

# **Value for Money (VFM) Review and Report for 2020/21 for the South East Wales Education Achievement Service**

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## Executive Summary

Value for Money (VfM), or cost effectiveness, is a measure of how well resources are being used to achieve intended outcomes. Good value for money is the optimal use of resources to achieve intended outcomes. VfM is usually measured by considering:

- **Economy:** minimising the cost of resources used while having regard to quality (inputs) – spending less;
- **Efficiency:** the relationship between outputs and the resources used to produce them – spending well; and
- **Effectiveness:** the extent to which objectives are achieved (outcomes) – spending wisely.

While the above represent the traditional method of measuring VfM it is also possible to include two further dimensions:

- **Equity:** the extent to which services are available to and reach all people that they are intended to – spending fairly.
- **Sustainability:** an increasingly standard consideration within the context of the Well Being of Future Generations Act (WBFG) – spending for the long term.

While addressing the above is essential within any VfM review it is also important to consider them within the specific context of the organisation being reviewed, and the external environment within which the organisation has been operating during the period under review. For the period 2020-2021 the dominant external consideration is that of an organisation operating under the challenges posed in adapting service delivery to respond to a global pandemic.

This means that a key feature of the review will be an evaluation of the effectiveness of the organisation's response both in terms of its deployment of resources and the impact of its amended service provision. Evaluating impact will also provide a unique challenge given that the usual measures of educational outcomes such as examination results, school categorisation and Estyn inspection reports will either not be available or, where available, will not provide a valid measure of progress.

In the context of operating in the unique circumstances of a global pandemic and in the absence of the usual measures of effectiveness then considerations of effectiveness have to be re-thought. The most valid measure now becomes a consideration of the extent to which EAS achieved what it set out to do in response to the unique set of circumstances under which it was operating.

The exceptional circumstances within which the EAS operated throughout 2020-2021 means that an evaluation of VfM must be re-thought. This re-thinking means that:

- considerations of economy and efficiency are best conflated into a single judgement;
- sustainability centres around the extent to which revised ways of working can be continued in the future;
- equity becomes an even more significant consideration given the well documented disproportionate impact of the pandemic on vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils; and
- effectiveness places a greater focus on well-being and becomes essentially a judgement on the extent to which schools and staff felt well-supported.

While the current context provides a particular set of challenges it does not deflect from an approach centred around answering the basic VfM questions of:

- Are you doing the right things?
- How well are you doing them? (economy and efficiency)
- Are you promoting fairness? (equity)
- What impact are you having? (effectiveness)
- Is your approach sustainable? (sustainability)

It must be recognised that the above questions are inextricably linked. There is a need to recognise that interventions that are being implemented economically and efficiently are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for demonstrating VfM. Interventions may be being implemented very well but if they are not the right interventions then impact will not be maximised and effectiveness – the cornerstone of VfM - will not be achieved.

One of the advantages of couching the questions in the above format is that they provide a possible framework for, or approach to, VfM that staff can integrate into their on-going or summative evaluation of their work. Arguably these are questions that sit more readily with reflection on performance than more formal and less widely used terms such as economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The value from a VfM review lies in part in the assurance that it can provide to both providers and recipients of services. However, it can be argued that a greater added value comes from the extent to which it acts as a catalyst for improvement, based on an evaluation of a body of evidence that demonstrates what is working well and what is working less well. This in turn can lead to well informed judgements about what needs to change.

If one accepts the approach and underlying assumptions outlined above, then the next consideration was how to gather the necessary evidence to make a valid evaluation of VfM. However, it must be recognised that evidence gathering and analysis for this report took place in the wholly exceptional circumstances of the working practices employed to combat the Coronavirus pandemic. Consequently, it was an exercise undertaken entirely remotely. While this caused some inevitable logistical challenges and delays in reporting, it did not affect the quality of evidence gathered or impair the validity of subsequent findings and conclusions.

This VfM review drew upon information and data supplied by EAS in response to requests and evidence from external experts who have undertaken work for EAS during the year 2020-21. The unique circumstances of operating during a global pandemic meant that the question that this VfM review had to answer to arrive at an overall judgement was:

*How successful was the EAS in responding to the pandemic to mitigate the impact on schools, learners and its own workforce?*

Consideration of the body of evidence provided to this review enabled a judgement to be made regarding VfM and the judgement is that:

**EAS continues to provide good VfM in terms of the services it provides, as evidenced by its successful mitigation of the impact of the pandemic on schools, learners and its own workforce**

This conclusion was arrived at because:

- **Economy and Efficiency – spending less and spending well.** The EAS has increased the capacity and credibility of the school improvement offer while reducing the cost of delivering it and maintaining one of the highest delegation rates to schools of any consortium in Wales.
- **Equity – spending fairly.** The EAS has mitigated the impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged and vulnerable learners through the provision of a range of services designed to promote wellbeing and minimise the, often disproportionate, impact on these young people.

- **Effectiveness– spending wisely.** The EAS has provided flexible and responsive support that has contributed positively to the wellbeing of staff both within schools and its own workforce.
- **Sustainability – spending for the long term.** In response to the pandemic the EAS has devised an alternative approach to service provision that is sustainable from both a financial and human resource perspective.

The main body of this report will detail the evidence that underpins these judgements.

