



WELL Project Evaluation Report Year 2 – 2022-2023

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Executive Summary

1: Background

- The WELL (Western Excellence in Learning and Leadership) project is a three-year place-based improvement programme (2021-2024) which aims to sustainably improve educational outcomes for all young people in west Cumbria, particularly those facing disadvantage. It is working with all primary and secondary schools in the districts formerly known as Allerdale and Copeland (n=118), offering a range of support structured in three strands: i) raising standards, ii) closing the gap and, iii) wellbeing. The project is hosted by Cumberland Council, but with an independent board and team.
- This report sets out findings from the second year of the project evaluation (2022-23). The evaluation is structured in two strands (implementation and process and impact) designed to address a series of questions posed by the WELL Project Board.

2. The context for schools in west Cumbria: views on the wider landscape

- The year one report highlighted that schools in west Cumbria have strong connections with their communities and many collaborate together well, but there remain significant place based challenges as a result of isolation, rurality/small schools, and deprivation. There is sometimes fierce competition among schools, particularly at secondary level. Rates of academisation remain low, with few strong Multi-Academy Trusts.
- The findings in year two broadly reinforce and build on this picture. Cumbria County Council was reorganised into two unitary councils this year, but school leaders did not see this as a major cause for concern. Like their peers nationally, school leaders in west Cumbria are wrestling with “ever shrinking budgets”, staff recruitment/retention challenges and pupil attendance issues.
- Overall school priorities remain similar in 2023 (compared to the 2021 survey) - with a core focus on improving teaching, learning and student outcomes and with a reduced (but still significant) focus on ‘mental health / well-being’ and ‘COVID recovery / catch up’.

3.1 To what extent has the WELL project been successful in engaging schools and supporting them to identify, prioritise, access and implement evidence-informed improvement approaches?

- Schools continued to engage very positively with WELL in 2022-23 and this engagement appears to have been more focussed and productive when compared with year one. This development reflects both improvements in how the WELL team has worked, with a streamlined Professional Development (PD) offer and more coherent approach to communication with schools, coupled with increased familiarity and confidence on the part of most schools.
- 79% of school leaders say they are confident that their school will benefit from engaging in the WELL project, an increase from 72% in 2021.
- 95% of school leaders say they are satisfied with the WELL PD offer. ‘Emotionally Literate Support Assistants’ (44%) and ‘Wellbeing Cluster Collaboration’ (36%) were the most popular elements of the programme this year.

- The great majority of schools are making good progress in their implementation of evidence-informed initiatives, drawing on annual WELL grant funding.¹ Most schools have embedded and extended initiatives that were started in year one. Phonics and literacy (specifically reading, but also oracy/vocab) have dominated school interventions this year.
- A small number of schools appear to have made more limited progress with their WELL-funded work so far, for example due to changes in staffing or having other priorities to address.
- Unsurprisingly, where schools have established and confident leadership they have been able to seize the WELL initiative to make it work for their context, whereas where school-level leadership is less stable or capable, the initiative appears to have less traction.

3.2 To what extent has school leadership and classroom teaching in schools in the west of Cumbria become more evidence-informed as a result of the WELL project?

- Schools are required to use the EEF's implementation planning process to identify and address a priority for their WELL grant funding. 96% of survey respondents were positive about this process in year 2.
- Five out of six case study schools were using the implementation planning approach with fidelity and in most of these it was clear that leaders were becoming more sophisticated in their use of evidence over time.
- Around 90% of leaders agree (while around 5% disagree) that research informs their leadership, that they know where to find research, that they can relate research to their school context, and that they use research to help decide on how to implement new approaches.
- We also saw examples of schools adopting more sophisticated approaches to evidence – including a preparedness to question and challenge simplistic assumptions around 'what works'.

3.3 To what extent has WELL enabled improved pupil outcomes, in particular in terms of the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils?

- The focus of WELL on disadvantage, including through targeted funding, implementation planning and a broader PD programme which includes a focus on well-being, has ensured that schools are focussed on meeting the needs of disadvantaged children as a priority.
- 97% of survey respondents are confident that engagement with WELL will benefit disadvantaged pupils in their schools.
- Most schools report seeing positive impacts based on internal data. 31% of leaders say they have collected strong evidence of impact from their WELL-funded work within school, while 61% report seeing emerging positive evidence. All 11 secondary schools that responded to the survey in 2023 reported seeing strong positive impact from their WELL-funded work.
- At this stage, the impact evaluation – which draws on national assessment data - does not show significant positive or negative impact, except for the matched sample on the Progress 8 measure for Key Stage 4. This finding is not surprising given that WELL aims to support sustainable improvement across multiple schools: for example, most interventions are not

¹ All schools receive annual grants from WELL, with differing amounts (targeted and universal) to reflect levels of deprivation and size etc. Projects must be planned and approved using the EEF implementation planning methodology (Charles et al, 2018). See the year one report (Greany et al, 2022) for details.

geared specifically at exam classes/year groups and many address well-being issues (which we would not expect to lead to rapid improvements in exam grades).² The findings are as follows:

Phonics: in 2023 schools in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland averaged:

- 78.6% against a Cumberland average of 77.4%, a Westmorland and Furness average of 79.1%, and a national average of 78.9%.
- WELL-supported 'Phonics schools' (N=39) achieved an average of 81.2%.
- Amongst disadvantaged pupils in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland the average was 66.7%, against a Cumberland average of 62.5%, a Westmorland and Furness average of 62.6%, and a national average of 66.7%.

Key Stage 2 (KS2): In 2023, schools in former districts of Allerdale and Copeland averaged:

- 105.0 in reading against a Cumberland average of 104.5, a Westmorland and Furness average of 105.7 and a national average of 105.1.
- 102.8 in Mathematics, against a Cumberland average of 102.8, a Westmorland and Furness average of 103.7 and a national average of 104.2.
- -0.08 for reading progress, against a Cumberland average of -0.46, a Westmorland and Furness average of 0.09, and a national average of 0.04.
- -1.15 in Mathematics progress, against a Cumberland average of -1.15, a Westmorland and Furness average of -0.82, and a national average of 0.04.

Disadvantaged pupils (KS2, 2023): schools in Allerdale and Copeland averaged:

- 101.9 in reading, against a Cumberland average of 102.2, a Westmorland and Furness average of 102.4, and a national average of 102.4.
- 99.8 in mathematics, against a Cumberland average of 99.6, a Westmorland and Furness average of 100.7, and a national average of 101.3.
- -0.37 for reading progress, against a Cumberland average of -0.64, a Westmorland and Furness average of -0.35, and a national average -0.87.
- -1.67 for mathematics progress, against a Cumberland average of -2.22, a Westmorland and Furness average of -1.39, and a national average -1.07.

Key Stage 4 (KS4): in 2023 Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged:

- An Attainment 8 point score of 41.5, against a Cumberland average of 43.2, a Westmorland and Furness average of 46.2, and a national average of 46.4.
- A Progress 8 score of -0.44, against a Cumberland average of -0.28, a Westmorland and Furness average of -0.1, and a national average of -0.03.
- An Attainment 8 disadvantaged point score of approximately 32.5, against a Cumberland average of 31.6, a Westmorland and Furness average of 32.4 and a national average of 34.9.

² Also important to note is that the impact evaluation in years one and two has relied on national assessment data aggregated at school level. This approach does not allow for targeted assessments of pupil progress in specific areas that have been the focus of WELL-supported interventions. In year 3, WELL is supporting many secondary schools to include additional pupil assessments of progress in reading, which we will draw on in the year three evaluation.

- A Progress 8 disadvantaged point score of -0.87 , a Cumberland average of -0.94 , a Westmorland and Furness average of -0.73 and a national average of -0.57 .

Comparing schools in Allerdale and Copeland with a matched sample of schools

- As with 2022, in 2023 WELL supported primary schools (targeted and universal grant schools, including infant and junior schools) have performed broadly in line with schools of similar characteristics matched from the wider Cumbrian population of schools across the three outcomes assessed (phonics and Key Stage 2 reading and mathematics). None of these outcomes shows a statistically significant difference.
- In 2023, WELL supported secondary schools (targeted and universal grant schools) on average performed below the national sample of schools with similar characteristics in both Attainment 8 and Progress 8. For Attainment 8 these differences now cannot be considered significant, but for Progress 8 they are.

3.4 To what extent have WELL-supported enrichment opportunities - particularly the Cumbrian Award - impacted on school practices and/or pupil aspirations for learning?

- Due to setbacks related to Covid-19, the Cumbrian Award is still in its infancy, but significant progress has been made in 2022-23 and 15% of schools have engaged with it.
- The evaluation evidence on Cumbrian Award engagement and impact is limited. However, school leaders who have engaged mostly reported positive experiences, with some believing that it is helping to break down attitudinal barriers and raise aspirations among young people.

3.5 To what extent has WELL enabled the development of a more outward facing and collaborative school system in west Cumbria, with the potential for systemic learning and improvement to be sustained over time?

- The vast majority of leaders say their school is open to sharing practice, but lower proportions agree that local collaboration is strong.
- Local clusters remain active in west Cumbria and most provide benefits for headteachers in terms of practical and moral support, although there are questions about how much wider staff are engaged.
- The WELL team has continued to work to encourage collaboration between schools and a more outward facing system in year two. This work has included: organising events and training sessions; commissioning national partners and PD providers; encouraging schools to work together on shared themes; and acting as a conduit and convenor for local and regional stakeholders, in particular through the new Education Research Alliance. These initiatives are widely welcomed by school and system leaders and are broadly seen to be having a positive impact. While this progress is important, there is a recognition that schools are constantly drawn to focus inwards, so there is likely to be a need to sustain this activity in the long term.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, the year two findings present a positive picture. School leaders and the staff who are directly engaged see WELL as an important vehicle for learning and improvement within their schools and for collaboration across the west of Cumbria. This is a reflection of how the core WELL team have continued to work skilfully to engage and support schools, with the use of grants linked to

improvement planning as a particularly key element. Importantly, this report shows that school leaders see how the WELL team are continually learning and improving in terms of how they operate, with improved communication and planning as significant developments in year two.

At this stage, it is not possible to discern a significant impact on national test and exam outcomes at school or system level in most areas, but this is not surprising given the scale of the programme and its design as a long-term and systemic intervention.

We make the following recommendations:

- ii. Help school leaders to evaluate how they are using evidence to support improvement and encourage the development of increasingly 'sophisticated' approaches.
- iii. Support schools with more limited leadership capacity to embed evidence-informed improvement.
- iv. Ensure the focus on disadvantage is fully realised by helping leaders to see how WELL-supported work on well-being, enrichment and quality first teaching can best be aligned at school level.
- v. Help schools to adopt common evaluation tools and approaches, building on the model of reading assessments in secondary, and use these to support programme-level learning.
- vi. Further encourage school networks and collaboration around evidence-informed improvement.
- vii. Further strengthen local coherence to ensure long-term impact and an outward facing system, including through the new Education Research Alliance.
- viii. Consider how to ensure long-term sustainable impact, potentially by providing funding beyond the three-year period.

1. Background

1.1 About the WELL project

The WELL (Western Excellence in Learning and Leadership) project is a three-year place-based school improvement programme (2021-2024) funded by Sellafield Ltd/Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA). The project aims to ‘sustainably improve educational outcomes for all young people in West Cumbria, particularly those facing disadvantage’ (WELL, 2022), with a focus on all primary and secondary schools in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland (n=118).³ This is to be achieved through the offer of compelling professional development, teacher development, targeted strategies, building local capacity, and developing evidence informed practice. The project is underpinned by access to evidence informed practice, working closely with the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and their Research School network. WELL is hosted by the local authority but has an independent Board and a small, dedicated team, led by Dale Hill (Project Director), Vicki Clarke (Project Manager), and Lucy Gill (Project Assistant).

The WELL project was launched in summer 2019, with initial funding of £1.7m. The project’s first two years were impacted by COVID-19, but an initial evaluation report in December 2020 indicated that ‘the right approach is being taken overall’ across the project. In 2021, Sellafield and NDA committed a further £3.9m to extend the project over a further three years (2021-2024). This report provides evaluation findings from year two, covering the 2022-23 academic year.

The project has the following objectives – to:

- use evidence informed approaches to improve pupil attainment, especially for disadvantaged pupils
- provide high quality, research led professional development and proven intervention programmes – promoting the use of the EEF tiered model - in order to improve the quality of teaching, especially of disadvantaged pupils, impacting on pupil attainment and progress.
- support the development of teachers in west Cumbria (formerly Allerdale and Copeland) as motivated, evidence informed professionals.
- provide curriculum enrichment opportunity and capacity in order to improve resilience and readiness to learn, including for the most vulnerable pupils, impacting on attainment.
- secure education, employment and training outcomes and raised aspirations including for vulnerable pupils including high quality employer experiences in partnership with Inspira.
- achieve school cultures of evidence informed practice, prioritising closing of the achievement gap.
- create an outward facing school system willing to share and learn with others locally and nationally.

³ On 1st April 2023 Cumbria underwent a significant change in local government. Prior to this date, Cumbria County Council included six district councils – Allerdale, Carlisle, Copeland, Barrow-in-Furness, Eden, and South Lakeland. In April 2023 these arrangements were replaced by two unitary authorities: Cumberland Council and Westmorland and Furness Council. The WELL programme has a specific focus on schools from the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland, which now sit within Cumberland Council, alongside the former Carlisle district. The WELL programme itself was transferred across from the former Cumbria County Council to Cumberland Council as part of this change.

The WELL team developed an initial Theory of Change (ToC) for the project at the outset. This was revised in January 2022, following a workshop with the University of Nottingham evaluation team. The revised framework is based on a model developed by 'Let's think'. It shows how the project activities are designed to address barriers and ensure action by schools that will lead to changes in practice and improvements in teaching, learning and pupil outcomes over the project period. This provides an important conceptual 'map' which the evaluation is designed to test and inform.

Factors that may decrease effect	Factors that may increase effect	If these things happen... (outputs)	Then we can expect to see these results... (short term outcomes)	Then we want to see these results... (intermediate outcomes)	Then we hope to see these results... (long-term outcomes)
<p>School leaders may not engage due to the pandemic/conflicting priorities/curriculum pressures/Ofsted/preference to stick with a professional judgement approach and to existing PP/school improvement processes and partnerships</p> <p>Schools participate through compliance to obtain some additional funds</p> <p>Schools make poor choices, do not engage with evidence and implement poorly</p> <p>School beliefs that they cannot make a meaningful impact on disadvantaged pupil outcomes eg Other factors beyond their control</p> <p>A fragmented school system could inhibit collaboration</p> <p>Limited access to evidence expertise required and therefore a lack of capacity</p> <p>Changes in school leadership/personnel resulting in loss of momentum</p>	<p>Compelling, high quality training opportunities/programmes for leaders and teachers</p> <p>Expert inputs for all schools on application of EEF implementation principles and processes, adopted by schools</p> <p>Targeted use of available resources to maximise reach for disadvantaged pupils</p> <p>Creation and facilitation of school learning communities</p> <p>Provision of high quality Wellbeing Training to build internal Wellbeing capacity</p> <p>Curriculum enrichment and Cultural Capital opportunities (Cumbrian Award)</p> <p>Local capacity is available to support the development of sustainable evidence informed practice</p> <p>Teacher attraction and retention opportunities</p>	<p>The training will be well attended and schools will use training and evidence to identify right priorities & act on feedback from expertise & collaborative learning network opportunities</p> <p>Schools will believe they can and will have an impact on disadvantaged pupil outcomes</p> <p>High levels of school commitment to WELL process and training opportunities are well attended - School leaders and staff engage willingly with the WELL elements</p> <p>Schools apply the modelled implementation process to WELL and wider school improvement work</p> <p>Schools will feel supported and challenged to identify & refine priorities and to find better bets/solutions to problems and that are amenable to change, impacting on inclusion, pupil attainment and progress especially for Disadvantaged pupils</p> <p>Schools commit to and are open to sharing successes and failures with others</p> <p>School based staff working more efficiently with vulnerable pupils</p> <p>Participating schools will articulate the value of and prioritise opportunities for pupils to access enterprise, adventure learning and cultural education</p> <p>Access to sustainable evidence expertise will be available and schools will act upon the guidance and support</p> <p>School staff feel motivated and retention is enhanced</p>	<p>Application of EEF implementation principles and processes</p> <p>School leaders and staff involved in WELL elements will articulate the benefits of the training and programmes provided and of an evidence informed implementation approach - They apply learning to identify priorities that are amenable to change</p> <p>Targeted and Universal Elements</p> <p>Every eligible school offered the opportunity to participate - Barriers identified and solutions explored - High levels of commitment to engage and participate - Priorities are based on exploration and use of some evidence - Plans are developed based on implementation principles but may be of variable quality</p> <p>Schools will have time to share learning with other schools and with evidence expertise</p> <p>Wellbeing Elements</p> <p>School leaders and participants articulate the opportunities and benefits of wellbeing training programmes provided, including Youth Mental Health First Aid and ELSA.</p> <p>Cumbrian Award Element</p> <p>Commitment of at least 13 schools to participate in pilot and to prioritise the Award - Partners in place to provide capacity - Training and resources are effectively supporting implementation</p> <p>Building Capacity (see also Wellbeing Elements)</p> <p>An EEF Research School is secured for Cumbria - Evidence Leader capacity secured to support project delivery</p> <p>Schools professional development programmes are supported by evidence and motivate the workforce</p>	<p>Majority of WELL project participants are satisfied with the quality of training and programmes provided - Schools can show improvement in quality of teaching and PP strategies as a result of WELL project approach - Schools choose to use the cycle of implementation to deliver, evaluate and refine improvement plans - Schools begin to apply principles to wider school improvement</p> <p>Quality of planning/delivery is more consistent - Pupils benefit from improved teaching, interventions and wider strategies, including the disadvantaged - Data at individual school level shows impact on pupil achievement, including the disadvantaged for chosen priorities - Targeted offer schools show improvements compared to other schools locally and in control sample</p> <p>Evidence use and learning from others results in refinement of solutions and improving quality</p> <p>School staff, parents and pupils report positive impact of school based support on learning readiness, inclusion and attendance</p> <p>Participating schools and pupils report and evidence impact of participation on quality of curriculum and outcomes</p> <p>Award reach extended to more schools</p> <p>Schools articulate the benefits of local evidence expertise - Learning communities are established and practice sharing is evident</p> <p>The quality of WELL programme opportunities positively impacts on teaching and best practice is embedded</p>	<p>School culture of evidence - informed practice and prioritising disadvantaged pupils (attitudes/beliefs and behaviours of leaders and teachers)</p> <p>The vast majority of participating schools can evidence measurable improvements in their chosen priority areas</p> <p>Pupil attainment and progress within participating schools showing an improving trend, impacting also on variation at district level when compared with historical performance and similar school control groups</p> <p>Variations in disadvantaged Pupil attainment and progress are diminished across participating schools over 3 years</p> <p>Embedded culture of collaborative learning - This learning can be shared within and beyond the locality - Commitment to reduce variation in school performance and progress of pupils</p> <p>Schools with internal capacity report a positive impact on pupil wellbeing, inclusion and Learning behaviours - This feedback to be supported by case study data</p> <p>Participation in Cumbrian Award results in improvements in school curriculum, culture and in pupil aspiration, knowledge of their heritage and sense of place, extending their cultural capital - Employers articulate benefits of Cumbrian Award as a currency for young people as they progress</p> <p>Internal and regional evidence capacity and expertise is in place to sustain improvements over time</p> <p>School based staff articulate positive impact of WELL on confidence, beliefs and a commitment to stay in education</p>

To achieve the project objectives, WELL activities are organised into three strands: i) raising standards, ii) closing the gap and, iii) wellbeing. Under these strands sit the following project elements:

- Making the most for disadvantaged pupils and Pupil Premium strategies
- Training and retaining teachers conference
- Universal offer
- Targeted offer
- Enhancing Local capacity
- Wellbeing and learning readiness
- Cumbrian Award
- Employability skills

A key feature of the WELL approach – representing just over half of the total budget (see Greany et al, 2022) – is the grants provided to participating schools. 'Universal' grant schools (n=95) receive a minimum annual grant of £4500 per year of the project, while 'Targeted' grant schools (n=23) – which, between them, educate 60% of the disadvantaged pupils in the former boroughs of Allerdale and Copeland - receive grants of between £13,800 and £22,600 per year, depending on the number

of disadvantaged pupils in the school (see Greany et al, 2022 for a list of schools showing Targeted and Universal grants).

