second language.

Retention

In many schools, leaders placed a high priority on retaining skilled and dedicated staff. A few schools were very successful in doing so. In these cases, leaders planned carefully to create a stable and positive work environment. They fostered a positive and inclusive school culture where teachers felt valued and respected. They ensured that teachers are involved in decision-making processes, which promoted a sense of trust, ownership and engagement. In these schools, leaders ensured that there are effective behaviour strategies, they planned carefully so that teachers have manageable class sizes, they eliminated unnecessary administrative tasks and ensured that staff have sufficient planning and collaboration time. Increasingly, school leaders have been trying to be creative in order to give staff greater flexibility and a better work life balance. In a few secondary schools, headteachers have been creative with PPA time to enable staff to have one afternoon a fortnight where they can work from home or come in to school slightly later in the morning. However, approaches like these are becoming more difficult with recent budgetary challenges.

There have also been challenges in recruiting and retaining support staff. Increasingly, support assistants with older children were no longer attracted by the benefits of school holidays and therefore they applied for other posts that offer more flexibility or hybrid working improved career pathways and better pay.

In a few instances, school leaders have articulated the benefits of partnerships with initial teacher education including professional learning opportunities for staff and enhanced recruitment opportunities. These collaborations also foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation, which can contribute to improving the overall quality of education within the school.

Despite recent increases in the starting salary of new entrants to the profession, there are several underlying issues that hinder effective recruitment. These include the relative inflexibility of teachers' working conditions, a decline in the number of people aged between 20 and 25 and the poor public perception of teaching as a profession.

Data: [Teacher recruitment: number of applications received by subject and year \(gov.wales\)](#)

Recruitment of headteachers

Appointing to leadership positions has also become more difficult over the last few years. Recent challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic and significant system wide changes such as curriculum reform and ALN reform have added to the workload pressure of headteachers and other leaders. Many headteachers felt that these issues created extra pressures over and above what they already felt was a challenging occupation. This has contributed to a few leaders expressing low morale in the role and occasionally prevented teachers seeking leadership roles.

When facing recruitment difficulties to leadership roles, and in particular to headship roles, local authorities and schools often considered potential alternatives. These were often temporary solutions until a permanent headteacher is appointed, such as another senior leader or teacher within the school taking up the headteacher role or a headteacher or leader from another nearby school acting as an executive headteacher. When the temporary solution has been exhausted, an increasing number of schools and local authorities looked to develop more long-term solutions. These include, for example, creating a federation of schools where one headteacher has responsibility for more than one school. There is a lack of research on the benefits of this practice and its impact on pupils. While

this practice notionally solves a problem, often executive headteachers found that the demands of the role are overwhelming.

* The figures that this commentary refers to are from unpublished data from the Welsh Government