## **Recommendations:**

1. The profound impact of the pandemic on working practices means that there was little or no opportunity for the EAS to implement the recommendation that was made last year. In anticipation of the year 2021-22 seeing something of a return to more 'normal' working it would appear sensible to re-iterate the recommendation as follows:
  - The EAS needs to build upon its evolving approach to considering VfM through:
    - on-going refinement of its internal reporting mechanisms;
    - further developing its mid-year review of VfM; and
    - extending engagement with recipients of its services to triangulate evidence and further validate findings and conclusions.
2. The pandemic has shown that positive change is, and has been, possible. Schools, settings and the EAS have seized opportunities to explore innovative ways of working and delivering meaningful learning experiences through a creative blended learning approach.
  - The EAS needs to reflect and build upon on the lessons learned from the positive approach that has been developed during this time.
3. The EAS needs to ensure that:
  - recommendations from the IIP report are implemented and their effectiveness evaluated through a staff survey;
  - responses are compared to those from the survey undertaken as part of the accreditation process; and
  - future people management processes are refined to reflect the survey outcomes.

**Economy and Efficiency – spending less and spending well. The EAS has increased the capacity and credibility of the school improvement offer while reducing the cost of delivering it and maintaining one of the highest delegation rates to schools of any consortium in Wales.**

One part of arriving at an overall judgement is to look at the organisation holistically in terms of the overall resources -essentially people and money - at its disposal.

The picture is one of ever diminishing resources both in terms of income and staff numbers. The extent of the reduction in core funding, grant funding and trading income is shown below. There has been an agreed 8.24% reduction in LA funding over the past 5 years which, along with the elimination of trading income, has resulted in a reduction in total core funding of some £880k or 22.12% in absolute terms between 2016-17 and 2020-21; although in real terms, when inflation and pay awards are taken into account, the reduction has been in excess of 30%. Over the same time period the reduction in the amount of grant money received from the Welsh Government has resulted in EAS having £4.96m or 7.3% less, in grant money available in absolute terms. When reductions in LA funding, elimination of trading income and reductions in grant money received are added together the reduction in total funding is £4.96m which represents an 8.3% reduction in absolute terms; although in real terms, when inflation and pay awards are taken into account, the reduction has been in the region of 10%.

The overall financial position is summarised in the table below.

	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
LA Funding	£3,376,653	£3,275,353	£3,209,847	£3,145,651	£3,098,465
Trading Income	£601,974	£447,460	£0	£0	£0
Total Core Funding	£3,978,627	£3,722,813	£3,209,847	£3,145,651	£3,098,465
Grants	£56,082,261	£52,033,572	£51,991,066	£49,022,408	£51,996,479
<b>Total</b>	<b>£60,060,888</b>	<b>£55,756,385</b>	<b>£55,200,913</b>	<b>£52,168,059</b>	<b>£55,094,944</b>
Delegated To Schools	£50,384,126	£46,481,315	£48,886,304	£46,142,076	£48,754,009
Delegation Rate	90%	89%	94%	94%	94%
Residual Income	£7,668,633	£7,278,655	£6,314,609	£6,025,983	£6,340,935

However, if increases in the rate of delegation to schools are taken into account then residual income spent on running the organisation, including staffing costs, fell by some £1.33m or 17.3% from 2016-17 to 2020-21. The evidence clearly demonstrates that EAS is spending less than in previous years and that the rate of reduction is accelerating, while the overall number of schools being supported has remained largely static.

Reduced spending has inevitably resulted in a considerable reduction in staffing numbers, with the number of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff reducing from 111 in 2016-17 to 69 in 2020-21, taking the total reduction in FTE staff reduction to 42 over the period 2016-17 to 2020-21, representing a reduction of over one third in staffing levels. This staffing reduction is starkly illustrated by the dramatic reduction in the number of Challenge Advisors employed by the EAS. Prior to the

inauguration of the EAS in 2012 the Challenge Adviser ‘to be’ model was based on 31.7 FTE employees. At the end March 2021, the Challenge Adviser delivery model was based on 4.20 FTE Challenge Advisers and 74 current serving Headteachers.

Such a reduction in staffing numbers inevitably leads to the question ‘*how does an organisation maintain the level and quality of service delivery with significantly fewer people to undertake the work?*’ The answer one suspects is through a different model of delivery which then begs the question ‘*does the revised delivery model provide value for money?*’

The answer to the first of these questions can be found in the evolution of a different model of service delivery, as reflected in the work undertaken by Steve Munby in his Review of Progress carried out in October 2020<sup>1</sup>. In his report of the findings from the review he concluded that:

*‘EAS is ensuring that it avoids being insular and maximises the expertise available to it by identifying highly effective schools from outside the region and pairing them with schools in the region. This is bringing in much needed additional capacity at secondary school level and is enhancing the credibility of the offer to schools.*

*EAS has continued to move towards a school-led system by ensuring that almost all challenge advisers are serving school leaders. This has significantly enhanced the credibility of those providing support and challenge to schools and has been very well-received by headteachers. In addition, wherever possible, EAS has combined the role of Challenge Adviser and Headteacher of the Lead Network School. This has provided more joined-up support and has increased the capacity of the school improvement offer, as the Lead Network School is able to bring the expertise from within their own school to provide support. 20 primary schools and 3 secondary schools are part of a new “earned autonomy” approach where they receive the resource but can choose how they use it.’*

While the above provides evidence of the enhancement of the quality of service being offered, a VfM study must also consider the cost of provision before coming to any conclusion regarding economy and efficiency. The evidence points to the service now costing considerably less than it would if the original number of CAs, that were envisaged to be necessary, were still being retained. This cost saving can be summarised as:

- £1,910,939 estimated current cost of employing 31.7 FTE Challenge Advisers
- £253,184 current cost of employing 4.2 FTE Challenge Advisers
- £953,500 anticipated partner Challenge Adviser costs
- **£704,255** reduction in costs

The evidence, relating to this significant area of service delivery clearly leads to the conclusion that both economy and efficiency in the use of resources are being achieved. The EAS is not only spending less but is also spending well by delivering an enhanced service at a reduced cost.