Linked to these grants, the WELL project has provided training for participating schools on the EEF's 'Putting evidence to work – a school's guide to implementation' (Sharples et al, 2018). Leaders from all 118 schools attended training on these resources during 2021-22 and have continued to engage with this training during 2022-23. School leaders are expected to undertake an internal review to identify a problem or challenge they want to address. In order to address this challenge, universal grant-funded schools can select a priority focus within the EEF's tiered model of teacher development, targeted intervention or wider strategies. Targeted grant schools may choose more than one tier, linked to their chosen priorities. Based on this work, in both 2021-22 and 2022-23, school leaders completed and submitted an action plan proforma as a basis for receiving the school's grant. Schools were then encouraged to apply the EEF implementation guide approach in how they worked to develop and embed their chosen initiatives.

In addition to the grants and projects within schools, the WELL project has provided or facilitated access to a range of other opportunities for schools, all of which fit within the ToC and the project strands and elements (see below for a full list). Most of these opportunities take the form of professional development/training (PD) programmes for school staff. The need for these programmes was identified based on consultation with participating school leaders during the early phases of the project. Having identified these priorities, the WELL team sought to identify and make available PD programmes that were evidence-based, for example promoting interventions/ approaches that had been evaluated and shown to be effective by the EEF where available. A notable development that began in year 1 (2021-22) and has continued in year two was to make the range of PD programmes on offer more focussed, with a small cluster of initiatives (in particular the Great Teaching Toolkit and Reciprocal Reading) prioritised and promoted to schools. This more focussed approach is partly a response to comments, flagged in the year one evaluation report (Greany et al, 2022), that the programme offer could feel diverse and confusing for busy school leaders to navigate. These PD opportunities remain optional – school leaders can decide which elements they want to prioritise, but overall engagement remains high as we outline below. Schools can also choose to spend WELL grant funding on other (i.e. non-WELL provided) training programmes or resources, in line with their school priorities.

A third main area of activity for WELL is sponsoring the early development of the Cumbrian Award. This is initially a Y5 – Y9 Award encompassing three strands: Adventure, Enterprise and Culture. The award seeks to ensure that schools can offer a set of enriching and inspiring opportunities which go beyond the core curriculum and ensure place-focussed development opportunities for young people in Cumbria. As in year one, the evaluation aimed to capture emerging learning from this innovative initiative by inviting participating schools to engage in the action research strand. In the event, no schools completed action research posters specifically on the Cumbrian Award, so in Section 3.4 we draw together the limited data we have from the wider evaluation on this theme.

The WELL team have also continued to develop a small number of wider initiatives. Based on year 2 survey responses, outlined below, participation in these initiatives by schools has been as follows: MADE Training and Retaining Teacher Conference - 21%, the Careers Pilot Secondary – 4%, and the Head Teacher Coaching Conversations – 9%. The Head Teacher Coaching was developed in response to a recommendation in the Year 1 evaluation report. The evaluation is not designed to evaluate these individual strands of activity in depth, although we draw out findings in relation to these aspects where appropriate.

Finally, in years 1 and 2 of the project, WELL has worked with EEF to provide funding for a local Research School in the west of Cumbria. In early 2023, following a national review of all Research Schools, the EEF decided not to extend the west Cumbria school's designation. Partly in response to this development, towards the end of year 2, the WELL team has worked with other local stakeholders to develop a new Educational Research Alliance, which aims to bring a range of partners together to strengthen coherence, quality and equity in terms of how schools can access evidence-informed professional development and support in the locality.

1.2 About the evaluation

In summer 2021 a team from the University of Nottingham (Toby Greany, Mike Adkins and Georgina Hudson), in partnership with CUREE (Philippa Cordingley and Bart Crisp), was commissioned to evaluate the three-year WELL project. This report sets out findings from the second year of the project (September 2022 – July 2023). The year 1 report (Greany et al, 2022) includes key themes from a literature review of research into rural and remote schools which provides an important backdrop to the findings.

The evaluation team's approach is underpinned by Improvement Science (see Box 1). Reflecting the Improvement Science philosophy, a key tenet of the approach has been to work in partnership with the WELL project team and schools in west Cumbria, providing formative as well as summative evidence which can help the project to achieve its aims, including via the action research strand.

Box 1: What do we mean by Improvement Science?

Improvement Science (IS) recognises that organisations are complex and so assumes that teachers and schools must be individually and collectively engaged in a continual process of learning how to improve, developing 'practice-based evidence'. This learning is structured in cycles of improvement, designed to develop, test, and refine interventions aimed at addressing specific problems.

Improvement Science has been widely adopted in health and other fields (Bradley et al, 2009). In education, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching,⁴ in the US, has been integral in promoting Improvement Science, which it describes in six steps:

- i. Make the work problem-specific and user-centered, starting with the question: "What specifically is the problem we are trying to solve?"
- ii. Variation in performance is the core problem to address, so the aim should be to help everyone learn together how to improve at scale.
- iii. See the system that produces the current outcomes. Go and see how local conditions shape work processes. Make your hypotheses for change public and clear.
- iv. We cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure. Embed measures of key outcomes and processes to track. Anticipate unintended consequences and measure these too.
- v. Anchor practice improvement in disciplined inquiry. Engage in rapid cycles of Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) to learn fast, fail fast, and improve quickly.
- vi. Accelerate and broaden improvements through networked communities.

At the project outset, an Evaluation Plan was developed and agreed with the WELL project team and signed off by the Project Board. Before data collection began, the evaluation received ethical

⁴ See <https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/> accessed 15.3.19

approval from the University of Nottingham School of Education Ethics and Research Integrity Committee. This included the preparation and approval of a Data Management Plan, to ensure that data is handled securely. Ethics approval included a commitment to maintain anonymity for schools and individuals that participated in the evaluation, not least so that respondents would feel able to provide honest assessments of the WELL project to the evaluation team. For this reason, case studies and quotes included in this report are anonymised – although we recognise that there is a risk of these being identifiable due to the local focus of the project and evaluation.

The original evaluation tender – issued by Cumbria County Council - set out a series of research questions to be addressed. The chapters of this report reflect the questions agreed as the core focus of this evaluation based on discussions with the WELL Project Board.

The evaluation is structured in two strands:

i) Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) – this seeks to assess the various project elements across the universal and targeted offers. As far as possible this draws on a core set of data collection processes, thereby helping to minimize data collection burdens on schools. In 2022-23 this comprised the following aspects:

- Observations of workshops/PD sessions (Implementation Planning, Reciprocal Reading, Action Research session on Great Teaching Toolkit)
- Key stakeholder interviews: n=6, including representatives from the Department for Education, Local Authority, school system leader (Local Alliance of System Leaders - LASL), Maths Hub and WELL programme team
- Online survey (Summer 2023): In addition to asking questions about the school landscape and the WELL programme, many of which allow for comparison with the year 1 survey conducted in autumn 2021, this survey included new questions on evidence use and school collaboration. Respondents to both surveys were predominantly headteachers, but with a small number of executive heads, heads of school and other senior roles on both occasions. Response rates to the surveys differed slightly – with 81 responses in 2022 (68% of WELL-supported schools) and 101 responses in 2023 (86% of schools).
- Case studies: A sample of six schools was selected to be broadly representative – for example, with:
 - two secondary schools, three primaries and one infant school;
 - three targeted and three universal for WELL funding;
 - geographic spread - coastal/inland, town/rural, north/south;
 - different sizes - e.g. NOR=39, to NOR=>360 in the primary sample;
 - Ofsted grade - Outstanding/Good/Inadequate;
 - levels of deprivation - from below national levels of children on Free School Meals to well above average (40%).

Each case study included: documentary analysis, visits, observations and interviews with senior leaders, teachers and wider staff (n=30), including follow up interviews with heads and senior leaders to assess change over time. The case studies were written up individually, following which a cross-case analysis was undertaken.

- Action research: between 8-14 colleagues from volunteer primary and secondary schools attended one of the four workshops run by CUREE in the spring and summer terms, with

7 schools submitting completed action research write-up “posters” at the end of the year, summarising their projects and findings.

- ii) Impact Evaluation – this drew on pupil assessment and demographic data provided by both Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness Local Authorities based on national tests and exams held in 2023. For a detailed explanation of how these data were analysed to assess impact see below.

This report draws from these various strands to provide an overall assessment of the WELL project's second year, structured against the questions identified by the Project Board. Before addressing these specific evaluation questions, the following section provides a broad overview of key developments and issues facing schools and the school system in west Cumbria, including how school priorities have shifted since the start of the project. This wider context provides an important backdrop for the WELL project and can also inform plans for its final year.

2. The context for schools in west Cumbria: views on the wider landscape

This section draws on findings from the interviews with key stakeholders as well as the survey and case study visits to set the scene, in terms of the wider context for schools in west Cumbria that WELL seeks to support.

2.1 Introduction

The year one report highlighted that:

- Schools in west Cumbria felt a strong connection with the local area, with a history of collaboration between schools, for example through local clusters and the county-wide LASL network. That said, there remained significant place based challenges, including a felt sense of isolation from both geographic and policy perspectives.
- There were significant issues for many schools resulting from deprivation. This was felt most keenly in coastal areas and in very small schools.
- In some cases, there was a sense of 'toxic' competition amongst schools, particularly secondary schools that were competing for pupil enrolment.
- There was a low rate of academisation in West Cumbria compared to other parts of England, with most school still maintained by the Local Authority.
- The WELL project was widely welcomed by local system leaders as well as headteachers, who saw it offering both high quality professional development opportunities for schools and helping to engender a sense of shared commitment and collective learning for improvement.

As we would expect, the findings from year two, outlined here, serve to reinforce and build on this initial picture.

2.2 The school landscape in west Cumbria

Locality, isolation and community spirit

As in year one of the WELL project, participants expressed a commitment to the community whilst at the same time recognising the range of challenges that arise from the combination of deprivation and isolation. Many interviewees were Cumbrian 'born and bred', with a strong sense of connection to the communities they served.

Case study schools tended to be strongly engaged with their local communities, in particular at primary level, with generally good relationships with parents - "they support their children brilliantly" (headteacher). One primary teacher described the connection as being:

Like a big family, you know, all the teachers, all the staff members, not just teachers, teaching assistants, the people in the community nursery. Everybody knows everybody. Everybody knows the children.

Interviewees explained that levels of deprivation and challenge for children, families and communities in west Cumbria have increased in recent years:

We have students that aren't just pupil premium, they're pupil premium plus. So they suffer from several factors that you know would lead to them being disadvantaged. (Headteacher)

Case study schools were commonly working to instil a sense of local identity and pride within their pupils. For example, one school was working with a local university to develop an app related to the local area, one school was contributing to local art displays, and other schools were engaged in community festivals and fundraisers. This sense of belonging felt like an important component of the case study schools, often helping to strengthen staff commitment and enable staff and pupils to develop a united front against the place-based challenges they faced:

We've got quite a lot of deprivation in this area and not a lot of funding coming into us... we're kind of more remote and we're kind of right on the fringes of everything, we're quite a resilient bunch in this area.

That said, a tight community could also lead to a sense of inwardness. One leader explained that the school was working to develop a wider awareness of the world, for example in terms of multiculturalism and "how families look different". This was seen as less of an issue for local children, who see diversity on screens at home, but more related to older generations in the locality.

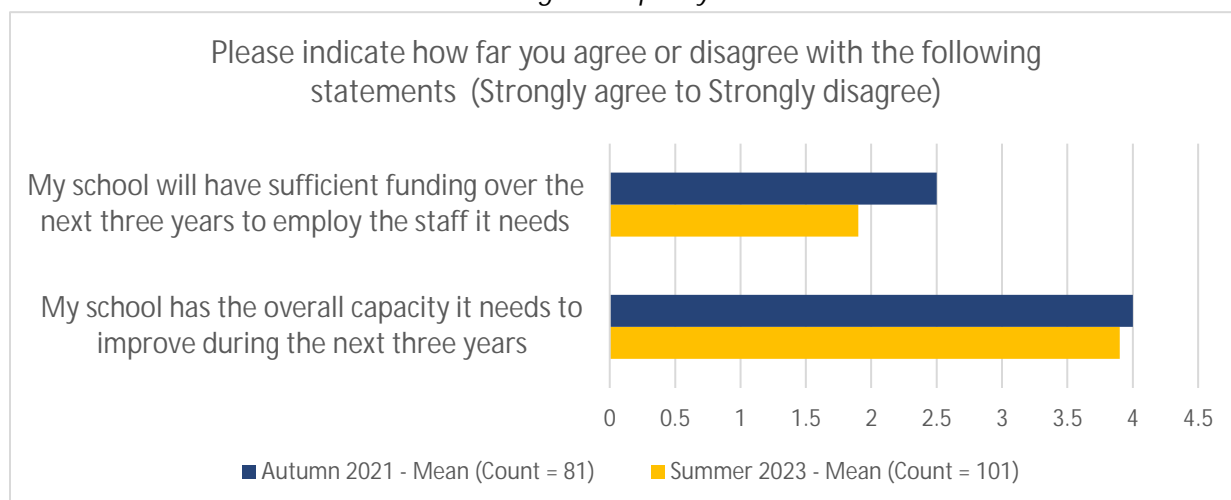
More surprisingly, we were struck that in a small number of cases school staff used deficit language to describe children, families and/or local communities, such as: "Lazy white working-class boys" and "I know a lot of families around here who I think their ambition for their child is to get a council house two doors down from them."

School challenges and capacity issues

Chart 1, below, shows headteacher responses to statements about school funding and capacity that were posed in both the baseline survey (Autumn 2021) and the year 2 survey (Summer 2023).⁵ Responses indicate that school leaders are less confident than they were in 2021 that their school will have the required funding, although they remain largely confident that their schools will nonetheless have the capacity needed to improve.

⁵ While responses rates to both surveys were good (68% in autumn 2021 & 84% in summer 2023), the number of responses (count) is different each time (see chart) and reflects the relatively small total population of schools (121) involved, so findings should be seen as indicative rather than statistically robust.

Chart 1: Headteacher views on school funding and capacity – 2021 and 2023



However, our wider evidence indicated that this confidence was often quite fragile, as schools wrestle with multiple challenges that include the cost-of-living and teacher recruitment crises. Survey responses highlighted that leaders were experiencing “ever shrinking budgets”, along with staff retention and pupil attendance issues, as the quote below indicates:

With teachers and workload and the strikes and the fact that we've got more vacancies at the moment in our schools than we've had for a long time. Changes in head teachers, people leaving the profession for other jobs in ALDI and for other jobs in Sellafield.

While these issues impact on all schools, they appeared particularly acute for leaders in the small rural schools we visited ⁶ and heard from in the survey:

I'm a teaching head, so I have a 0.5 teaching commitment, and then the management is the same as if it would be if you were in a bigger school with deputies to delegate to, etcetera, etcetera. There is no delegation ability here. So, you take on a much bigger workload as far as I'm concerned, having worked in big schools and small schools.

From the outside looking In

Key stakeholder interviews indicated that Cumbria has been a tricky landscape for external providers of professional development and school support to navigate and that schools have continued to engage cautiously with national policies, notably academisation.

Issues described ranged from difficulties in accessing data, knowing the right people to talk to, geographical barriers, and a sense of feeling like an ‘outsider’:

Copeland and Allerdale, in terms of reach, we're doing OK compared to other what I would call 'cold spots'. It's very much about having specialists in the area that know their local context and schools. There is a genuine reticence about coming over to Carlisle, Penrith, Kendal. We've learned over last two years that we go to them.

⁶ Two case study schools had fewer than 100 pupils on roll, while another had around 150.

There was a sense that, when working with schools across west Cumbria, external visitors needed to “talk to [schools] on their own terms” and, in order to create effective working partnerships, it was important to develop a situational understanding of the specific challenges faced by schools in the area. These challenges faced by external networks and providers were not necessarily a result of local schools’ unwillingness to collaborate; as we outline below, many school leaders express excitement about being involved with national initiatives and are pleased to see Cumbria being “put on the map”. In both years of the evaluation, we visited case study schools - including some small schools – that are impressively outward looking and connected, for example to national and international initiatives. Thus, it seems the difficulties for engagement lie in the challenges outlined above, with schools feeling stretched to capacity coupled with geographical isolation.

A school landscape in flux: evolving networks in a context of fragmentation

One of the WELL project’s priorities is to develop a more outward facing and collaborative school system in the west of Cumbria⁷, since this appears key to ensuring that schools share knowledge and expertise, and that the project’s impact is sustained over time. However, in the year 1 evaluation report we argued that the challenges of geographic isolation in west Cumbria are compounded by competition between schools (particularly at secondary level), fragmentation across the ‘middle tier’ that supports schools (due to the roll back of the Local Authority) and the government’s push for academisation (with relatively limited engagement from Multi-Academy Trusts – MATs - in the region). Unsurprisingly, these issues remained significant in the 2022-23 year, although some key stakeholders detected a shift in attitudes towards MATs, as explored below. At the same time, we heard that many schools are continuing to collaborate together well and that the WELL project is helping to connect schools locally and beyond the region.

Chart 2 shows responses to three questions asked in both the 2021 and 2023 surveys. As can be seen, there have been slight increases in the proportion of leaders agreeing to all three statements. This indicates that three quarters (74%) of school leaders agree that schools collaborate together well, while 59% disagree that a lack of trust hinders meaningful collaboration. This is despite 42% of respondents agreeing that there is a clear local hierarchy of schools in their area (a situation which often drives competition to attract pupils and thus impacts negatively on inter-school trust and collaboration) (Greany and Higham, 2018).

⁷ We report evidence relating to this WELL aim in Section 3.5. In this section we focus more generally on system changes and attitudes.

Chart 2: Headteacher views on school collaboration, status hierarchies and trust – 2021 and 2023

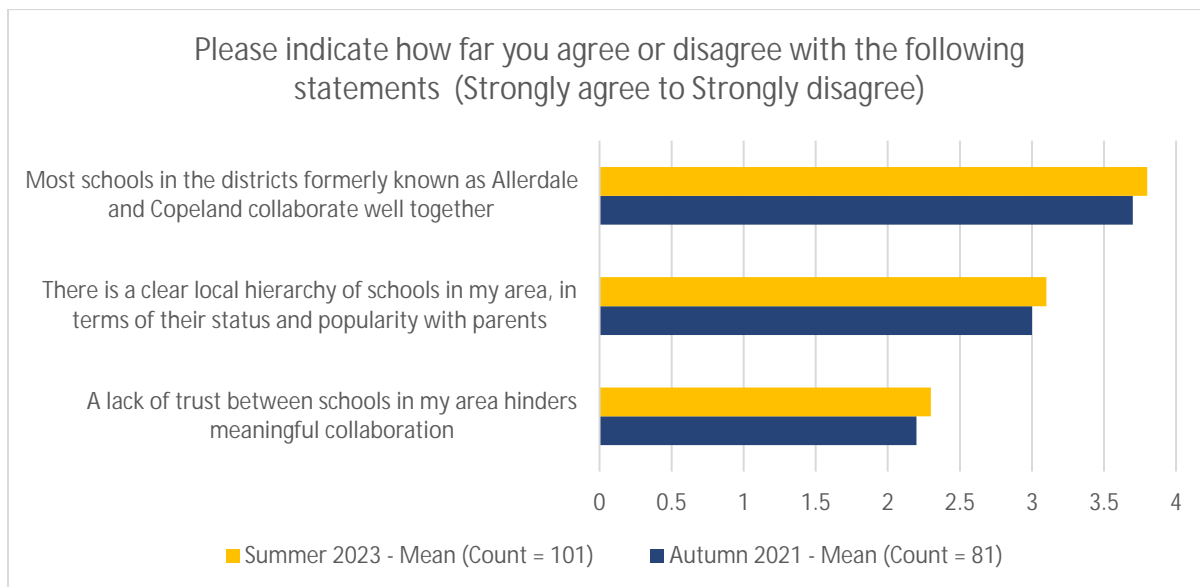
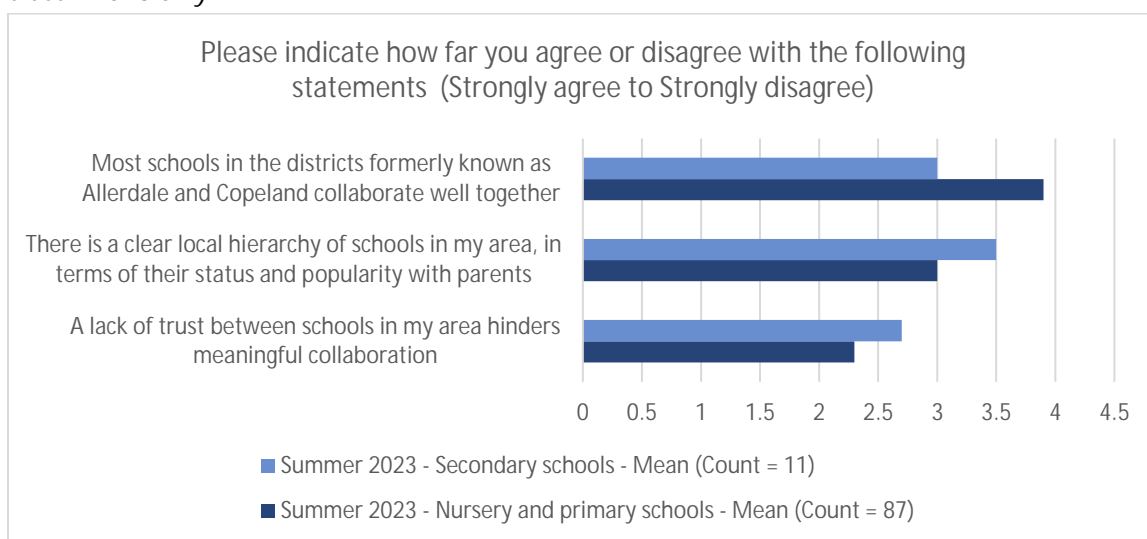


Chart 3 shows the same responses, for 2023 only, but now broken down to show differences between nursery/primary schools and secondary schools. The number of secondary school responses is very small (n=11), so should be treated with caution. Chart 3 indicates that issues of competition and collaboration are more complex at secondary level, given more significant parental choice at this level. Previous research shows that these phase differences are replicated nationally, although it is notable that schools in western Cumbria are less likely to perceive local status hierarchies than schools nationally (Greany and Higham, 2018).

Chart 3: Primary and secondary headteacher views on school collaboration, status hierarchies and trust – 2023 only



Interview data reinforced these messages from the survey. It was common for system informants and school leaders to lament the sense of fragmentation and competition resulting from ongoing academisation and a continual battle for pupil enrolment:

That's the difficulty with schools being Single Academy Trusts, Multi Academy Trusts and then the competition for places amongst the schools. Because our roles are all dropping, and finances are dropping in schools and we're in direct competition with each other and those are all well-known barriers. What would really drive things forward are joined up approaches to things. (Headteacher)

Academisation was certainly viewed by some as a barrier to local collaboration - it "leaves a lot of micro politics in the area" – which reduces the focus on place - "it takes locality out of education provision". One school leader felt that their support networks had been dismantled as a result of academisation in the area, and that this was causing schools to look at education through a competitive lens, thus reducing collegiality and collaboration.

At the same time, system leader interviews suggested that attitudes towards academisation in the area may be beginning to change, although overall rates remain well below the national level. For example, one explained:

I do think there's a shift, we've seen interest from local authority maintained schools (i.e. in becoming academies). I don't know whether local government reorganisation might have something to do with that. I think some of our trusts have been providing school to school support. So, they've (i.e. schools) kind of understood 'well actually, if this is what it means to be part of a trust, I might want a bite of that myself'. (System leader)

This thinking was reflected in one of the case study schools, in which interviewees said they valued the sense of belonging as well as practical support that their Multi Academy Trust offered them. However, the suggestion that LA reorganisation on 1st April 2023 (see footnote above) was driving an increase in schools applying for academy status was not clearly supported in our data. Certainly, as in year one, participants did express concern that the local authority was not as present as it used to be within school governance, but school leaders did not appear to see LA reorganisation as a major cause for concern - "we haven't really noticed it." Nevertheless, one local system leader argued that academisation had become inevitable and that this was now the most pragmatic choice given policy trends and in order to overcome the current model in which schools are 'structurally disincentivised' from collaboration:

Whether you are an ideologue or a pragmatist in relation to Multi Academy Trusts, we need our schools to be in them because they are structurally disincentivized from collaboration. Because of their different governance structures and the issues around pressure and budget and income in a way that if they were part of a MAT, they just wouldn't have... Essentially, you're just creating several local education authorities (i.e. by putting all schools into MATs). (System leader)

Although significant, issues of fragmentation, competition and academisation were not the most pressing issues facing most school-based interviewees. Furthermore, the case study research and survey indicated that many schools are collaborating together well, in particular through primary-focussed local clusters and often supported by the Local Alliance of System Leaders (LASL) network. In the survey, 96% of leaders agreed with the statement: 'My school is open to sharing practice with

other schools in the area'. We explore this evidence on local collaboration in detail in Section 3.5. Meanwhile, reflecting WELL's focus on supporting an outward facing system and its work to establish an Educational Research Alliance, there was a growing narrative in year 2, in particular among system informants but also many schools, that west Cumbria as a whole is becoming a more networked landscape and that the WELL project is helping to support collaboration in various ways:

You've got One Cumbria (the Teaching School Hub) asking for inputs now into their training, into their modules, from a research and evidence point of view. You've got the local authority wanting the research school to lead the conference for the whole of Cumbria. You've got the early years team asking for that. You've got the Maths Hub saying can we jointly develop the 'what' and the 'how'. (System leader)

2.3 School improvement priorities

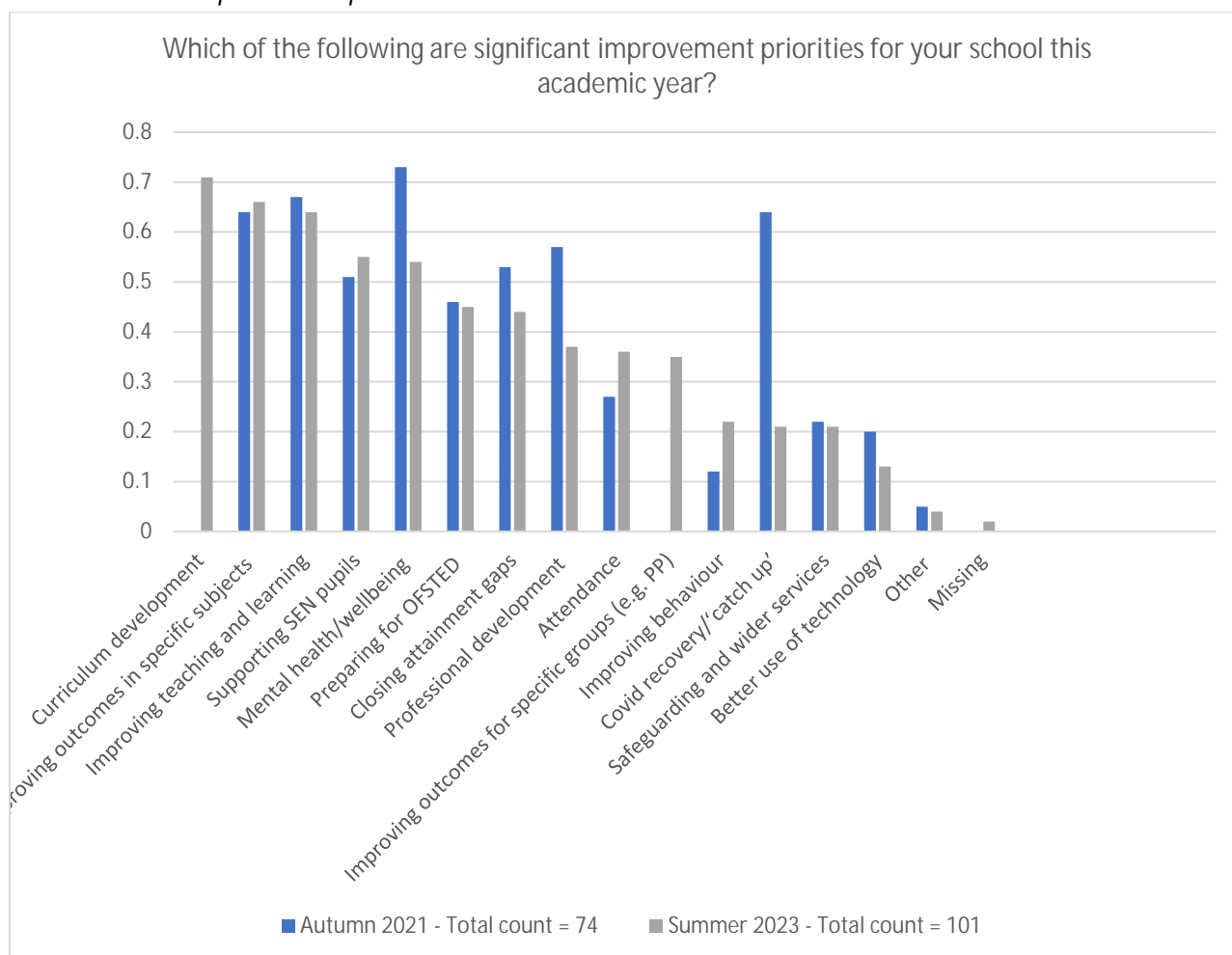
Chart 4, below, shows responses to a question about school priorities that was asked in both the baseline survey (Autumn 2021) and the second-year survey (Summer 2023).⁸ In most respects, school priorities remain similar each time, with a core focus on improving teaching, learning and student outcomes, including for specific groups of children. However, there were some notable differences between the two surveys, with a reduced (but still significant) focus on 'mental health / well-being' and 'COVID recovery / catch up' in 2023.

The survey responses on schools overall improvement priorities (Chart 4) align with the decision by many schools to focus their WELL grant funds on phonics, oracy/language, reading and/or writing (as outlined in Section 3.1). The central WELL team also reported that "a lot of the schools were interested in phonics and literacy and very few maths." A notable theme in year 2 was the number of secondary schools choosing to focus their WELL-funded projects on literacy, in particular reading at Key Stage 3 – using the FFT's Reciprocal Reading scheme – which we explore in Section 3.

Case study schools explained that this was where the majority of attainment gaps existed - "I'd say our maths results are looking better... and reading and writing is where I would say we're not as strong". Similarly, some case study schools felt that their literacy approach was achieving inconsistent results - "our big concern when we were reviewing data and things was that there was a discrepancy between our phonics and spelling and reading". This builds on the findings from the year one study, where four out of six case study schools focused on literacy and oracy due to the apparent attainment gaps following the pandemic.

⁸ Please note small changes in how the question was asked the second time (e.g. 'curriculum development' and 'improving outcomes for specific groups' options added).

Chart 4: School improvement priorities: 2021 and 2023



Although the focus on mental health, well-being and COVID recovery was lower in 2023 than in 2021, this remained a significant priority for schools. For example, 55% of survey respondents stated that ‘mental health, wellbeing and pastoral care’ was a priority for the academic year. Interviews suggested that this reflected the passage of time since the pandemic - “COVID knocked everything out, we’ve just pulled it back in again”. However, some of the wider ‘long-run’ impacts of the pandemic seen nationally – in particular the growing concerns around school attendance and student behaviour – were also apparent in our data, as seen in Chart 4 and the quote below from a secondary school leader:

Attendance hugely, hugely a priority for us this year. We are just shocked in secondary. I mean the data may be different by the end of this year, but we were in the sort of 93rd centile for attendance secondary you know abysmal. (Headteacher)

Despite the reduced focus on wellbeing as a priority for schools, overall engagement with wellbeing related WELL strands was still strong, as we outline in Section 3.1. The central WELL team confirmed that this work remained a priority, including in the year ahead: “we’ve received requests for another 190 teachers to be trained in youth mental health first aid and we have secured the capacity for that”. However, they also acknowledged that it had been hard to capture and assess the impact of school engagement in these initiatives on children’s well-being in practice:

It is a priority. It's the capacity we have in terms of the mental youth, mental health, first aid training we've put in in the past, we have been working with schools to seek feedback on what impact that's having, how it's improved capacity in the schools. And it's been a challenge at times to get that feedback and we're unpicking the reasons for that because we trained over 190 people in supporting schools with mental health. (System leader)

2.4 Views on WELL aims and confidence that these will be met

When asked to prioritise the WELL aims in order of importance, survey respondents selected the following two as most important:

- 'To provide high quality, research led professional development and proven intervention programmes in order to improve the quality of teaching, especially of vulnerable pupils, impacting on pupil attainment and progress'
- 'To use evidence informed approaches to improve pupil attainment especially of vulnerable pupils'.

This mirrors the findings of the year one survey, where respondents also ranked these two aims highest. When asked how confident they were that these aims would be met, 27% of respondents were very confident and 70% were somewhat confident. Again, this reflects the findings of the baseline survey, where 26% of respondents were very confident about aims being met, and 70% were somewhat confident.

3. Findings

3.1 To what extent has the WELL project been successful in engaging schools and supporting them to identify, prioritise, access and implement evidence-informed improvement approaches?

In this section, we draw on the different strands of the IPE to consider evidence on school engagement in WELL overall. In the following section (3.2) we focus in on how schools are engaging with evidence and the extent to which this engagement is beginning to impact on school and classroom practice.

Overview

Overall, the evaluation indicates that schools continued to engage very positively with WELL in 2022-23. Furthermore, this engagement appears to have been more focussed and productive when compared with year one. This change reflects both improvements in how the WELL team has worked, with a streamlined PD offer and more coherent approach to communication with schools, coupled with increased familiarity with the process and confidence on the part of most schools.

As noted in Section 1, all schools receive either 'universal' or 'targeted' grant funding from WELL each year. School leaders can use this funding to address one or more school-identified priorities, using the EEF Implementation Planning process to structure their efforts. In addition, schools can choose to access various PD programmes and initiatives offered by WELL and its partners.

The year one evaluation found that this model had proved broadly successful in engaging schools. The combination of grants and a core PD offer meant that school leaders felt a sense of ownership and commitment, but were also required to adhere to an evidence-informed structure and approach through the implementation planning structure. In our view, this level of commitment from schools would not have been as strong if the grant funding had not been made available.

Reflecting on the year one findings, we have written elsewhere about the important role played by the WELL team in securing high levels of engagement from schools (Greany and Hudson, 2023). This leadership has continued in year 2. It relies partly on the WELL team being seen by schools as credible and responsive, but also on a level of pragmatism and flexibility, thus ensuring that the offer meets the different needs and priorities of different schools. For example, we see it as helpful and necessary that the WELL team is not overly purist in how they interpret what 'counts' as evidence-informed practice, meaning that school leaders have engaged and not felt overly constrained as they have used the grant funding to address their local priorities.