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<sup>1</sup> A previous review was conducted in 2019 and reported on in October 2019

**Equity – spending fairly. The EAS has mitigated the impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged and vulnerable learners through the provision of a range of services designed to promote wellbeing and minimise the, often disproportionate, impact on these young people.**

Before considering the issue of equity it is important to be clear what is meant by equity in the context of education. In education, equity addresses the issue of fairness and the removal of barriers to achievement. The Welsh Government's Education in Wales: Our National Mission states that, *"each learner must be respected and challenged to achieve the best they are capable of ... while being supported to overcome barriers that inhibit their learning"* (Welsh Government, 2017, p.31).

*"Equity in education means that personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)"* (OECD, 2012, p.9).

*'Equity does not mean that all students obtain equal education outcomes, but rather that differences in students' outcomes are unrelated to their background or to economic and social circumstances over which students have no control'.* (OECD, 2018, p.13)

For the purposes of this report the concentration will be on the impact of the pandemic. It is appropriate to acknowledge that the pandemic has not necessarily been a positive time as many have experienced loss and had difficult lockdown experiences, including isolation, physical and mental health challenges, and anxiety. Home learning experiences will have been varied. We know that some learners have struggled and, due to a range of factors including digital exclusion, many have not engaged adequately. It is important to note that some children and families have struggled and been concerned that they are not making progress.

In response to this the EAs has continued to place wellbeing at the forefront of a supportive regional approach. This approach reflected a recognition that schools and their communities have had their own unique set of circumstances that required a bespoke and flexible approach to learning..

There is ample evidence of the impact of the pandemic on pupil wellbeing and in particular the wellbeing of disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. Research suggests a strong association between wellbeing and educational outcomes. There is widespread acknowledgement that wellbeing is multifaceted including the following four dimensions of:

- emotional (including fears, anxiety and mood);
- behavioural (including attention problems);
- social (including victimisation); and
- school wellbeing (including enjoyment and engagement) (Gutman & Vorhaus, 2012:3).

In recognition of this the EAS provided a range of services designed to equip the educational workforce to mitigate the threat to wellbeing and minimise this disproportionate impact. This approach encompassed a recognition that promoting the well-being of school leaders and their workforce was integral to supporting the well-being of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners. The support provided to promote well-being among school leaders and their workforce is detailed later in this report, while this section of the report concentrates on the support that was provided to better equip the educational workforce to support vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

One aspect of this support was participation in a National Pupil Development Grant (PDG) Focus Week as part of a national programme of work designed to support disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of learners. An overview of the programme is provided below.



	Theme	Keynote Speakers	Breakout Sessions
Monday 22 <sup>nd</sup> March	Whole School Approach	Kirsty Williams – Education Minister Alasdair MacDonald – Pupil Development Grant (PDG) Overview Sally Holland - C.C Officer Becky Frances - Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)	Trauma Informed and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Practices – Dr Coral Harper
Tuesday 23 <sup>rd</sup> March	Teaching and Learning	Mike Guerson	A Tiered Approach to Teaching and Learning – Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)  Understanding the impact of poverty – Ellie Harwood (Children in Wales)  Engaging the digitally excluded – Kate Thomas.  Early Language Development – Head sprout
Wednesday 24 <sup>th</sup> March	Re-igniting Learning	Nina Jackson - Engaging with Families Professor Barry Carpenter - A Recovery Curriculum	
Thursday 25 <sup>th</sup> March	Accelerating and Intervention Programmes	Lousie Blackburn - Raising the Achievement of Disadvantaged Youngsters	Engagement in Communities – University of Florida  Family and Community Engagement Modules – Regional Presentation  Literacy and Oracy – Voice 21 Role of the Engagement Officer – Regional Presentation  Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA) – Regional Presentation  Super Ambassador Programme and Pupil Voice – Kath Mattingly
Friday 26 <sup>th</sup> March	Effective Approaches and Planning	Professor Mick Waters	

The programme was well received as the following comments from participating Headteachers illustrate:

*‘I wanted to thank you for helping arrange this week’s training. It’s been thought-provoking and inspiring. I understand that all the sessions have been recorded. Is that right? I’d really like to use some of them with my staff. Where can I find them please?’*

*‘This has really given me food for thought. Definitely something I want to follow up.’*

In addition to participation in the national programme of work the EAS also provided support at a regional level. This support entailed the EAS providing schools across the region with professional learning opportunities with a focus on teaching, learning and developing learner's engagement in learning. These opportunities included the provision of a Primary and Secondary Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Learner Lead Programme. This programme comprised a number of sessions that covered:

- *Professional Learning Programme: Settling in* – teaching learning behaviours and high expectations; including the development of resources, for use when appropriate, for school professional learning.
- *Thinking Differently for Disadvantaged Learners* - focusing on ‘hearts and minds’ encouraging staff to reflect on their own beliefs and how these impact on their work and the work of their colleagues.
- *Understanding impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Learners* – building greater knowledge and understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on disadvantaged learners based on international research.
- *Understanding ‘Learned Helplessness’* - developing a clear understanding of how to help learners become more resilient.
- *Assessing the poorest child* – including consideration of how planning impacts on the poorest learners.
- *Developing ‘Universal Provision’ for Teaching and Learning of Vulnerable Learners* – focusing on developing schools’ tiered approach to supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable learners.
- *Supporting Young Carers in school* – providing schools with resources to raise the awareness of Young Carers.
- *What being poor does to young people’s brains and what schools can do about it* - focusing on the impact of poverty on learners and which instructional strategies will help make miracles happen!
- *Supporting Adopted Learners* - providing professional learning opportunities and resources to support those learners who are either identified as Adopted Learners or those currently in Care.
- *Hard to reach schools* - looking at the school as part of the community including the challenges of attendance and engagement from the hardest to reach families.
- *Developing five steps to instructional coaching to benefit disadvantaged and vulnerable learners* - focusing on behaviour and relationships, curriculum planning, explaining, and modelling, questioning and feedback.
- *Supporting learners who are ‘New to English’* - providing guidance and resources to support the learners who are either BAME or New Arrivals and new to the English language.
- *Moving on and Moving Up* - Download resources (to use when appropriate) for school development and professional learning, focusing on careers related learning and transition.
- *Taking the REINS – Reflection, Evaluation, Impact, Next Steps* - download resources (to use when appropriate) for school development and professional learning.