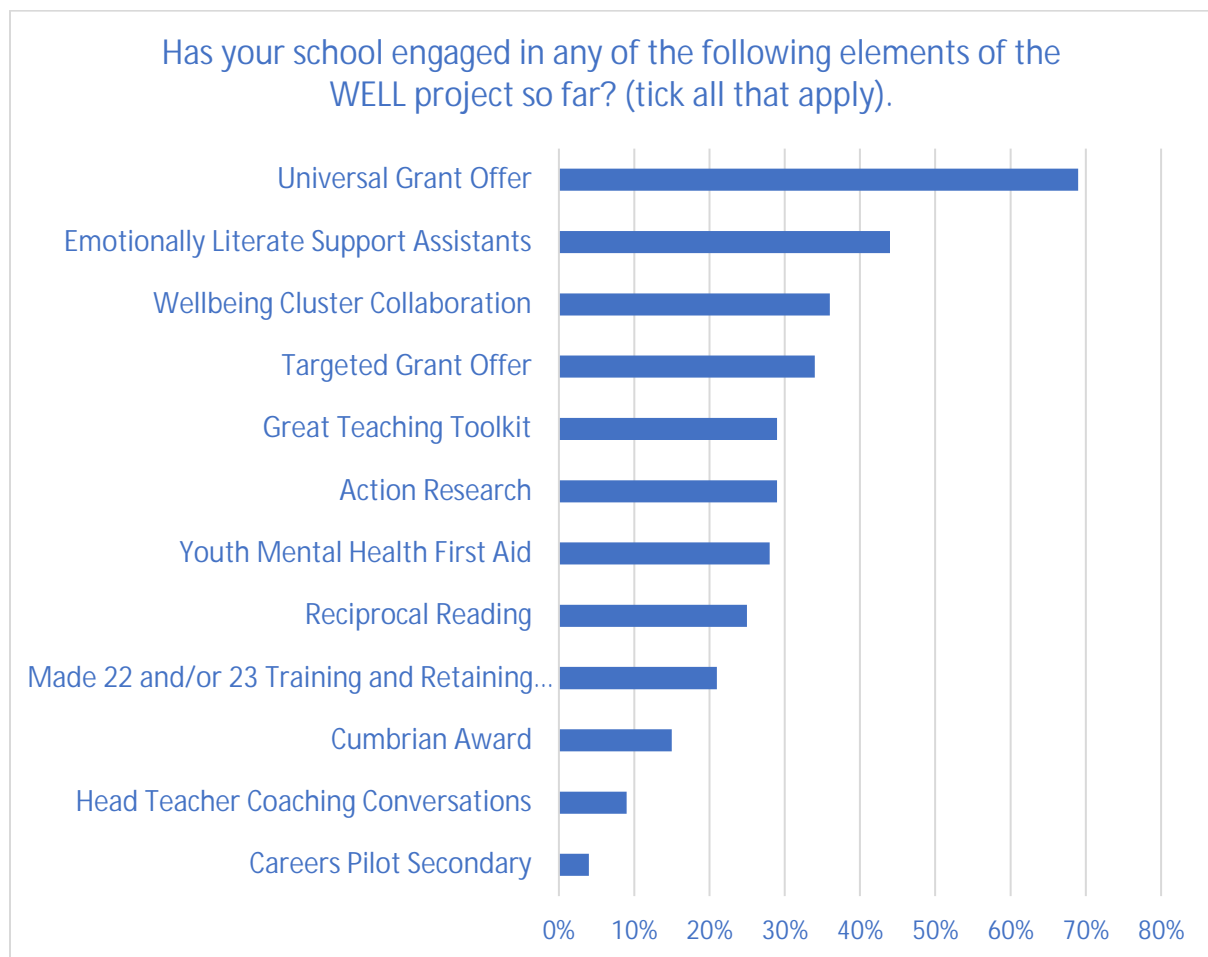
As we outline in detail below, the year two evaluation found that all eligible schools have remained engaged and, furthermore, that a majority are making good progress in their implementation of evidence-informed initiatives. Most school leaders have embedded and extended approaches that were initiated in year one, although some have used the second year of implementation planning as a diagnostic process to refine their focus and approach. That said, a minority of schools appear to have made more limited progress with their WELL-funded work so far. In some cases, this was due to changes in staffing or circumstances since WELL began, in others the school has had other priorities to address (e.g., a large budget deficit) which may have distracted the focus on WELL. Importantly, these schools are still 'engaged', in the sense that they are using their WELL grant money to address a local priority; however, some have needed to restart the process in year two, while others might be

pursuing their chosen priority with less commitment or sophistication than other schools. This finding highlights an important theme, explored in more detail below, that has become increasingly apparent in year two: where schools have established and confident leadership, they have been able to seize the WELL initiative to make it work for their context, whereas where school-level leadership is less stable or capable, the initiative appears to have less impact.

School engagement with WELL

Chart 5, below, shows the proportion of schools that have engaged with each of the WELL elements. It shows that, in the second year, all schools engaged in either the 'Universal' or 'Targeted' grant offer. Beyond this, school leaders chose which of the WELL-provided PD programmes and other initiatives to engage in, with 'Emotionally Literate Support Assistants' (44%) and 'Wellbeing Cluster Collaboration' (36%) as the most popular elements, but with 20-30% of schools also participating in the next five most popular elements.

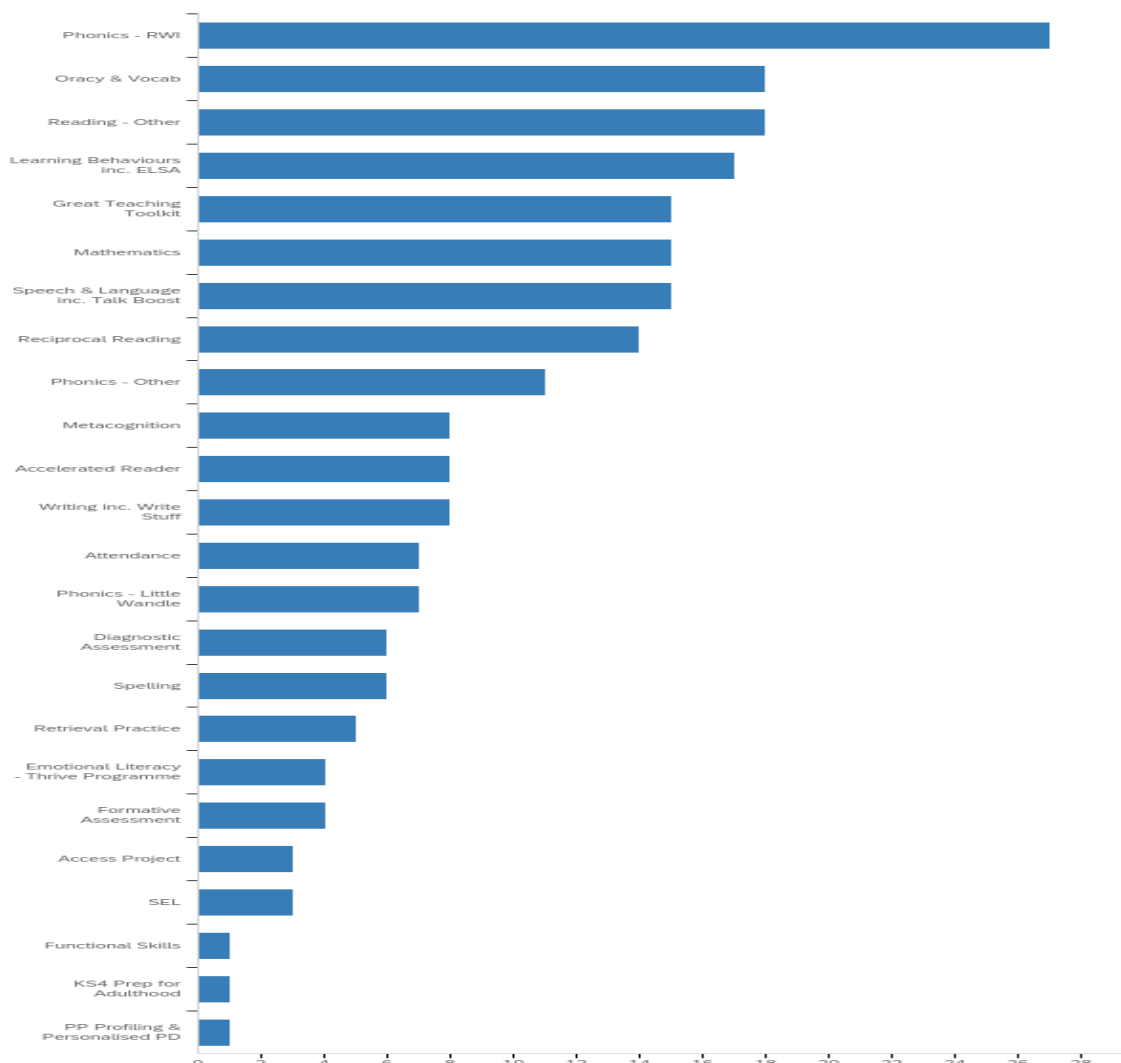
Chart 5: School engagement in WELL elements - 2022-23



As in year one, all schools received a grant from WELL in year 2 (either 'Universal' or 'Targeted'), which the school's leaders could spend to address a school-identified priority. Each school developed an action plan, using a WELL-developed template in line with the EFF implementation planning process, which was signed off by the WELL project director. Chart 6, below, indicates what schools have focussed on in this grant funded work. It shows that phonics and literacy (specifically reading, but also oracy/vocab) have dominated school activities this year, although the list is long –

demonstrating the breadth of school issues and the flexibility that the WELL project has demonstrated in supporting school priorities.

Chart 6: Please select which of the following priorities best describes your WELL grants funded work in school this year:



Based on feedback in the year one evaluation report, the WELL PD offer was further refined and simplified in year two, as schools had sometimes found the volume of options to be too broad. A second development in year two was the focus on a small number of themes within which schools have been encouraged to collaborate and share experiences in networks as a way of strengthening sustainable engagement and impact, as the project lead explained:

Last year was very much a focus around engagement and actually working with schools on more of an individual basis to really support them through the inputs, but then individually reflecting on their priority... Whereas this year we've been able to more show the connectivity, we'll be able to share with schools a full spreadsheet to say you can now find the other schools working on Reciprocal Reading, or Great Teaching Toolkit, or phonics. Here you all are. It's not about forcing them, but I think we've made it clearer, the intent and ambition for schools to actually pick up the phone, speak to each other, share practice, which I think last year was more schools were working on an individual basis. (Project lead)

Alongside these efforts to streamline the offer and develop networks, the WELL team has also improved its approach to planning and communication, including through the publication of an annual calendar of events and a weekly newsletter which highlights upcoming events, action points for schools, and signposts towards training opportunities and relevant resources (WOW – WELL on Wednesdays). As a result, school leaders reported feeling that they had a firmer grasp on what was on offer and how to engage, whereas in year one a common complaint was the use of excessive and sometimes ambiguous communication.

Great Teaching Toolkit – a new development

In year two, the WELL project offered all schools the chance to participate in the Great Teaching Toolkit (GTT), which is a nationally available online evidence-based PD programme, designed to help schools make more informed decisions around school improvement. School leaders had opportunities to attend face to face sessions on the Toolkit, led by Professor Rob Coe and his team, while wider school staff could work their way through a suite of online materials. 29% of survey respondents had engaged with this element, including three of our case study schools. Emerging feedback on this element has been positive. Survey responses indicated a number of benefits from this approach, including increased impact in lesson observations, teachers feeling more confident about having professional discussions, an increased sense of collegiality, and perceived improvements to practice and teaching. The quote below, from a case study primary school headteacher, exemplifies both some of the practical challenges in finding time for staff to engage properly with GTT, but also the benefits in terms of enhanced reflection and collaborative school improvement planning:

The other thing we're doing is the Great Teaching Toolkit. So we're running that in school this year as well, which has been great. We've been on quite a journey with that. Because I think it's very hard the premise, and the structure of the Great Teaching Toolkit is fabulous, but actually trying to fit that into a crazy manic day in school with, you know, teachers already working very, very hard. It's time, getting that quality time. That's what it keeps coming back to, I think. You can get time, but it needs to be good time. It's not just a case of finding the time. It needs to be time when you are down and accessible and able to give your full attention to what you're doing. So we have done that, we have small working groups in school to do that now because we've found it's better to do the training together, we get far more out of it. It takes us a bit longer, 'cause we talk a lot, but we do get a lot out of it and what we find is whatever we've done is impacting on our conversations and our discussions even to the point where, in September, I know what the INSET will be in September. I know what we need to do as a staff now and it's all about developing thinking.

Case Study 1: a primary school using implementation planning, action research and Great Teaching Toolkit to inform school improvement

This single form entry Local Authority maintained school is welcoming and vibrant. The school was judged 'Good' by Ofsted at its last inspection. About 10% of pupils are eligible for Free School Meals and the school employs 8 teachers and 13 teaching assistants.

"We're a very creative school. We love our art and design and love being outside. We've got a fantastic wild area renamed the Nature Zone" (HT).

Prior to the WELL, the school didn't engage with evidence much beyond attainment data and looking up schemes of work. This was due to time restraints and a lack of awareness on what was available. The head teacher feels that the WELL, and in particular early sessions with the Shotton Hall Research School, have enabled them to understand the importance of evidence-based school improvement. The head teacher has embraced the implementation planning process and now utilises it to inform wider school improvement. Implementation planning has been used to refine thinking around the GTT, while the action research strand has been used as a way to assess the impact of this work. As a result of engaging with these three strands, the school has developed a new collaborative way to approach school improvement and ensures that changes are well researched before attempting to implement them.

Reciprocal Reading:

As shown in Chart 6, a significant proportion of schools adopted Reciprocal Reading (developed by the Fisher Family Trust – FFT) as a WELL funded intervention in year two.⁹ Among the case study schools, three schools had chosen to adopt it as a result of WELL, including the two secondaries.¹⁰ In both these secondary schools, Reciprocal Reading was being used to support a more comprehensive approach to identifying children who are struggling with reading and writing (usually via screening in year 7), linked to focussed intervention work provided by well-trained and dedicated teachers or Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs), coupled with efforts to develop more consistent approaches to developing disciplinary literacy across the curriculum (See Case Study 2 for an example of this). The central WELL team explained that in total nine out of the 11 secondary schools in west Cumbria had adopted Reciprocal Reading, despite the fact that the intervention was originally developed for primary schools, offering significant opportunities for shared learning and impact:

I think secondary engagement in some of the work was - we were thinking why aren't they coming because it's absolutely linked to need and to priority... We've now got nine of those schools working on that Reciprocal Reading, and I suppose even more exciting, we've got disciplined innovation in the sense that FFT are keen to explore reading across the curriculum. Not specifically for reading and the English department. So we're doing some groundbreaking work through WELL now with FFT where in June we're launching with six of

⁹ For details on the Reciprocal Reading intervention see <https://fft.org.uk/literacy/reciprocal-reading/>

¹⁰ In addition, one of the two secondary schools visited in year one of the evaluation had adopted Reciprocal Reading – see Greany et al, 2022.

those nine schools, a specific bespoke piece of work around reading in the other part in other departments. (Project Lead)

Case study 2: a secondary school using Reciprocal Reading to support a whole-school focus on literacy

The school has used WELL grant funding to introduce Reciprocal Reading (RR) as a way of addressing disadvantage gaps, particularly in relation to reading and comprehension. The intervention was selected by the school's Literacy Director, who felt that there was promise in the approach for students who were not meeting their reading targets, although the school has had to adapt it to make it suitable for a secondary school context. A portion of the WELL funding was used for staff to attend training run by the Fisher Family Trust.

This has replaced what was felt to be an outdated approach of 'waiting for problems to arise' instead of actively screening students and monitoring their progress across their time at the school.

The school's new approach has two strands: i) focussed interventions for children identified via screening as needing additional support (there are five different intervention groups, which focus on different needs – e.g. phonics, decoding, fluency, comprehension, dyslexia) and ii) introducing a stronger disciplinary literacy focus into all curriculum areas across the school.

The literacy lead and one other staff member are responsible for running the interventions. About 120 children are currently receiving some form of intervention support. Meanwhile, in the second strand, departments across the school are trained and supported to develop subject-specific literacy, including through RR, in order to reinforce the model.

Interestingly, the Literacy teacher explains that she adapts her approach, sometimes going outside the standard interventions to meet the needs of specific students.

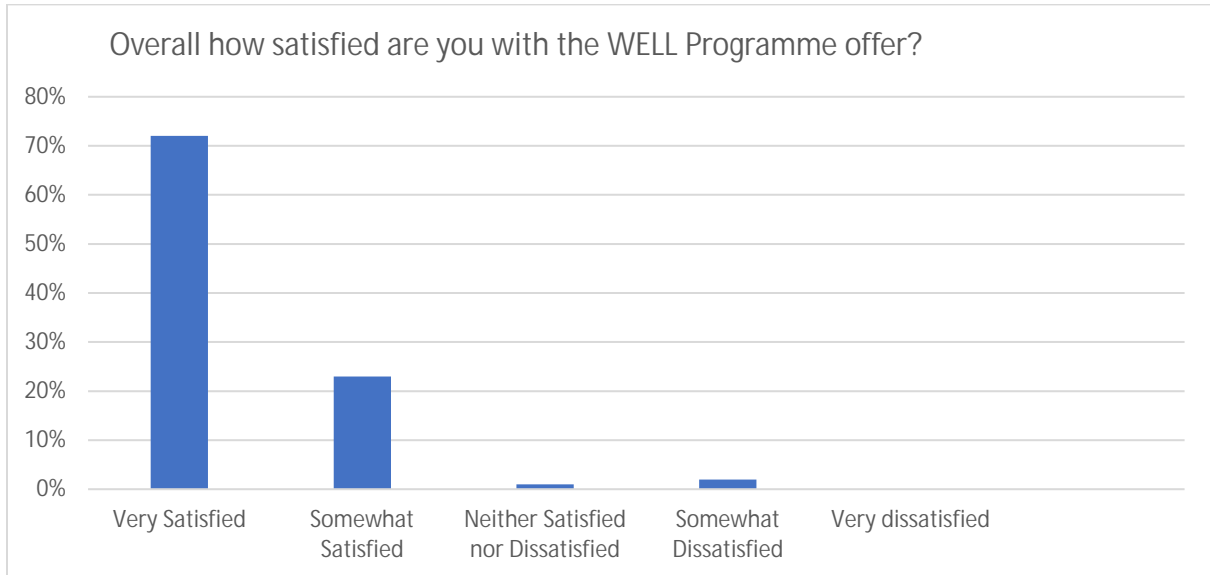
"For example, I have two students in year eight who I've tried phonics with and then I took a step back and thought 'Well, why hasn't phonics worked in the past? Let's try and get to the root of that'. And these students have a number of other learning needs, physical needs as well... We scrapped phonics because it wasn't working... So, they're on more of a precision teaching programme... that I've adopted from the Downs Syndrome Society."

The Literacy teacher and Director lead regular PD sessions for staff, helping them to introduce disciplinary literacy into their teaching approaches. This has been challenging because staff can be nervous or see it as another job for them to do, although most have become more confident over time. The school has tracked progress through annual screening, whereby the teacher of literacy oversees the screening of all year eight and year nine pupils. This allows the school to identify any students who may "slip under the radar". So far it is felt that this is working - "we have had no surprises in our data".

Overall perceptions of WELL

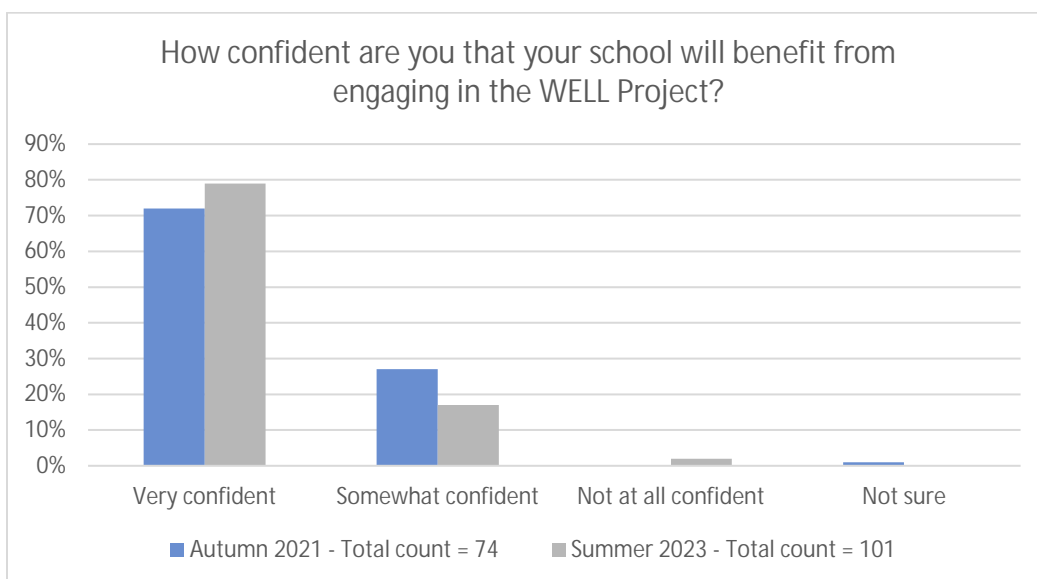
In year two, the WELL team and overall offer received strongly positive feedback, in terms of overall satisfaction, as shown in Chart 7, with 95% satisfied with the offer.

Chart 7: Headteachers' satisfaction with the WELL offer – summer 2023



Encouragingly, this positivity translated into increased levels of confidence that WELL will have a positive impact in schools. Chart 8, below, shows responses from both the 2021 and 2023 surveys to the question 'How confident are you that your school will benefit from engaging in the WELL project?' It shows an increasing level of confidence over time, rising from 72% 'Very confident' in 2021, to 79% in 2023.

Chart 8: Headteacher confidence that their school will benefit from engaging in the WELL project – 2021 and 2023



This improved confidence appears to reflect both improvements in how WELL has operated in year two, including through the streamlined PD offer, better communications and a clearer calendar of

activities, and improved confidence on the part of schools in terms of how they can access and benefit from this offer. The following quotes illustrate this journey:

WELL didn't feel that useful two to three years ago. But it has become incredibly useful in the inputs that we get... WELL's paperwork has streamlined, the deadlines have been published more, you now see a programme for what's coming up so that you can link your own school improvement into the inputs that you're getting and think about your review points... that's really shifted. (Senior leader, Case study - secondary)

WELL is on its own implementation journey. We are now getting to a point where it feels like an embedded part of our school development priorities. In the last year the nationally recognised expertise brought into West Cumbria has provided real impetus for change. Geography is so challenging in West Cumbria, and we are starting to get vibrant professional development close to home which increases the ability to access it. (Survey)

At various points in the 2023 survey, we asked respondents to provide additional open text comments, which we then coded to identify themes. A question at the end asked for any final reflections on the WELL project, with 40 out of 41 responses being overwhelmingly positive. We coded these under the five headings in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Positive engagement with WELL

Codes	N
Gratitude & Enjoyment	17
Funding	10
Support	8
Opportunity & Aspiration	7
Satisfaction with WELL Team	3

Throughout these comments there was a sense that respondents now fully understand and value the project and that many could see change developing within and beyond their schools as a result. It was regularly commented upon that sustainability of the programme was paramount to its success and that consistent energy and funding needed to be allocated to the project beyond its three-year lifespan:

I hope the commitment to supporting the work is secured for at least the next 10 years. It is only this longer-term commitment that will truly mean a more strategic approach can be taken to improving chances for our disadvantaged pupils. (Survey)

These responses indicated a number of benefits for schools from engaging in WELL, such as enabling a more focused approach to school development - "WELL has become our DRIVER in school development and school improvement" - and increasing the ability of schools to collaborate and network:

I really do think WELL is enabling so much more collaboration and thinking. It is steering us all in the direction of evidence-based research, informing school development priorities and embedding a reflective implementation approach to all school improvement priorities.
(Survey)

Comments from case study interviewees and survey respondents consistently highlighted the extent to which the WELL team was seen as credible and responsive:

They are a very understanding and supportive team who take the time to personalise their approach and I have found working with them both beneficial and rewarding. (Survey)

The case studies and wider interview data as well as our observations of WELL-run events all corroborated these findings, indicating that school leaders generally felt increasingly positive about the WELL project in year 2.

Challenges to engagement

As would be expected in any large and complex initiative of this kind, school leaders did also report some challenges to engagement and, very occasionally, critiques of the WELL approach.

In the survey, one question asked: 'Have you encountered any challenges in engaging with WELL?', to which 49% of respondents answered 'Yes'. These respondents were then asked to describe the challenges, via an open text option. We coded the forty-eight responses received to identify the five themes in Table 2, below.

Table 2: Challenges to engagement with WELL

Codes	N
Time & Workload	23
Staffing & Capacity	22
Understanding of WELL Programme/Terminology	9
Being a Small School	9
Pressures of the System	7

As might be expected, these challenges largely align with findings in the year one evaluation. Most of these challenges (Time & Workload, Staffing & Capacity, Being a Small School, Pressures of the System) are not issues that the WELL project can be expected to address on its own, although they are certainly issues that the WELL team can – and does – take into account in terms of how they work with schools.

The third issue ('Understanding of WELL Programme/Terminology') came through strongly in the year 1 report but was markedly less prominent in year two, no doubt reflecting the focus on

improving communication by the WELL team. Nevertheless, the comments below indicate areas that the project can continue to address in year three:

Information is lengthy and confusing despite the WOW Wednesdays. More and more staff seem to be employed but we are unclear on their roles. (Survey)

The programme can become a bit overwhelming and confusing as there are so many different elements to it. The emails come thick and fast and that sometimes gets too much to keep on top of when everything is so busy already. (Survey)

Challenges to engagement where school leadership capacity is weaker and/or distracted

A final theme to emerge in year two was around school leadership capacity. This came largely from the case study evidence and is thus based on a small sample of schools, but we are keen to explore whether this can be assessed more comprehensively through the evaluation in year three.

On the one hand, most of the year two case study schools demonstrated how they have built on their work in year one and are developing increasingly sophisticated approaches to evidence-informed implementation and improvement. In these schools, the rationale and evidence-base for selecting the intervention is clear, both in terms of why this is an important issue for the school to address and why the particular approach has been selected. Implementation in these schools is carefully planned and sequenced: appropriate staff are fully trained and thoughtfully deployed, resources (including time) are made available, data is tracked, and key staff have opportunities to come together to reflect, learn and adapt as they grapple with how to make the new approach work in practice. Critically, in these schools, the WELL-supported intervention work is integrated into a wider vision and evidence-informed improvement culture; meaning that senior leaders and staff at all levels not only support the initiative but can also articulate how it fits within their wider work and priorities.

Inevitably, the case study schools we visited were at different stages on this journey. In schools where the senior leadership capacity was strong the features outlined above were always apparent, even if to differing extents. In one school, the WELL-funded work displayed many of the features outlined above, but the school also faced a significant budget deficit and was in the midst of a staff restructure. Perhaps as a result, some members of staff we interviewed were only peripherally aware of the project, while others were ambivalent about the implications for their own practice. One member of staff had been tasked with developing a parallel initiative, but it was not clear whether or how this integrated with the WELL-funded activity. In another school, the headteacher had been off sick for much of the previous year, so engagement with WELL did not really get started until the 2022-23 academic year. The school was using its WELL grant to strengthen its IT facilities and practice, although this was starting from a low base. WELL funding had been used to purchase equipment and a relatively inexperienced teacher had been charged with developing the school's approach, however there were challenges around Wi-Fi connectivity and some staff were described as "resistant". The headteacher explained that they found completing the WELL plan "quite hard".

These examples suggest that where leadership capacity is weaker or distracted, WELL engagement and implementation within schools appears less strong. Such a finding is hardly surprising, and it chimes with findings from previous studies of large-scale efforts to develop evidence-informed practice (Gu et al, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to reflect on the implications if it means that while some schools are able to accelerate their improvement as a result of engagement with WELL, others are – potentially – left behind.

3.2 To what extent has school leadership and classroom teaching in schools in the west of Cumbria become more evidence-informed as a result of the WELL project?

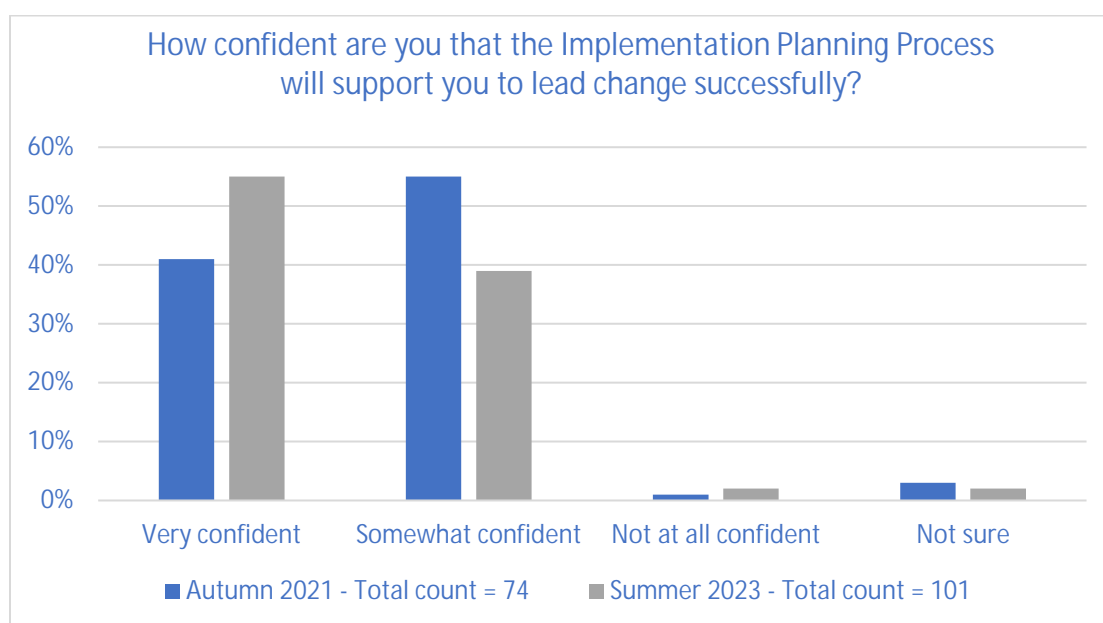
One of the aims of the WELL Programme is to encourage the use of evidence-based practice within schools in west Cumbria. In this section we draw on the survey, case studies, action research and observations to explore how schools have engaged with evidence as a result of WELL and how they are utilising evidence in their practice.

Implementation planning as a process for strengthening evidence-informed decision making

A key approach to strengthening evidence-based practice in WELL has been the requirement to adopt the EEF's implementation planning process to help school leaders identify and address a priority for their grant funding. This included a requirement to use standard tools, such as a planning proforma which is signed off by the WELL Director before a school can access its funding.

As shown in Chart 9, below, participants were positive about implementation planning in year 2, with 56% of survey respondents strongly agreeing that implementation planning will support successful change, and 40% feeling confident. This is a small increase on the year one report, where 41% were very confident and 55% were confident.

Chart 9: School leaders' views on Implementation Planning, 2021 and 2023



Five out of six case study schools were using the implementation planning approach with fidelity and in several of these it was clear that leaders were becoming more sophisticated in their use of the process and tools over time, for example by applying it across wider areas of school development planning beyond the WELL grant. This shift is potentially significant, since it is an example of how WELL could achieve sustained change in thinking and practice. The following extended quote helps to highlight why this is important: many, perhaps most, school leaders have tended historically to adopt approaches based on word of mouth or because another school that is seen to be high-performing (for example in terms of Ofsted) is doing it, so the move towards assessing the evidence-base underpinning any chosen approach reflects a significant change in their decision-making approach:

That's what was great about the WELL... we learned about the importance of research based evidence to impact on school improvement. Whereas before, you know, we would say things like, 'well, that school's doing OK with their reading - what scheme are they using?'... And they said 'yeah, it's really great, we're enjoying it'. You know, we weren't basing any of these big improvement decisions on absolutely tried and tested research and evidence. We weren't. Because actually, again, it's the nature of the job is you spin in 25 plates, you don't often have the time to do that. So that mindset is great now. So we go to the evidence base straight away... it's become the way we do things, I suppose. And it's onerous at times... let's face it, that paperwork... But, actually, going through the implementation process, looking at, you know, why is it we're wanting to, what are we wanting to change? What has led to us making that discovery or decision? And how are we gonna do it? What options have we got? That kind of process, um, the prep, the preparation kind of process is, is the bit that I think is now more embedded in an evidence based way. (Case study primary head)

This shift towards more sophisticated and integrated approaches to using implementation planning in schools in year two is particularly encouraging because in year one we heard some concerns around the technical language involved (e.g. active ingredients) and onerous paperwork required. Although a small minority of interviewees still found this to be the case in year two, our data overall indicates that the approach is now better understood. This was reflected in comments from the WELL central team:

The feedback I've had from the 24 schools I've visited shows that the overwhelming majority of those schools understand now that it's not a piece of paper, it's not a bureaucratic thing that you have to do just to get money, they see it as a process. (Project lead)

Growing sophistication in how school leaders understand and use evidence

The shift in year two towards greater confidence and sophistication in terms of how school leaders were using the implementation planning process was also reflected in wider evidence, all of which points to a more mature use of evidence by many (though not all) participating schools.

One example of this was in the 2023 survey, where we included two sets of questions that had previously been developed by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) on behalf of the EEF to assess research attitudes and use in schools (Nelson et al, 2017). NFER's survey was completed by a sample of teachers and leaders in 2017 (Walker et al, n.d.) – although it is important to note that our survey was completed only by headteachers, with a smaller sample and slightly different question wording, so the two surveys are not directly comparable.

Chart 10, below, shows responses from headteachers in the WELL summer 2023 evaluation survey to four statements developed by NFER. As can be seen, the responses are very positive, with around 90% of heads agreeing or strongly agreeing (and around 5% disagreeing) that research informs their leadership, that they know where to find research, that they can relate research to their school context, and that they use research to help decide on how to implement new approaches. The lowest response (although still with 80% agreeing) is to the statement on analysing research. Table 3 below, then shows responses to the same statements from NFER's national survey in 2017. While the two surveys are not comparable, they do suggest that school leaders in west Cumbria are now relatively confident in their use of research.

Chart 10: WELL school leaders' responses (2023) to statements from Nfer (2017) survey

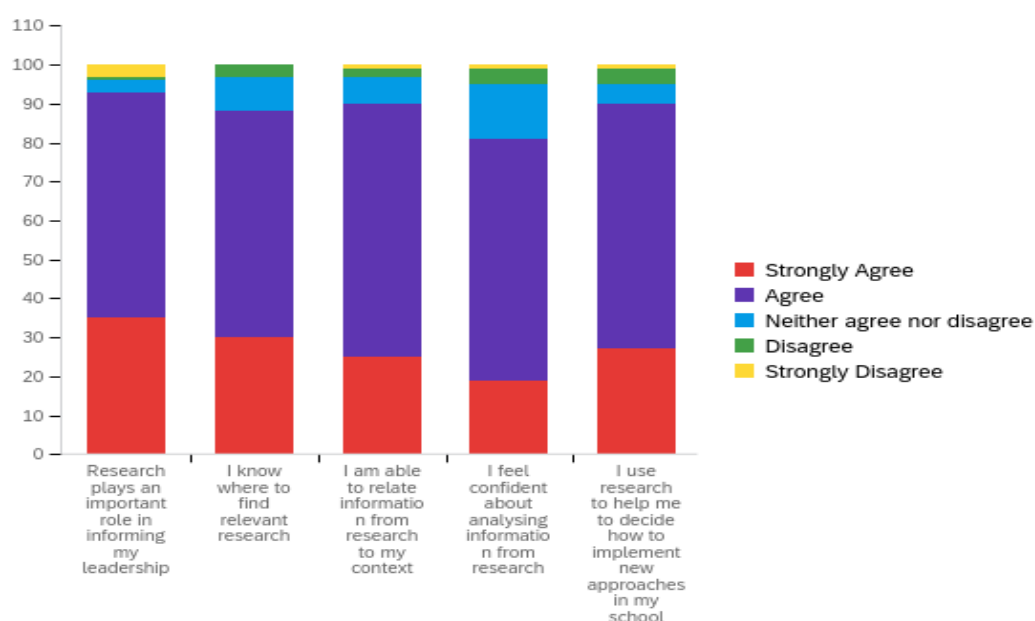
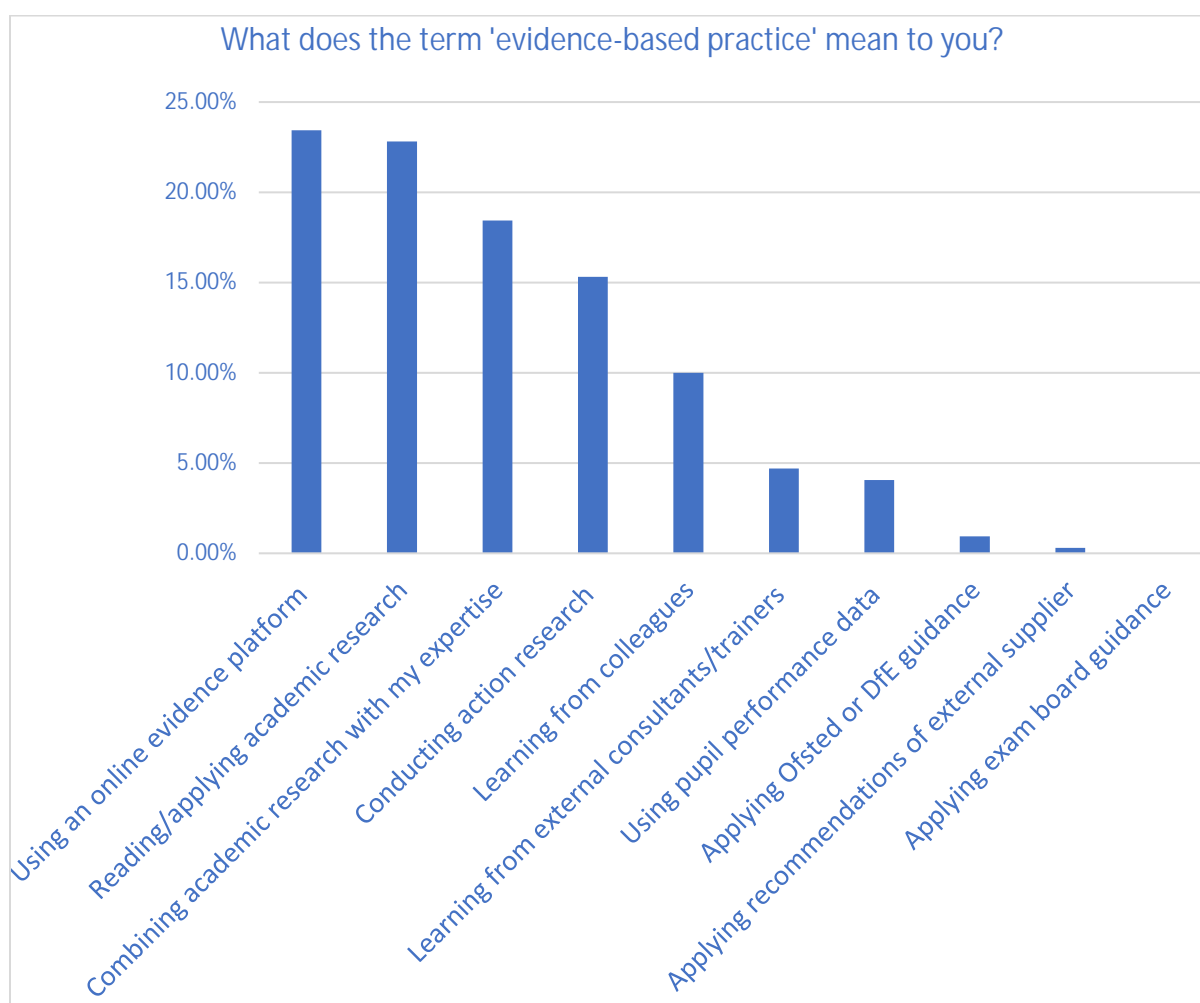


Table 3: EEF/Nfer National Survey 2017 – responses from teachers and leaders

- Research plays an important role in informing my/our teaching practice – 69% agree / strongly agree
- I know where to find relevant research – 70% agree / strongly agree
- I am able to relate information from research to my context – 77% agree / strongly agree
- I feel confident analysing info from research – 66% agree / strongly agree
- I use research to help me decide how to implement new approaches in the classroom – 68% agree / strongly agree

In a similar vein, we used a second question from the Nfer survey which asked leaders to select responses (from a list) to the question 'What does the term 'evidence-based practice mean to you?' Their responses are shown (using abbreviated wording) in Chart 11, below. The top three options selected by WELL survey respondents were: Using an online evidence platform/database (e.g. Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit) and applying the learning (23%), Reading and applying information from academic research or from working with researchers (23%), and Combining academic research evidence with my professional expertise (18%). Interestingly, these options were intended by the Nfer/EEF survey designers as the 'correct' responses, with the other options seen as less ideal interpretations of 'evidence-based practice'. In the 2017 national survey run by Nfer (Walker et al, n.d.) respondents were less likely to select these 'correct' answers, perhaps indicating a relative level of sophistication in terms of how WELL-supported leaders understand evidence-based practice.