In addition to the programme outlined above the EAS has:

- Provided *Positively Mad Professional Learning* - sessions for staff focusing on habits of learning.
- Purchased *‘Thinking Differently for Disadvantaged Learners’* – a Professional Learning Offer for teachers to support vulnerable learners and raise aspirations. The programme provides new ideas and approaches to support accelerating learning approaches for all schools and settings.
- Supported the *Accelerating Learning Programme grant*. - this included the creation of a playlist of research-based interventions to support all learners return to school but a targeted approach for vulnerable learners.
- Expanded the existing *Raising the Achievement of Disadvantaged Youngsters (RADY) Programme across clusters* - to get a consistent approach regarding support and provision for vulnerable learners.
- Developed a *Blended Learning Website* - in partnership with schools with a section aligned to supporting Disadvantaged and Vulnerable Groups of Learners.
- Captured *Case studies* - to share practice across the region.

- Developed a guidance document *‘Engaging the Digitally Disengaged Learners.’*
- Provided a range of professional learning opportunities to include:
  - *Family and Community Engagement Programme.*
  - *Designated Looked After Children Lead*
  - *Sexuality and Relationship Curriculum Toolkit.*
  - *Reading and Reflection Intervention Programme for Teaching Assistants*
  - *Developing your Anti-Poverty Strategy.*
  - *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) (train the Trainer – Unit 2)*
  - *Rights of the Child and Curriculum for Wales*

The extensive range of Professional Learning support that was offered was complemented by targeted financial support for disadvantaged and vulnerable learners via the Pupil Development Grant and financial support for secondary schools to continue to engage in the Vulnerable Learner Lead Programme.

At the start of the pandemic, no one could have foreseen or anticipated the disruption to the lives of learners, staff and school communities that would happen during the course of the year. In recognition of this the EAS continues to place wellbeing at the forefront of the regional approach and this is reflected in the Business Plan for 2021-2022 which identifies the following priority:

*‘Continue to provide support to leaders on the identification and support for specific groups of disadvantaged and vulnerable learners including those who have been disproportionality affected by the pandemic.’*

The approach adopted by the EAS was endorsed by Dr Steve Munby in the findings from his follow-up review in October 2020 where he commented that:

*‘Good progress has been made by EAS, in partnership with Local Authorities and schools, in developing support for student well-being and for staff well-being. A well-being review is now being conducted jointly with local authorities. Since my last review, a regional approach to supporting vulnerable learners has been developed. The Raising the Achievement of Disadvantaged Learners (RADY) initiative is an important development, with 26 clusters requesting to be involved. Networks are very well-attended and a new offer for professional learning for Teaching Assistants has been well-received.’*

**Effectiveness– spending wisely. The EAS has provided flexible and responsive support that has contributed positively to the wellbeing of staff both within schools and its own workforce.**

As stated earlier, arriving at a judgement on effectiveness, in the context of a school improvement service operating in the unprecedented circumstances of a global pandemic, requires a greater focus on well-being and becomes essentially a judgement on the extent to which schools and staff felt well-supported. It is important to recognize that the term staff, as used here, refers to the Wellbeing support provided for all levels of educational practitioners, learners and the EAS in-house workforce.

The impact of the pandemic was such that the original priorities and actions set out in the 2020-21 Business Plan were not able to be delivered. A revised plan was developed (October 2020) that reflected the adaptation required to meet the needs of the changed situation. It is important to note that wellbeing featured as an objective in the initial Business Plan and this was reflected in the revised plan. It was recognised that it was critically important that the EAS remained sensitive and responsive to the needs of the school workforce. Schools and settings were facing many challenges and new approaches, the EAS needed to be a highly supportive, reflective and

responsive organisation that provided resources and guidance materials for schools that addressed the 5Rs<sup>2</sup>.

The approach outlined above in the revised 2020-21 Business Plan has been continued in the 2021-22 iteration, to reflect the on-going nature of the pandemic and its wellbeing legacy. This is illustrated by the inclusion, as Priority A, within the 2021-22 Plan of the following:

*‘Ensure that the wellbeing of practitioners and learners in schools and settings remains paramount. Regional professional learning will be provided to support the social and emotional needs of the workforce and learners.’*

This revised approach adopted for the latter half of 2020-21, and its continuation into 2021-22, is entirely consistent with expert external advice provided to the EAS:

*“Especially in times of uncertainty, it is important for the organisation to be agile and to be able to respond quickly to changing needs. In these times of challenge, continue to focus on staying close to schools, listening to the voice of school leaders and working closely with local authorities. Relationships and trust are crucial in times of uncertainty so in spite of the other pressures this needs to continue to be prioritised very strongly and time proactively put aside in diaries to do it.”*  
(Steve Munby: Review of the EAS - October 2020)

One aspect of the support provided was participation in a National Development Programme entitled ‘Well-being Partnership Programme’. Participation in the core elements of the programme involved the EAS in:

- raising awareness and enabling access to mental health and well-being support;
- the development and delivery of mental health support for educational staff and leaders;
- creating capacity to provide every headteacher with a coach;
- promoting and hosting National Well-being webinars;
- the development of national Well-being programme for leaders plus review and revision of current well-being module of all leadership pathway programmes;
- the development of Compassionate Principles for Leaders (Leadership Academy leading); and
- a programme of recognition for educational staff at all levels;

Alongside participation in the National Programme the EAS also provided additional support on a regional basis. One component of this regional support was the EAS offer of emergency Wellbeing Coaching sessions to support leaders. Other examples included:

- development of a Wellbeing Team Space for schools to remain connected and informed during the pandemic;
- shared links to Wellbeing webinars in all EAS networks;
- Professional Learning in using Emotional Coaching Techniques with learners;
- the purchase of a license for all schools and setting to access the resources via the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) website;
- the delivery of four PL programme focussed on engaging the disengaged learner;
- drop in coffee mornings to support Foster Carers by providing resources and techniques to help manage the emotions of their foster children;

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<sup>2</sup> Regrouping, reflection, renewal, relationships, relaxation

- two pupil voice activities focussed on their wellbeing. One pupil voice questionnaire was particularly targeted at Children in Care; and
- a planned curriculum entitled 'Altogether Now' was shared with all schools to assist them with their curriculum offer in June 2020. This was supported with another planned curriculum called 'Altogether Again', shared with schools to support their return to school in September 2020.

Given that a very significant factor in judging effectiveness is the extent to which schools felt well supported, then the most valid form of evidence available to this review is the views of headteachers on that support. This evidence is available in the form of responses to a survey carried out by the EAS in April 2021. For summer 2021 the survey was significantly adapted to share with a broader range of stakeholders, including headteachers, other leaders, governors, teachers, learners and teaching assistants. At the time of writing, responses from the broader group were not available so the following analysis is based on headteacher responses.

The survey was distributed in a series of Headteacher Briefings, with time being given to complete and the introduction, for the first time, of an option to complete anonymously. Approximately 70% of those who attended chose to complete the survey. All questions were revised, from previous surveys, to focus upon the role of the EAS during the main period of the pandemic from Summer 2020 to Spring 2021.

It is worth noting that the validity of the evidence generated from the survey is enhanced by:

- its recent timing; and
- its amended focus.

In analysing survey results two universal considerations apply in relation to historical trends. The first is response rates and the second is the level of positivity in those responses. In relation to response rates it is significant that the overall response rate rose from 38% in 2019 to 53% in 2021.

In terms of positivity levels, it must be recognised that previous iterations of the survey used different question sets that were focused on support and challenge as it was delivered at that time. While this rules out direct comparison question by question it is still possible to compare overall levels of positivity. Approximately 70% positive approval rates were achieved in 2018 and 2019, compared with an approximate positive rating of 80% and above in 2021. It is also worth noting that negative response rates were significantly lower in 2021 than in 2018 and 2019.

In looking at survey findings on a question by question basis it needs to be recognised that all main questions had 6 response options:

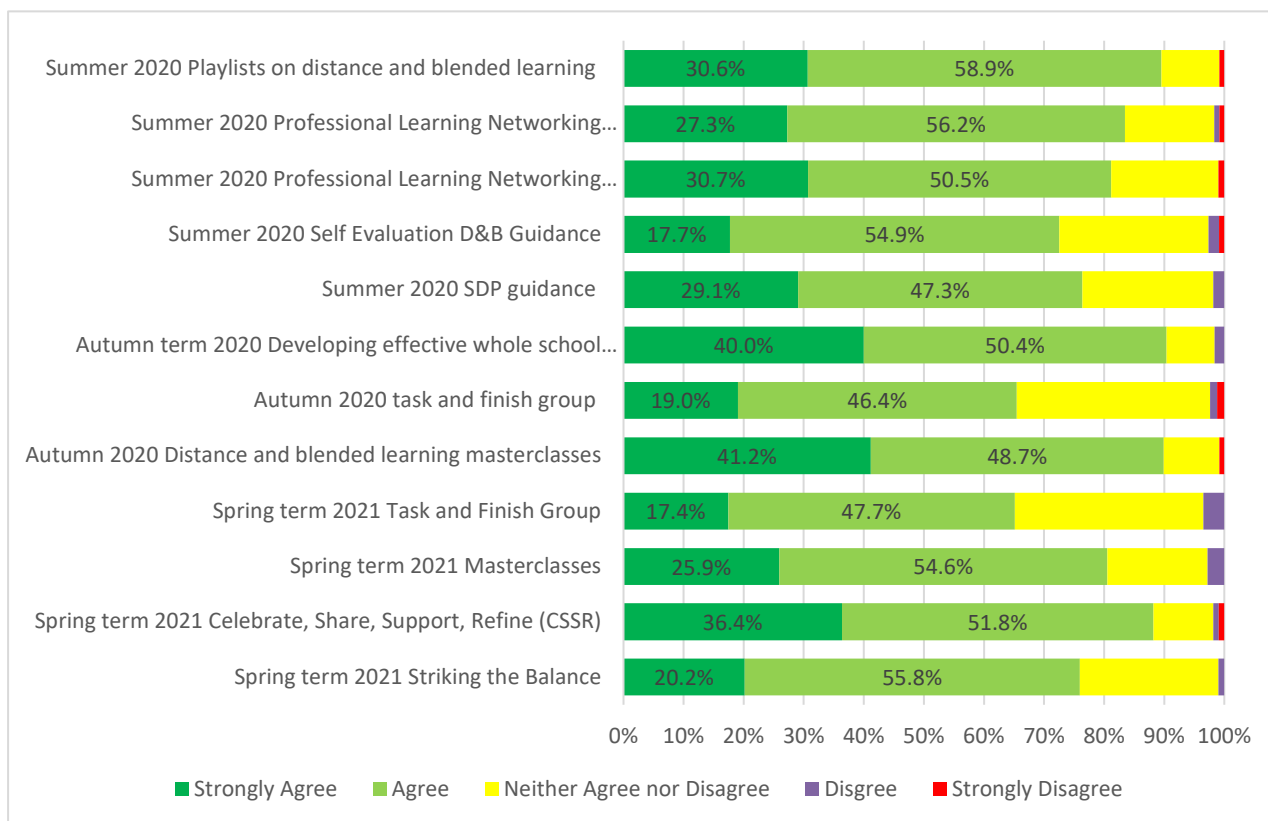
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not applicable

All 'Not applicable' responses have been removed and only the 5 applicable responses are included in the following illustrations of results.