Chart 11: WELL school leaders' responses (2023) to NFER (2017) survey question



More broadly, in several of the case studies and the action research, we saw various examples of schools adopting more sophisticated approaches to evidence – including, in a minority of cases, a preparedness to question and challenge simplistic interpretations of ‘what works’. One example of this was a case study primary school where the headteacher explained why they had selected the Sounds Write phonics programme, seeing it as preferable to government-sponsored phonics interventions because it introduces multiple ways of spelling a single sound together:

We looked at a number of programmes and I really like the Sounds Write programme, which is what we've all trained in and I really like the fidelity of the teaching and the style of their teaching and the fact that it's not only just a scheme that's been set up in England for England, it's a global scheme and it's come from a totally different starting point.
(Headteacher)

In the case study schools that were developing more sophisticated, whole school approaches to using evidence, it was clear that WELL was one – but not the only – source of inspiration for this. For example, the quote below, from a middle leader in a case study secondary school, captures how the school's culture and practice has changed over a period of ‘four or five years’, becoming more evidence-based. This reminds us that schools nationally appear to have become more evidence-

informed in recent years, not least as a result of the work of the EEF, with WELL work serving to complement and accelerate these changes in west Cumbria:

This isn't the school that I came into. It was very, very dated, very old fashioned when I first came here and in the last few years I'd say maybe four or five years it's picked up pace with sort of movement. What's happening nationally and thinking more about sort of from my perspective and what sort of research, you know, evidence based approach and much more unified approach. It's very different. (Head of Department, Case study secondary school)

Case study four, below, provides an overview of how one secondary school is developing its overall approach to evidence-informed practice, integrated with its WELL-supported reading intervention.

The action research strand of the evaluation provides an opportunity for schools to identify and explore their own enquiry questions, frequently related to assessing the progress and impact of their WELL-funded interventions in ways that go beyond collecting and reviewing assessment data, while still drawing on “naturally-occurring” evidence where possible. There were some alterations to the structure and approach for action research in year two: in particular, due to logistical concerns, there were fewer sessions conducted in-person, with a greater emphasis on online opportunities to interact (3 online, 1 in person session). Although this made it possible for a larger number of participants to attend sessions, the quality and depth of discussions appears to have been reduced. Perhaps as a result, the survey and case studies revealed mixed views on these sessions, from “not useful” to “really good”. Schools were encouraged to participate in action research by the WELL team, in particular those involved in the Cumbrian Award, although participation was voluntary. Several of the participating schools focussed their action research on their use of the Great Teaching Toolkit. Case study 5, below, provides an example of a primary school that used action research to evaluate the progress and impact of its WELL intervention. A separate report by CUREE, based on data captured during the action research sessions and an analysis of the research posters produced by schools, indicates growing sophistication in terms of how participating leaders are thinking about and using evidence to inform collective learning and improvement across schools.

Case Study Four – a sophisticated approach to developing evidence-based practice across a secondary school

The Senior Deputy at this secondary school describes developments aimed at shifting the school culture and approach to enhance inclusion and cross-curricular working – with the WELL-funded Reciprocal Reading literacy project as a key element. “Leadership comes in phases I think and this is the next phase”. This work includes both strategic elements (such as looking at the shape of the workforce needed to support inclusion), chalk-face culture change elements (such as PD sessions on knowing every child in your class well) and efforts to shift the overall culture (for example through an increased emphasis on strengthening middle leadership across the school).

The Deputy Head feels that the school is ‘research rich’. She explains that WELL’s implementation planning sessions have enabled her to think more strategically as a leader, and that the resources provided through these sessions have been invaluable. She tries to spend time really thinking things through using the implementation training and approach, although this is hard to do as it goes against the grain of busy life in schools. A recent ‘mocksted’ review of the school highlighted that she was strongest in the areas where she had found time to complete the implementation planning approach.

More broadly, the school’s leadership team is working to develop a reflective, evidence and data-informed culture across the school - “People become really dismissive of data and outcomes. But we’re trying to shift the culture on that as well and say actually it’s information, they’re not just numbers that you put into the system. Those numbers mean something. Those gaps can tell us something” (Deputy Head).

Alongside the focus on evidence, there is a focus on learning: “That’s really important to us because we’re very clear that we don’t want people to have to go and manipulate information to tell us a really positive story. Things don’t go right in life”. (Deputy Head)

One of the assistant heads is responsible for staff training and development and uses skills learned from their doctorate to remain abreast of current research. She will sometimes circulate research articles, but the school mostly utilises resources from the EEF. Staff who were interviewed felt that they had an understanding of how to access evidence and that they were well supported by leadership in this area. There is also a staff library where staff are invited to share resources, and prior to Covid, staff were encouraged and sometimes funded to attend ResearchEd conferences.

Case study 5: A research-engaged small primary, using action research to evaluate the impact of its WELL-funded intervention

This primary school is much smaller than average, with mixed age classes. It serves a mixed community of generational farming communities and professionals.

The head teacher is strongly research-engaged, regularly interacting with blogs, journal articles, and EEF resources, although they explain that their current role does not enable them as much time to engage with research as they would like. The school's small staff are also research engaged, in particular the Y5/6 teacher, who identified as a "research practitioner". This engagement is balanced with a healthy scepticism: "just because something does well in research doesn't always mean it's appropriate for your particular situation" (teacher).

Reciprocal Reading had been successfully introduced before WELL, but the school's data revealed "a discrepancy between our phonics and spelling and reading", so the staff decided to adopt Sounds Write through WELL funding in order to improve the phonics offer. This approach was introduced for all year groups except Year 6 from September 2022.

The Sounds Write online training for all staff was extensive – 40-50 hours in total. To make this possible, the head "rightfully rejigged the timetable so that we would all basically get a day a week of teaching time, of paid time, where someone else would cover your class, and you exclusively did your Sounds Write training that day" (teacher). This training involved teachers from around the world, with participants recording their teaching and then giving feedback to each other. It is described as "formulaic and prescribed, but I guess, looking back, it had to be".

The head teacher found the EEF implementation training to be useful but somewhat basic for anyone who is already research engaged, but expressed positivity about the action research sessions, finding them insightful and informative.

The Y5/6 teacher led the internal evaluation of Sounds Write, using the action research framework "to measure how we're going and what we need to do next". This has included a book scrutiny for a sample of children in each year group, looking at specific words that children often spell wrongly, to see whether this has improved. It also includes pupil voice feedback and a termly spelling, punctuation and grammar progress tests. The school expects impact to emerge more strongly over time as children progress through the new approach but are encouraged that 81% of pupils are making good or better progress on these assessments. Another measure is the spelling age test, which has been run three times since March 2021:

"What we've seen is a huge difference between the two most recent tests. So you would expect between October 22 and February 23, three to four months of progress. But what we found is that the younger ages are making ten months of progress on average, and the older age groups are making as much as a year and three months of progress. In some pupils it's been as much as 2 1/2 three years of progress. And this has been with people who've been stubbornly stuck at maybe 5 or below 5 despite multiple interventions." (Y5/6 Teacher)

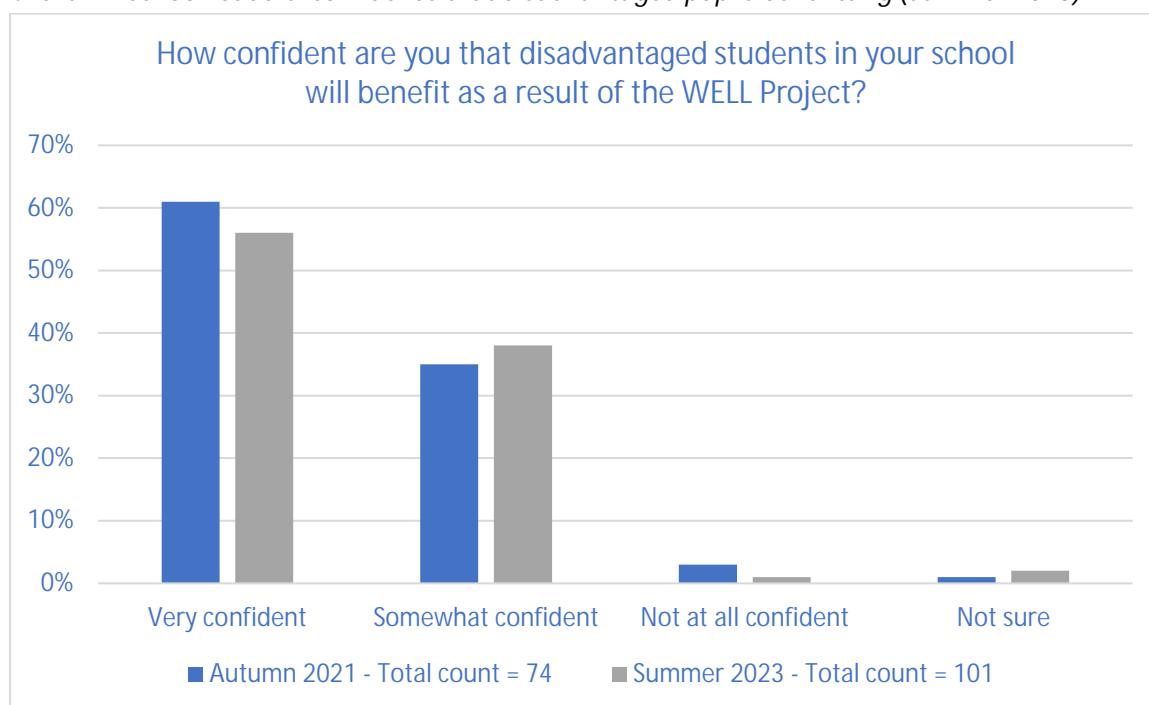
3.3 To what extent has WELL enabled improved pupil outcomes, in particular in terms of the progress and attainment of disadvantaged pupils?

This section focusses mainly on the findings from the impact evaluation, but we start by briefly highlighting relevant findings from the Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE).

Implementation and Process Evaluation findings

The focus of WELL on disadvantage, including through targeted funding, implementation planning and a broader PD programme which includes a focus on well-being, has ensured that schools are focussed on meeting the needs of disadvantaged children as a priority, while also strengthening schools' capacity in wider areas. The year one report highlighted how schools were beginning to see an upward trend for pupils involved with WELL funded interventions, and findings from year two reinforce this, with some evidence that progress and attainment were progressing. For example, in autumn 2021, 96% of survey respondents were confident that engagement with WELL would benefit disadvantaged pupils, and in summer 2023 this confidence had been sustained, with 97% confident (Chart 12).

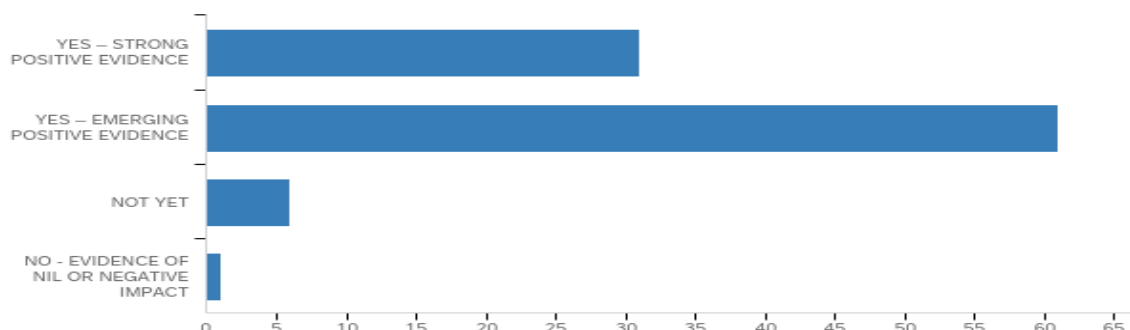
Chart 12: School leaders' confidence that disadvantaged pupils benefitting (Summer 2023)



When asked if WELL-funded activities were showing evidence of impact, including for disadvantaged pupils, 31% of survey respondents in summer 2023 indicated they were seeing strong evidence of this, while 61% were seeing emerging positive evidence (Chart 13). Interestingly, all 11 of the secondary schools responding to the survey indicated that they have strong positive evidence of impact. Respondents were asked to add more detail on the in-school evidence collected, with the most common sources being pupil assessment data.

Chart 13: School-reported evidence of impact from WELL (summer 2023 survey)

As a result of implementing your WELL-funded plans this year are they showing evidence of impact, including for disadvantaged pupils?



This picture of growing evidence of impact within schools was reflected in most of the case study data (e.g. see Case studies 2 and 5), although several also acknowledged that their interventions were not 'quick fixes' (i.e. focussed only on Year 6 or Year 11 students etc.) and so would take time for impact to feed through into improved results. In a similar vein, the focus on well-being, enabled through WELL, was seen as providing the conditions for disadvantaged students to learn and make progress, although this too would take time to be seen in terms of impact:

Following the pandemic, we faced new challenges. The WELL funding has enabled us to meet the emotional needs of our most vulnerable pupils, which in turn frees up teachers to focus on teaching and learning, so the benefits are far-reaching. (Headteacher)

Impact evaluation

As with our year 1 report, given that the WELL activities are spread across primary and secondary schools, we have focused on several measures to assess how treated schools (both targeted and universal offer schools) have fared in the second year of the programme. Our outcome variables of interest remain:

- percentage achieving the expected standard in phonics;
- average scaled scores in reading and mathematics at KS2;
- average attainment 8; and average progress 8 scores.

We provide descriptive headline figures from WELL schools based in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland against all schools in Cumberland, Westmorland and Furness, and nationally. We also present the results of a matched sample of schools. The methodology is outlined briefly below.¹¹

Several caveats are important to keep in mind. In the 2022/23 academic year, while improving outcomes in specific subject areas and improving teaching and learning overall were core foci for WELL schools, the design of the programme is for sustainable school-led improvement across a wide range of areas. Most WELL interventions are not geared specifically at exam classes/year groups and many address well-being issues, which we would not expect to lead to rapid improvements in exam

¹¹ For a more detailed description of the impact methodology see the year one report – Greany et al, 2022

grades. As such any 'treatment' effects are likely to be diffused, so some caution should be exercised in interpreting the findings below.

Furthermore, while academic activities in 2022-23 were not directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the long-term impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning in schools is still being felt. The impact of the pandemic means that we have limited data from 2020 and 2021 when the Key Stage tests were cancelled, and GCSEs were awarded by teacher/centre-based assessment only. We continue to collect phonics and Key Stage 2 data from Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness and collect KS4 data from publicly available data published by the Department for Education. These issues mean that caution should be applied when interpreting the analyses here.¹²

In terms of approach, we used the previously created (i.e. year one) matched sample of similar schools to compare with WELL project schools using non-parametric matching. This allows us to assess how WELL project schools have achieved in the programme years of 2022 and 2023 when compared with an equivalent group of schools. We accessed school-level statistics for all Cumbrian schools (268 primary schools) from Cumbria County Council in 2022 and followed up with a request to the new Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness councils for the 2023 data. As before, for secondary schools, the number of schools within the two council areas is low at just 39 open schools. Therefore, we continue to use a national sample of schools to compare school performance.

The aim of statistical matching is to create a synthetic, similar, and well-balanced control group based on key observable characteristics. The matching process is an iterative process that is a compromise between complexity and minimising imbalance (i.e. where the standardised average differences between the two conditions are minimised – ideally within 0.1 standard deviations). As outlined in the year one report, we matched schools on several key characteristics including: the type of school (academy/maintained etc), number of pupils, urban vs rural location, latest OFSTED rating, intake gender, percentage Free School Meals (FSM), and average student achievement at the school over a three-year period immediately before the pandemic. For primary schools, we adopted nearest neighbour matching using mahalanobis distance without replacement, and for secondary schools, the same, but with replacement.

Given the availability of both the 2022 baseline and 2023 outcome data, we proceeded to investigate the impact of the programme using a multivariate multilevel model. This simultaneously models multiple outcomes, gaining the advantage of being able to compare coefficients between outcomes and allowing the individual models to gain strength from the other, potentially shrinking the uncertainty around parameter estimates.

How have schools in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland performed?

In this section we provide a description of school performance in Allerdale and Copeland overall, which is compared with Cumbrian/Cumberland and Westmorland and Furness and national averages

¹² The impact evaluation in years one and two has relied on national assessment data aggregated at school level. This approach does not allow for targeted assessments of pupil progress in specific areas that have been the focus of WELL-supported interventions. In year 3, WELL is supporting many secondary schools to include additional pupil assessments of progress in reading, which we will draw on in the year three evaluation.

(i.e. not based on a matched sample) both historically, for the 2022 baseline and for 2023. As such it revisits some of the findings reported in the year one report. It is also summarised in

Table 6 below.

Phonics

Table 4: Summary of Phonics Outcome raw measures.

Measure	Allerdale & Copeland	Cumbria	Cumberland	Westmorland and Furness	National
Phonics (2018-2021)	78.5%	78.3%	-	-	80.6%
Phonics Disadvantaged (2018-2021)	65.7%	64.4%	-	-	69%
Phonics (2022)	73.1%	72.5%	-	-	75.5%
Phonics Disadvantaged (2022)	57.2%	58%	-	-	62.5%
Phonics (2023)	78.6%	-	77.4%	79.1%	78.9%
Phonics Disadvantaged (2023)	66.7%	-	62.5%	62.6%	66.7%

For Phonics testing we have the full range of historical data from 2018 through to 2023. As discussed in the Year 1 report, between 2018 and 2021, Allerdale and Copeland performed slightly above the Cumbrian average with 78.5% of pupils achieving the expected level, although both Allerdale and Copeland, and Cumbria more generally (78.3%), were below the national average of 80.6%. Amongst disadvantaged pupils 65.7% achieved the expected standard, against a Cumbrian average of 64.4% and a national average of 69%.

In 2022, the previous historical trend persisted, with Allerdale and Copeland schools averaging approximately 73.1% of pupils achieving the expected level, Cumbria as a whole trailing slightly with an average of 72.5%, and both slightly below the national average of 75.5%. For disadvantaged pupils 57.2% achieved the expected standard, against a Cumbrian average of 58% and a national average of 62.5%.

In 2023, the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland averaged 78.6%, against a Cumberland average of 77.4%, a Westmorland and Furness average of 79.1%, and a national average of 78.9%. Amongst disadvantaged pupils the average was 66.7% against a Cumberland average of 62.5%, a Westmorland and Furness average of 62.6% and a national average of 66.7%.

Amongst the 39 WELL-supported 'Phonics schools', the historical average between 2018 and 2021 was 81.8%, 83.1%, 77.3%, and 73.5% respectively, giving a simple four-year average of 78.9%. In 2022, WELL Phonics schools averaged 71.7%, and by 2023 this had increased substantially to 81.2%, although an additional 10 schools have invested in Phonics between 2022 and 2023.

Key Stage 2

Table 5: Summary of Key Stage 2 Outcome raw measures.

Measure	Allerdale & Copeland	Cumbria	Cumberland	Westmorland and Furness	National
KS2 Reading (2016-2019)	104.5	104.5	-	-	104
KS2 Mathematics (2016-2019)	103.5	103.6	-	-	104.1
KS2 Reading Progress (2016-2019)	0.35	0.12	-	-	0.01
KS2 Mathematics Progress (2016-2019)	-0.86	-0.71	-	-	0.01
KS2 Reading Progress Disadvantaged (2016-2019)	-0.72	-0.7	-	-	-0.68
KS2 Mathematics Progress Disadvantaged (2016-2019)	-1.63	-1.47	-	-	-0.63
KS2 Reading (2022)	104.0	104.5	-	-	104.8
KS2 Mathematics (2022)	102.0	102.7	-	-	103.8
KS2 Reading Progress (2022)	-0.46	-0.3	-	-	0.07
KS2 Mathematics Progress (2022)	-1.40	-0.96	-	-	0.07
KS2 Reading Disadvantaged (2022)	102.5	102.1	-	-	102.2
KS2 Mathematics Disadvantaged (2022)	99.6	99.9	-	-	100.8
KS2 Reading Disadvantaged Progress (2022)	-0.32	-0.99	-	-	-0.84
KS2 Mathematics Disadvantaged Progress (2022)	-2.37	-2.10	-	-	-1.17
KS2 Reading (2023)	105.0	-	104.5	105.7	105.1
KS2 Mathematics (2023)	102.8	-	102.8	103.7	104.2
KS2 Reading Progress (2023)	-0.08	-	-0.46	0.09	0.04
KS2 Mathematics Progress (2023)	-1.15	-	-1.15	-0.82	0.04
KS2 Reading Disadvantaged (2023)	102.3	-	102.2	102.7	102.4
KS2 Mathematics Disadvantaged (2023)	99.8	-	99.6	101.1	101.3
KS2 Reading Disadvantaged Progress (2023)	-0.37	-	-0.64	-0.35	-0.87
KS2 Mathematics Disadvantaged Progress (2023)	-1.67	-	-2.22	-1.39	-1.07

We have historical data between 2016-2019, along with 2022 and 2023 data.

For the former, Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged 104.5 on the reading scaled score, against a Cumbrian average of 104.5 and a national average of 104. For the mathematics scaled score, Allerdale and Copeland schools scored 103.5 against a Cumbrian average of 103.6, and a national average of 104.1. For reading progress, Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged 0.35 against a Cumbrian average of 0.12, and a national average of 0.01. For mathematics progress it was -0.86 against a Cumbrian average of -0.71, and a national average of 0.01. Amongst disadvantaged pupils they averaged -0.72 for the reading average progress score against a Cumbrian average of -0.7, and a national average of -0.68. For mathematics progress, the schools averaged -1.63, against a Cumbrian average of -1.47, and a national average -0.63.

In 2022, Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged 104.0 in reading against a Cumbrian average of 104.5, and a national average of 104.8. In mathematics they averaged 102 points, against a Cumbrian

average of 102.7 and a national average of 103.8. For reading progress schools averaged -0.46, against a Cumbrian average of -0.3, and a national average of 0.07. In mathematics progress the average was -1.40 against a Cumbrian average of -0.96, and a national average of 0.07. Amongst disadvantaged pupils, Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged 102.5 in reading against a Cumbrian average of 102.1 and a national average of 102.2. They also averaged 99.6 in Mathematics against a Cumbrian average of 99.9, and a national average of 100.8. For reading progress the schools averaged -0.32 for the disadvantaged pupils, against a Cumbrian average of -0.99, and a national average -0.84. In mathematics the progress score was -2.37 against a Cumbrian average of -2.10, and a national average -1.17.

In 2023, schools in the former district of Allerdale and Copeland averaged 105.0 in reading against a Cumberland average of 104.5, a Westmorland and Furness average of 105.7, and a national average of 105.1. For mathematics, schools in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland averaged 102.8 against a Cumberland average of 102.8, a Westmorland and Furness average of 103.7, and a national average of 104.2. For reading progress schools scored -0.08, against a Cumberland average of -0.46, a Westmorland and Furness average of 0.09, and a national average of 0.04. In mathematics the average progress score was -1.15 against a Cumberland average of -1.15, a Westmorland and Furness average of -0.82, and a national average of 0.04. For disadvantaged pupils, schools in the former district of Allerdale and Copeland averaged 102.3, with the Cumberland local authority average marginally lower at 102.2 and the Westmorland and Furness being marginally higher at 102.7. The national average was in between the two with a value of 102.4. For Mathematics, the average for Allerdale and Copeland schools was 99.8, with the Cumberland average again marginally lower at 99.6, the Westmorland and Furness average marginally higher at 101.1, and the national average at 101.3. Lastly with the disadvantaged progress scores, schools in Allerdale and Copeland averaged -0.37 for reading compared to a Cumberland average of -0.64, a Westmorland and Furness average of -0.35, and a national average of -0.87. For Mathematics Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged -1.67, compared to a Cumberland average of -2.22, a Westmoreland and Furness average of -1.39, and a national average of -1.07.

Key Stage 4

Table 6: Summary of GCSE Outcome raw measures.

Measure	Allerdale & Copeland	Cumbria	Cumberland	Westmorland and Furness	National
KS4 Attainment 8 (2016-2019)	44.3	46.4	-	-	46.6
KS4 Attainment 8 Disadvantaged (2016-2019)	35.6	35.2	-	-	36.9
KS4 Progress 8 (2016-2019)	-0.22	-0.12	-	-	0.02
KS4 Progress 8 Disadvantaged (2016-2019)	-0.64	-0.63	-	-	-0.43
KS4 Attainment 8 (2022)	42.5	47.4	-	-	48.8
KS4 Attainment 8 Disadvantaged (2022)	35.3	35.3	-	-	37.6
KS4 Progress 8 (2022)	-0.58	-0.18	-	-	-0.03

KS4 Progress 8 Disadvantaged (2022)	-0.92	-0.83	-	-	-0.55
KS4 Attainment 8 (2023)	41.5		43.2	46.2	46.4
KS4 Attainment 8 Disadvantaged (2023)	-0.44		-0.28	-0.1	-0.03
KS4 Progress 8 (2023)	32.5		31.6	32.4	34.9
KS4 Progress 8 Disadvantaged (2023)	-0.87		-0.94	-0.73	-0.57

For the period 2016-2019, this showed Allerdale and Copeland schools fluctuating above and below the Cumbrian average while trailing the national average by a small margin. For average Attainment 8 point score, Allerdale and Copeland schools scored 44.3 against a Cumbrian average of 46.4 and a national average of 46.6. However, amongst disadvantaged pupils, the schools averaged a score of 35.6, against a Cumbrian average of 35.2 and a national average of 36.9. For Progress 8, Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged a score of -0.22 compared to a Cumbrian average of -0.12 and a national average of 0.02. With disadvantaged pupils, Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged a score of -0.64 compared to a Cumbrian average of -0.63 and a national average of -0.43.

In 2022 it appears that Allerdale and Copeland schools were particularly impacted by the pandemic. For Attainment 8 they had an average point score of 42.5, against a Cumbrian average of 47.4 and a national average of 48.8. For disadvantaged pupils the average for Allerdale and Copeland was the same as the Cumbrian average of 35.3, compared to a national average of 37.6. On Progress 8, Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged a score of -0.58 against a Cumbrian average of -0.18 and a national average of -0.03. For disadvantaged pupils, Allerdale and Copeland schools averaged -0.92 compared to -0.83 for Cumbria more generally and -0.55 for England as a whole. However, some caution should be exercised with Progress 8 for disadvantaged pupils, as the three-year average disguises a negative trend in England and Cumbria more generally, and this is a pattern that has continued post-pandemic.

In 2023, schools in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland averaged an Attainment 8 point score of 41.5, against a Cumberland average of 43.2, a Westmorland and Furness average of 46.2, and a national average of 46.4. For Progress 8, the average was -0.44, against a Cumberland average of -0.28, a Westmorland and Furness average of -0.1, and a national average of -0.03. Amongst disadvantaged pupils the Attainment 8 average was approximately 32.5, against a Cumberland average of 31.6, a Westmorland and Furness average of 32.4 and a national average of 34.9. Lastly for Progress 8 the disadvantaged point score of -0.87, a Cumberland average of -0.94, a Westmorland and Furness average of -0.73 and a national average of -0.57.

How have WELL-supported schools performed against a matched sample?

For primary schools, Table 7 presents the results from a matched sample analysis of schools modelling the percentage achieving the expected level in phonics in 2022 and 2023 simultaneously, allowing for the direct comparison of coefficients between the years. The statistical controls in the model remain the same across both outcome variables – whether the school is a WELL “treatment” school or a synthetic control, a mean centred average historical percentage achieved in phonics between 2019 and 2021, whether they were designated as a phonics school, whether their location is rural or urban, and a mean centred percentage FSM score. We note that the model’s estimated parameters are somewhat sensitive to the matching specification, although the 95% uncertainty intervals remain similar across different specifications.

The intercept for the control condition was 74.3% in 2022 and 77.3% in 2023 with an average treatment effect of 0.2 in 2022 and 0.8% in 2023. Both sets of uncertainty intervals cross the 0 boundary, indicating that under classical statistical significance these treatment effects would not be considered significant. We note that modelling the two simultaneously did alter the point estimate for the 2022 treatment effect, but the 95% uncertainty intervals remain similar. In a nutshell, with the current data collected we cannot discern whether there is a difference between treatment and the synthetic control.

Table 7: School-level percentage of pupils achieving the expected level in phonics in 2022 and 2023 modelled simultaneously, matched sample comparison between Allerdale and Copeland primary schools against the broader Cumbrian sample with similar key characteristics.

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Percent of pupils achieving the expected level in 2022</i>		<i>Percentage of pupils achieving the expected level in 2023</i>	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>
Intercept	74.3	70.6, 77.8	77.3	73.2, 81.4
Treatment	0.2	-5.1, 5.4	0.8	-5.8, 7.0
Average Percent Achieved in Phonics in 2019-2021	0.4	0.2, 0.6	0.4	0.2, 0.6
Well Phonics School: Yes	1.4	-6.3, 8.8	-1.4	-9.0, 6.2
Urban Location: Yes	1.2	-5.1, 7.7	4.6	-2.6, 11.7
Percentage FSM	-0.2	-0.5, 0.0	-0.1	-0.4, 0.2
N			166	
σ^2		247.3		294.2
ρ			0.1	

For the KS2 analysis, the simultaneous modelling of the baseline and 2023 reading scales scores is presented in Table 8, with the historical reading average, rural vs. urban location, and percentage FSM included in the model controls. For the 2022 reading outcome, with this new modelling approach the average score for the matched control condition after the covariate adjustment was 104.6, with the average treatment effect was estimated at -0.3 points with an uncertainty interval of -1.4 – 0.8. As with the phonics modelling the uncertainty interval crossed the 0 boundary and so in classical statistical terms the result would be considered non-significant with the current evidence. For the 2023 outcome the treatment coefficient was marginally smaller at -0.2, but the uncertainty interval of -1.4-0.9 crossed the 0 boundary and would not be considered significant with the current evidence. In a nutshell, with the current data collected we cannot discern whether there is a difference between treatment and the synthetic control.

Table 8: School-level Reading scaled scores in 2022 and 2023, matched sample comparison between Allerdale and Copeland primary schools against Cumbrian schools with similar key characteristics

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Reading Average Scaled Score in 2022</i>		<i>Reading Average Scaled Score in 2023</i>	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>

Intercept	104.6	103.8, 105.4	105.8	105.0, 106.7
Treatment	-0.3	-1.4, 0.8	-0.2	-1.4, 0.9
Reading Average	0.0	-0.1, 0.1	0.0	-0.1, 0.1
Urban Location: Yes	-0.1	-2.0, 1.7	-0.5	-2.5, 1.4
Percentage FSM	-0.1	-0.1, 0	-0.1	-0.1, 0.0
N			143	
σ^2		9.9		11.1
ρ			0.4	

For the mathematics scaled scores analysis which simultaneously modelled the 2022 and 2023 scores presented in

Table 9, with this new modelling approach the average treatment effect was estimated at 0.1 in 2022 with an uncertainty interval of -0.9, 1.2, slightly lower than previously reported, but with a similar interval, again crossing the 0 boundary and would not be considered significant in classical statistical terms. For the 2023 outcome, the treatment effect was similar with 0.1 difference between treatment and control, however the uncertainty interval remained between -0.9 and 1, again indicating that with the current evidence we cannot discern a clear positive treatment effect.

Table 9: School-level Mathematics Scaled Scores in 2022, matched sample comparison between Allerdale and Copeland primary schools against Cumbrian schools with similar key characteristics

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Mathematics Average Scaled Score in 2022</i>		<i>Mathematics Average Scaled Score in 2023</i>	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>
Intercept	102.1	101.3, 102.9	103.0	102.3, 103.8
Treatment	0.1	-0.9, 1.2	0.1	-0.9, 1.0
Maths Average	0.0	-0.1, 0.1	0.0	-0.1, 0.1
Urban Location: Yes	0.4	-1.4, 2.2	0.6	-1.0, 2.2
Percentage FSM	-0.1	-0.1, 0.1	-0.1	-0.1, 0.0
N			143	
σ^2		9.6		8.2
ρ			0.4	

For secondary schools, Tables 10-13 show the results from the matched analysis models for four core outcomes of the school-level averages of Attainment 8 and Progress 8 for all pupils and those from disadvantaged backgrounds in 2022 and 2023, controlling for the treatment condition and percentage of FSM pupils.

Starting with all pupils (Table 1010), with Attainment 8, we can see the control condition average score of 48.8, and an average treatment effect on the treated of -3.2 points for the WELL schools, with an interval of -6.2 to -0.2. In 2023, this estimate had decreased slightly to -2.8 points, albeit with a larger uncertainty interval of -0.6 to 0.6. Given that this crossed the 0 boundary, there is no longer a clear negative difference between the treatment and synthetic control schools. This could be a potential sign of a narrowing of the gap between the treatment and synthetic control schools and we will need to look at subsequent data to understand the longer-term trends.

Table 10: School-level Attainment 8 scores in 2022 and 2023, matched sample comparison between Allerdale and Copeland secondary schools against national schools with similar key characteristics

Parameter	Attainment 8 in 2022		Attainment 8 in 2023	
	Estimate	95% uncertainty interval	Estimate	95% uncertainty interval
Intercept	48.8	47.0, 50.6	45.2	43.2, 47.2
Treatment	-3.2	-6.2, -0.2	-2.8	-6.1, 0.6
Percentage FSM	-0.6	-0.8, -0.5	-0.6	-0.7, -0.4
N			33	
σ^2		17.5		22.83
ρ			0.7	

For Progress 8 presented in Table 11 in 2022 the control condition average score was 0, with an average treatment effect of -0.4, with an uncertainty interval of -0.7 - -0.1. For 2023, this was unchanged with the same uncertainty interval bound away from 0, indicating a clear negative difference between the two conditions. For Progress 8 negative differences between the WELL treatment and matched control groups thus remain persistent, following the pattern identified in year one of the evaluation.

Table 11: School-level Progress 8 scores in 2022 and 2023, matched sample comparison between Allerdale and Copeland secondary schools against national schools with similar key characteristics

Parameter	Progress 8 in 2022		Progress 8 in 2023	
	Estimate	95% uncertainty interval	Estimate	95% uncertainty interval
Intercept	0.0	-0.2, 0.21	0.0	-0.2, 0.2
Treatment	-0.4	-0.7, -0.1	-0.4	-0.7, -0.1
Percentage FSM	0.0	-0.1, 0.0	0.0	0.0, 0.0
N			33	
σ^2		0.2		0.2
ρ			0.8	

Examining disadvantaged Attainment 8 scores presented in Table 52, in 2022 the control condition average score was 40.3, with an average treatment effect of -3.8, with an uncertainty interval of -7.1 to -0.5. By 2023, the estimate was -2.6, with an uncertainty interval of -6.2 to 1.1. This crosses the 0-boundary indicating there is no clear significant evidence of a difference between the two conditions. As with the Attainment 8 score across all pupils this could be a potential sign of a narrowing of the gap between the treatment and synthetic control schools and we will need to look at subsequent data to understand the longer-term trends.