## **Advice and guidance**

This section of the survey listed a number of support measures provided by the EAS and asked respondents whether or not they agreed that the EAS had provided timely and effective advice and guidance on, and approaches to, distance and blended learning. The results are presented in the

table below:

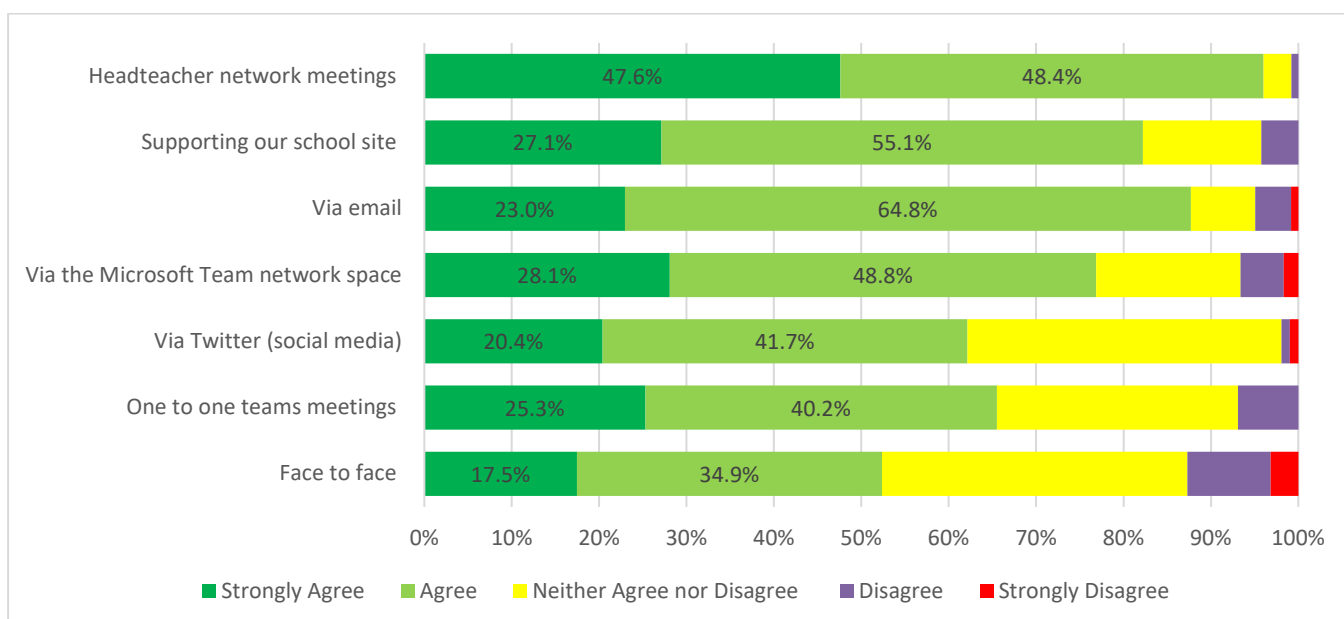


The positive response rates (Strongly Agree / Agree) for each of the support measures ranges from between 65%-90%. Negative response rates (Strongly Disagree/ Disagree) were never higher than 5%, representing between 1-4 respondents of the 128.

The single response of “Strongly Disagree” on each of the 7 questions was from the same respondent.

## Communication

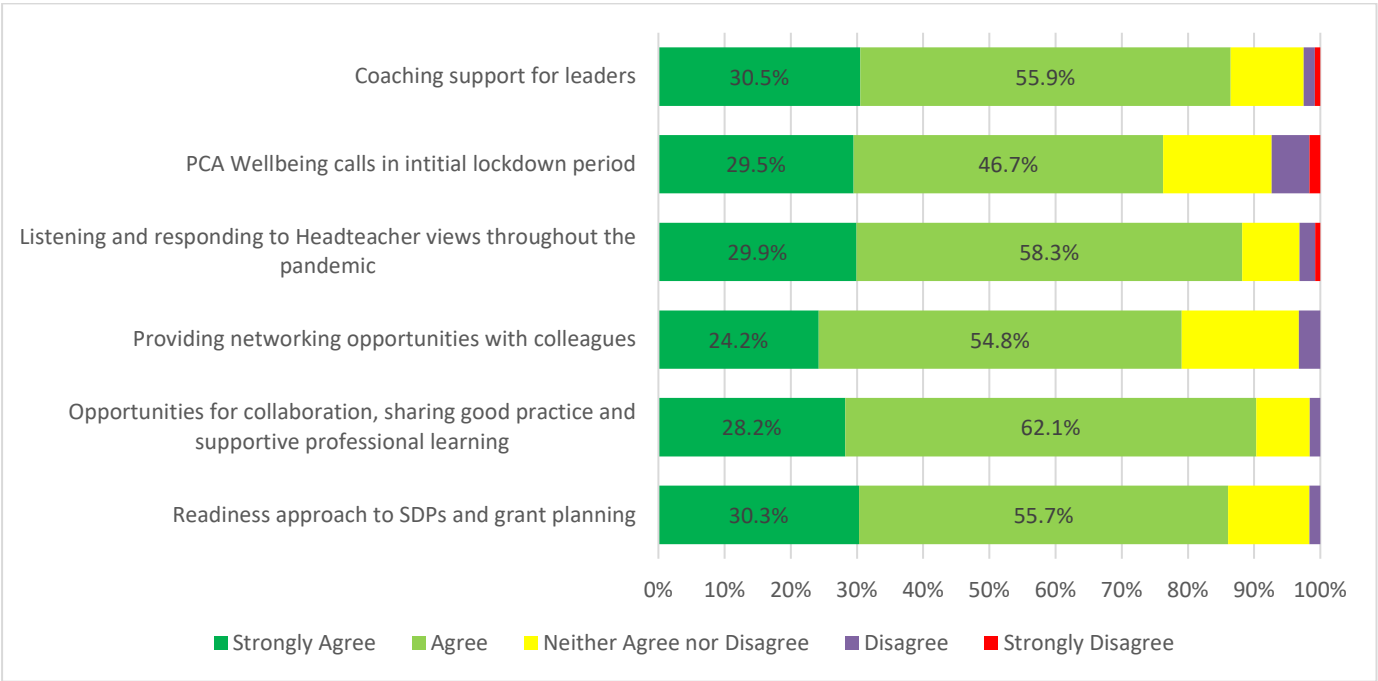
This section asked school leaders to reflect on whether or not they agreed that the range of communication methods the EAS has utilised and evolved during the period of the pandemic were effective. The results are presented in the table below:



The positive response rates (Strongly Agree / Agree) for each of the questions range from 50%-95%. Negative response rates (Strongly Disagree/ Disagree) were never higher than 7%, except for the question on face-to-face, where 13% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed.

**Wellbeing.**

This section asked school leaders to reflect on whether or not they agreed that the EAS appropriately prioritised the wellbeing of all through the period of the pandemic. The results are presented in the table below:



The positive response rates (Strongly Agree / Agree) for each of the questions ranges from between 75%-90%. Negative response rates (Strongly Disagree/ Disagree) were never higher than 8%.

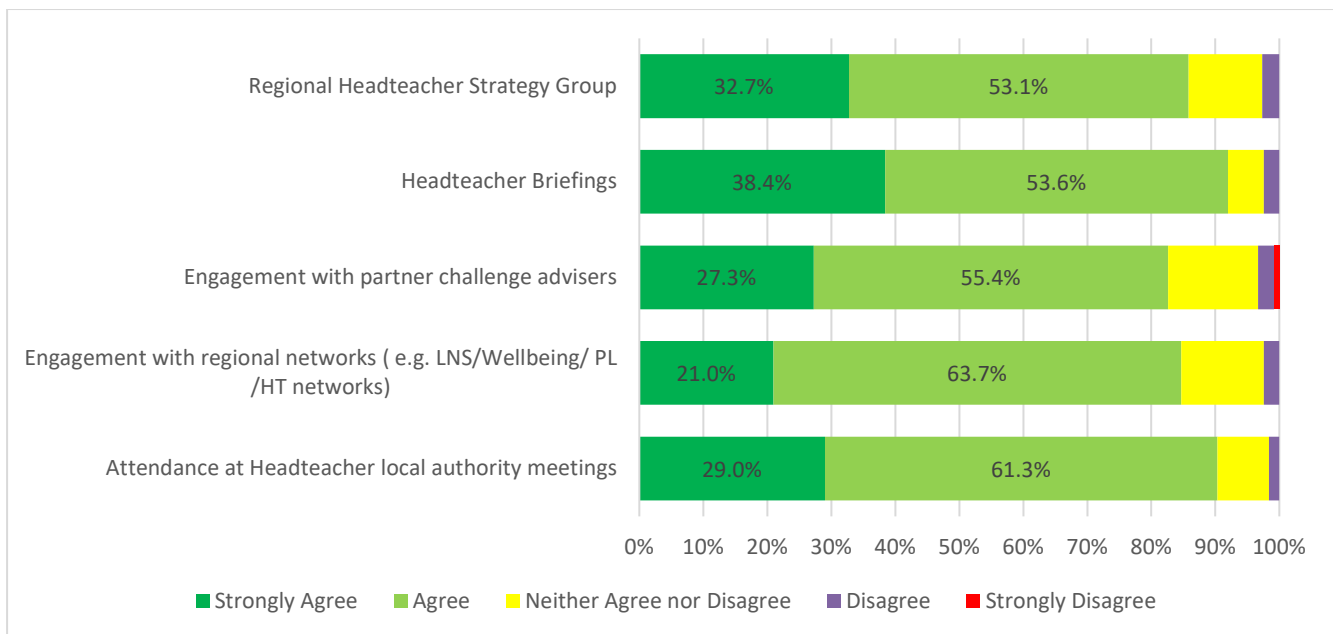
In addition to the quantitative evidence of positive and negative response rates illustrated above, there is also qualitative evidence in the form of the following comments received from individual headteachers:

*‘During a time when we have all had to make significant adaptations, the EAS has adapted exceptionally well to support schools. There is a genuine feeling of well-being and balance that underpins the strategic direction. Thank you.’*

*‘EAS certainly listened following the first return to school and responded well to ensuring the wellbeing of schools and school leaders became a priority.’*

**Involvement**

This section asked school leaders to reflect on whether or not they agreed that the EAS had involved headteachers in discussions about regional support via a range of mechanisms/groups. The results are presented in the table below:



The positive response rates (Strongly Agree / Agree) for each of the questions ranges from between 80%-90%. Negative response rates (Strongly Disagree/ Disagree) were never higher than 4%.