Table 52: School-level Disadvantaged Attainment 8 scores in 2022 and 2023, matched sample comparison between Allerdale and Copeland secondary schools against national schools with similar key characteristics

Disadvantaged Attainment 8 in 2022	Disadvantaged Attainment 8 in 2023
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<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>
Intercept	40.3	38.4, 42.3	35.6	33.5, 37.8
Treatment	-3.8	-7.1, -0.5	-2.6	-6.2, 1.1
Percentage FSM	-0.3	-0.5, -0.1	-0.3	-0.5, -0.1
N			33	
σ^2		21.9		26.4
ρ			0.4	

Lastly, for disadvantaged Progress 8 scores presented in Table 63, the average treatment effect in 2022 was -0.5, with an uncertainty interval of -0.8 to -0.1. This remained similar in 2023 with an average treatment effect of -0.4, and the same uncertainty interval. Both were bound away from 0, indicating evidence of a significant difference between the schools. As with the overall Progress 8 comparison, Progress 8 for disadvantaged students shows negative differences between the WELL treatment and matched control groups, again following the pattern identified in year one of the evaluation.

Table 63: School-level Disadvantaged Progress 8 scores in 2022 and 2023, matched sample comparison between Allerdale and Copeland secondary schools against national schools with similar key characteristics

<i>Parameter</i>	<i>Disadvantaged Progress 8 in 2022</i>		<i>Disadvantaged Progress 8 in 2023</i>	
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>95% uncertainty interval</i>
Intercept	-0.4	-0.6, -0.2	-0.5	-0.6, -0.3
Treatment	-0.5	-0.8, -0.1	-0.4	-0.8, -0.1
Percentage FSM	0.0	0.0, 0.0	0.0	0.0, 0.0
N			33	
σ^2		0.21		0.22
ρ			0.6	

The evidence so far suggests no clear effect being evident amongst primary schools in both 2022 and 2023. For secondary schools initial evidence which suggested negative differences between the treatment and synthetic control schools has disappeared for Attainment 8, although they remain with the Progress 8 measure.

3.4 To what extent have WELL-supported enrichment opportunities - particularly the Cumbrian Award - impacted on school practices and/or pupil aspirations for learning?

The Cumbrian Award (CA) is a new initiative supported by WELL (see Section 1 for details). The year one evaluation report did not address this question as CA was still being established in the 2021-22 academic year, partly due to set backs resulting from Covid-19. In year 2, 15% of school leaders responding to the survey said they have engaged with CA (see chart 5). This included a minority of the case study schools, although we were unable to investigate this engagement in depth due to issues with the availability of staff involved. In addition, CUREE ran an action research session attended by members of the core WELL/CA team and a small number of early adopter schools and we conducted two interviews with members of the WELL team involved in CA. The evidence drawn on here is thus not by any means comprehensive, but we include some relevant insights on progress.

Raising aspirations and expanding opportunities

As highlighted in Section 2, many schools across west Cumbria face challenges in terms of pupil and parental aspirations and opportunities, often reflecting issues of rurality and deprivation. As one interviewee put it: "I know a lot of families around here who I think their ambition for their child is to get a council house two doors down from them". As we note above, the focus on well-being – for example through Mental Health First Aid training – is helping schools to support students and families beyond the classroom. WELL has also supported other elements – such as the Careers Pilot Secondary – which aim to help schools raise awareness of possibilities and strengthen career planning for post-16 pupil premium students.

The Cumbrian Award is the most significant WELL intervention in this area. The Award seeks to ensure a broad and balanced curriculum and strengthen engagement in learning, by providing opportunities for young people to develop social skills and cultural capital. It is described as a multifaceted approach, similar to the Duke of Edinburgh Award, that seeks to engage pupils with the local area and to increase ambition:

In terms of what the award is on a practical level, it's 3 strands. You've got adventure, culture and enterprise, where the students have curriculums to follow and go through and which are fantastic. Because how I read them, they are quite nonprescriptive curriculums. So albeit they have to take a minimum sort requirement to get through the award and reach a minimum standard of work, it is very flexible to the individual school.

One of the Cumbrian Award facilitators explains that they are particularly passionate about the place-based aspects of the programme and its potential to engage pupils, based on their own less favourable experiences of being educated in Cumbria: *"it's probably important to get this across in your evaluation that I was young person that grew up in Cumbria, I really struggled with traditional education and I'm really, really passionate about being from Cumbria."*

Due to setbacks related to Covid-19, the Award is in its infancy - *"It has felt like a bit of a start-up project in many ways"* – but the project lead explained that significant progress has been made in 2022-23:

We've got 23 schools involved in actually rolling out that in Years 5 to 9, and I think that is 1000 / 1000 pupils. And of those, 200 of them are disadvantaged pupils and we're more

primary than secondary, so there's still, but we have had a Multi Academy Trust now that's asked about getting their entire trust involved from September, so that is promising.

School leaders who have engaged with the award have mostly reported positive experiences, with some believing that it is helping to break down attitudinal barriers:

To develop our children to a more well-rounded set of individuals and for them to see some of the school ethos actually in action... I think one of the things that the Cumbrian Award has really done for the school is given opportunity for culture to come to us. For us to be able to have a pot of money to go and explore the rich and wide, wonderful opportunities that are out there... in Cumbria.

There was a sense that participating in the award could benefit children's mental health and make them more aware of local social and environmental issues:

It's trying to contextualise for them, it's not quite charity begins at home, but actually there are people who are really in need and actually the poverty that we have isn't necessarily the poverty that's out there. There's a real poverty here as well and we can be part of that solution.

One secondary school felt that the award was beneficial in allowing pupils to broaden their horizons - *"we really buy into the philosophy of giving students those opportunities."* However, it was noted that engagement was relatively low, and pupils did not always share the same enthusiasm to participate - *"with the Cumbrian Awards stuff, it's not quite where I hoped it would be, and I think some of that might have been a lack of interest from our students, which was really disappointing."*

3.5 To what extent has WELL enabled the development of a more outward facing and collaborative school system in west Cumbria, with the potential for systemic learning and improvement to be sustained over time?

In Section 2, we outlined some key features of the school landscape in west Cumbria, including the sense of geographic isolation, rurality and small school challenges, and competition between schools for pupils (particularly at secondary). We also highlighted some of the ways in which schools collaborate with each other, including through local clusters, the secondary consortium and LASL (Local Alliance of System Leaders).

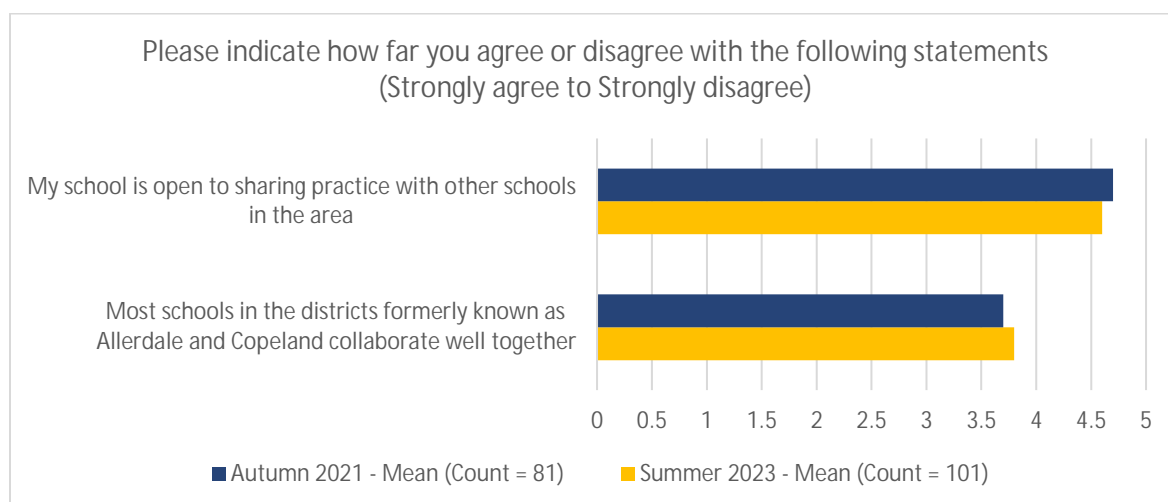
WELL has a specific aim to develop a more outward facing and collaborative school system and, Sections 1 and 2, we outlined some of the ways in which the team has been working to achieve this; for example by bringing in national partners and PD providers (e.g. Great Teaching Toolkit), encouraging schools to work together on shared themes (e.g. Reciprocal Reading) and by acting as a conduit and convenor for local and regional stakeholders, such as the Maths Hub, in particular through the new Education Research Alliance.

In this section, we assess how far these WELL initiatives are serving to develop a more outward facing and collaborative system. These findings build on the year one report, where we highlighted various positive developments as a result of WELL – not least the various opportunities for face to face training and events, which allowed people to re-connect after the pandemic. Here we draw mainly on the case studies, stakeholder interviews, observations and the survey. This year, the survey included some new questions on how and where schools engage in networks. We do not include the findings here, but will do so when we have repeated them in the final survey (summer 2024) and report, at which point we will be able to track changes over time. In the meantime, we are working with the WELL team and LASL to share these findings on networks with schools.

School collaboration and networks

In both the 2021 and 2023 surveys we asked leaders to respond to the statements 'My school is open to sharing practice with other schools in the area', and 'Schools in the districts of/formerly known as Allerdale and Copeland collaborate well together'. The mean response in each survey is shown in Chart 14, below. As can be seen, there have been minimal changes over time, with the vast majority of leaders saying their school is open to sharing practice, but considerably lower proportions agreeing that local collaboration is strong.

Chart 14: School leaders' views on sharing practice and collaboration (2021 and 2023)



Certainly, as we indicated in Section 2, collaboration between schools was sometimes inhibited by geographical factors, school capacity challenges, and/or competition:

You are sort of in competition with your local schools because there's only a certain amount of children to go around, but it's a friendly competition.

For some existing networks, structural changes – for example as schools joined different MATs - could be seen to impact on these groups: “The dynamics of the group are beginning to change. We've had quite a few changes of heads recently”.

Small schools were particularly likely to raise capacity issues as a barrier to collaboration, for example where the headteacher was also teaching. However, such issues were not insuperable: one head in a very small case study school was actively engaged in a range of international networks and projects, explaining:

I wanted us to be, you know, looking outward, looking globally and looking at how our children, who are in a very white rural school needed to understand their place in the world.

School leaders felt that collaboration across west Cumbria was effective where there were existing networks, such as the secondary Consortium. For primary schools in particular, there was evidence that clusters continued to be a valued network, as was the case with the year one report:

We'll meet probably every second Monday of every half term and we have a focus that we're going to look at. I've found it to be really quite supportive and quite interesting.

These groups seemed to allow headteachers who might otherwise feel quite isolated to connect, although the strength of clusters varied and it was not always clear how much such collaboration included staff at other levels. Other networks had more mixed reviews; for example, the LASL and CASL networks were not always well understood or could feel somewhat closed:

I've never really felt the impact of LASL ever. It's been there for a while and we had CASL. I think in a local cluster of heads, you know in a local cluster of schools you get things done and and I know their role is to certainly to have representatives and it feeds back to us and it keeps us in the loop. But it's very much almost like a communication, 'what's going on' kind of role, and it hasn't impacted, and this might be me, this might just be me being isolated and and quite happy in my own skin.

I'm not from Cumbria so I don't have that local sort of historical knowledge of people and who they are.

WELL's contribution to collaboration and an outward facing system

As indicated throughout this report, there is clear evidence that WELL is helping school leaders and staff to become more outward facing and to collaborate. WELL provides a unique space for schools and academies to come together, in particular through the in-person training days, but also through the encouragement in year two for schools to network around common themes/approaches (e.g. Great Teaching Toolkit and Reciprocal Reading).

WELL has also been instrumental in introducing a range of national providers to the area, connecting together existing hubs and providers, and building the capacity of the local system (e.g. through the Research School). The programme lead, Dale Hill, was seen by local system leaders to have developed a unique and widely welcomed role as a 'boundary spanner' (i.e. a professional who provides a bridge between organisations or areas of expertise) between western Cumbria and a range of regional and national stakeholders. There was thus a sense that the WELL project is helping to bridge gaps in communication and understanding:

We've had an interesting relationship with the local authority in Cumbria, in terms of it's a strong relationship, but actually there's been barriers to really having deep and meaningful conversations rather than maintaining some sort of superficial-ness. So, we were never really encouraged to be involved with WELL and then, on meeting Dale, I mean he's got so much energy and passion for it - we were brought in quite quickly at that point. (System leader)

I know a lot more about it because of the WELL work and it's obviously provided me with that local context and understanding the challenges specifically around that. So, I think that's been beneficial for me and my job, you know, not necessarily me bringing anything to the table. I think I've taken stuff away. (System leader)

However, the 2023 survey found that relatively few schools in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland engage with partners based outside western Cumbria, perhaps indicating that the system is not yet really outward facing. Furthermore, as the quote below indicates, this work is never complete and must be constantly reinvigorated, because the pressures on schools and leaders will always drive them to be insular:

It's really only getting started in terms of learning communities and broader, wider learning communities and I think, if anything, what would be needed would be for that to continue because we need to keep making connections. When your default setting is to return back to your familiar, comfortable place in school and deal with the issues in school. What we all need is to be forced to look outwards, and especially where we are, West Cumbria's massive and you are so naturally geographically isolated and you have so many issues to deal with in your local communities, which will be familiar issues. I would say on the coast of West Cumbria, you're everything to everybody in a school in West Cumbria and and so there's a lot to deal with. It's very easy to get pulled back in. It's a bit like sinking sand.

Conclusion and recommendations

This report builds on the year one report and the messages should be seen as complementary and cumulative. Overall, the findings present a very positive picture. Schools nationally face tremendous pressures as they work to support families and pupils in a context of austerity, the cost-of-living crisis, and the ongoing impact of the pandemic. These pressures are undoubtedly present in west Cumbria, but our findings indicate that WELL is helping schools to address pupil well-being issues, focus on ways to improve teaching, learning and outcomes, and remain collaborative and outward facing.

Such progress was by no means a given when WELL first started. Although the project's funding is generous, it is relatively small in the context of total school budgets, and it would be quite possible to imagine WELL being seen as peripheral by most schools. We think the opposite is true: school leaders and the staff who are directly engaged generally see WELL as an important vehicle for learning and improvement within their schools and for collaboration across the west of Cumbria. This is partly a reflection of how the core WELL team have operated to engage schools, with the use of grants linked to improvement planning as a particularly key element. Importantly, this report shows that school leaders see how the WELL team are also learning and improving in terms of how they operate, with improved communication and planning as significant developments in year two.

At this stage, while the majority of participating schools do report positive impact from their WELL-funded projects, it is not possible to discern impact on national test and exam outcomes at system level. As we note above, this is not surprising given the scale of the programme and its design as a long-term and systemic intervention.

We make the following recommendations for WELL to consider:

1. Help school leaders to evaluate how they are using evidence to support improvement and encourage the development of increasingly 'sophisticated' approaches: As a result of WELL, some schools are now developing sophisticated approaches to embedding evidence into whole school improvement thinking and practice. In these schools, responsibility for engaging with evidence is distributed, including at least one member of staff having responsibility for tracking the progress and impact of initiatives within the school. The WELL team has also become more sophisticated in its thinking about how to support evidence-informed improvement, adopting a pragmatic but focussed approach. In Year 3, there is scope to build on these growing strengths, in particular by: a) helping all WELL-funded schools to assess their use of research and ways in which this could be enhanced; b) helping schools to understand what a 'sophisticated' approach looks like and how they could move their own practice forward.
2. Support schools with more limited leadership capacity to embed evidence-informed improvement: In schools where leadership capacity is weaker and/or where wider challenges (e.g. funding) are impacting on school capacity, WELL grant funded initiatives are less developed and/or less integrated with whole-school improvement initiatives. Staff in these schools are sometimes unaware of WELL and/or ambivalent about the value of evidence-informed practice. The WELL team does not hold any statutory responsibilities in relation to these schools, so has limited opportunities to address capacity concerns, although the team is working to

coordinate with both the Local Authority and MAT leadership teams where appropriate. The WELL team already offers additional visits and coaching support for school leaders, particularly newly appointed heads, although take-up is not always good. In Year 3, it may be appropriate to consider making engagement with this support a requirement for schools with identified capacity challenges.

3. Ensure the focus on disadvantage is fully realised by helping leaders to see how WELL-supported work on well-being, enrichment and quality first teaching can best be aligned at school level: WELL has a strong focus on improving outcomes for disadvantaged children. In years 1 and 2, this has included a focus on helping all schools to strengthen their capacity to support mental health and well-being challenges, for example through the ELSA and Youth Mental Health First Aid training. Some schools have also used WELL funding to address related issues, such as attendance. Meanwhile, WELL is rightly focussed on strengthening evidence-informed practice in the classroom, given the importance of quality first teaching. In Year 3, WELL should continue to support this twin-track approach and should work with school leaders to explore how quality first teaching can best be combined with effective pastoral support and early help to ensure that all children, but particularly those facing additional challenges, can thrive.
4. Help schools to adopt common evaluation tools and approaches, building on the model of reading assessments in secondary, and use these to support programme-level learning: The adoption of common reading assessments (NGRT) in the secondary schools working on enhancing reading/literacy has significant potential to support school and programme-level learning (including if these can be included in the year 3 evaluation). It will be important to share any initial assessment findings with all participating schools as the year progresses, to support sensemaking. We encourage WELL to build on this approach across other areas where possible.
5. Further encourage school networks and collaboration around evidence-informed improvement: Most schools in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland work well together in local clusters and these networks are linked together through the wider LASL initiative. These networks are valued by school leaders, offering sources of hands-on support as well as information, including in relation to WELL activities and priorities. Sustaining these networks will be important at a time of falling pupil rolls and the gradual expansion of MATs across Cumberland, given that competition and academisation have been shown to impact negatively in local collaboration in other areas of England. In Year 3, the WELL team should continue to work with LASL and school leaders to support these networks, including by building on its work to develop themed networks (e.g. Reciprocal Reading and Great Teaching Toolkit) in year 2.
6. Further strengthen local coherence to ensure long-term impact and an outward facing system, including through the new Education Research Alliance: In Year 2, the WELL team has continued to connect and collaborate with a range of external partners, including regional hubs and national experts. This role is an important aspect of WELL, helping to develop an outward facing system and to provide a bridge for schools to access external capacity and expertise. That said, the evaluation survey showed that relatively few schools in the former districts of Allerdale and Copeland engage with partners based outside western Cumbria, indicating a need to continue

and extend this work. The WELL team is now developing the new Educational Research Alliance, which offers an important vehicle to develop an outward facing system in Year 3.

7. Consider how best to ensure long-term sustainable impact. Our findings are clear that the WELL programme is valued by schools and is beginning to shift thinking and practice in important ways. Equally, as with any ambitious and complex reform, it will take time for impact to emerge and there are risks that if the work stops in summer 2024 this momentum could dissipate. School leaders told us that the programme should be sustained beyond its three-year lifespan. We agree that there would be value in considering how some or all of the WELL approach could be sustained beyond summer 2024.

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