The quantitative and qualitative evidence paints a picture of school leaders who feel that they have been well advised, listened to, supported and involved by the EAS through the period of the pandemic. This is also reflected in the findings of Dr Steve Munby in his follow-up report of October 2020. The report ends with the following conclusion:

*‘I was greatly encouraged by my return visit. When I reviewed the work of EAS last year, it was already making strong progress on its agreed direction of travel. But since then, in spite of the massive change that covid-19 has caused in how schools and the EAS need to work, the progress has either been significantly accelerated or has, at the very least, continued steadily. Some of the practices that are now in place or are being developed are as good as I have seen anywhere else in the world. Now is not the time to lose your nerve but to renew your efforts’.*

In the opening paragraph of this section of the report reference was also made to the the wellbeing support provided the EAS to its in-house workforce. This support was provided in recognition of the additional support that was required to ensure that the potential adverse impact of the pandemic on the workforce was mitigated. In outline the support comprised:

- developing a Team Space for EAS staff to connect;
- creating a Staff Wellbeing Focus Group (consisting of representatives from each EAS Team);
- sharing ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing<sup>3</sup>’ for staff;
- introducing monthly staff briefings to remain connected to all staff;
- conducting staff surveys;
- continuing to work towards Investors in People accreditation; and
- holding staff virtual social events.

<sup>3</sup>Seen to be of fundamental significance in ensuring culture change within an organisation and comprising:

- Routines
- Reactions
- Roles
- Relationships
- Reflections



One source of objective external evidence of the quality of people management within the EAS comes from the Investors in People (IiP) accreditation process referred to above. The decision to undertake the IIP accreditation process was agreed following a request by the Company Board on 19 December 2019 to explore accreditation options following on from the results of the November 2019 staff survey. The process commenced in October 2020 and a feedback report on the outcome of the assessment was received on 4 January 2021. As a result of the assessment process the EAS has been awarded the Gold level of the 'We invest in people' accreditation.

The assessor commented in his report that *"the achievement of Gold level accreditation is based on extensive evidence collection despite restrictions imposed by government in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic"* and highlighted the following as standout strengths:

- excellent communications;
- a distinctive leadership style;
- teamworking at all levels;
- intersectional working typified by several task and finish groups;
- strong core values; and
- a strong commitment to learning and continuous professional development.

The IIP feedback report highlights the following as areas the EAS should be proud of:

- The seamless switch from office to home-based provision of services without any perceptible impact on the quality and levels of service provided to clients.
- Emphasis on staff wellbeing (using a structured five-point model) during the current lockdown including a Covid-19 related staff survey (undertaken in July 2020) and the activities and proposals of the Wellbeing Focus Group.
- The involvement of all staff and other stakeholders in the development of the business plan and overall strategy of the organisation.
- An effective PDR system that provides all staff with meaningful performance objectives that can be linked directly to requirements contained within the business plan.
- Despite the restrictions on flexible rewards and remuneration, senior staff are at pains to recognise staff individually and collectively for their contribution to organisation.
- Good channels of communications, especially during home-working, with regular team briefings to keep staff informed of activities and developments within the organisation.
- Frequent canvassing of the opinions of the workforce. Recent surveys have focused on assessing the impact of Covid-19 on wellbeing and operations and current levels of ICT literacy in view of the change in working practices.
- The EAS places great store on 'reflection' as precursor to organisational improvement through the adoption of a 'no blame' culture and the viewing of error as a learning opportunity.
- A strong emphasis on learning and development by various means including work shadowing, access to coaching, in-house knowledge sharing, as well as traditional training course attendance and qualification attainment.
- Use of task and finish groups drawn from across the organisation to consider pressing matters and present solutions. Such groups also draw their representation from across the organisation as a whole.
- Despite the limitations in terms of flexible remuneration, the EAS has compensated for this by recognising and valuing staff both as individuals and teams.

In addition to recognising organisational strengths the report also highlighted the following as areas for development.

- Consider the development of a structured leadership programme throughout the organisation.
- As intended, review current organisational values and in so doing, take the opportunity to develop an associated competency framework of linked behaviours.
- Introduce 360° feedback as an extension to the current PDR system and to facilitate the adoption of revised values and behaviours.
- Further develop the inter-relationship between teams by establishing customer-supplier arrangements and key performance indicators.
- Develop a project management methodology to achieve consistency in the way task and finish groups and other cross-sectional teams manage assignments.
- Consider means of encouraging staff to challenge decisions and organisational objectives to facilitate ownership and involvement in strategic and operational decision-making.
- Re-examine the concept of 'the learning organisation' by undertaking a proximity audit to its basic tenets and introducing improvements accordingly.
- Consider forming a working party to examine how bilingualism could be strengthened further within the organisation.

While the evidence provided by the IIP accreditation process has been included within this section of the report that is focused upon effectiveness, with an emphasis on staff wellbeing, it also feeds into other judgements within this report. The evidence of effective people management demonstrated through the accreditation process provides important, objective, external and valid evidence to support the earlier judgement of efficiency in the use of resources. It also provides evidence that impacts on any judgement relating to sustainability particularly in relation to the retention of staff which is seen to be a key factor in determining sustainability.

**Sustainability – spending for the long term. In response to the pandemic the EAS has devised an alternative approach to service provision that is sustainable from both a financial and human resource perspective.**

Sustainability in the current context of adapted service provision can be seen to comprise both financial and human resource sustainability. Resource sustainability can, in turn, be seen to comprise both delivery resource sustainability and recipient resource sustainability. Essentially, sustainability requires an approach that continues to be affordable, remains deliverable from the available human resources and capable of continued absorption by the recipients of the services embodied in that approach.

The first two dimensions are not mutually exclusive in that resources attract a financial cost and their efficient deployment makes a significant contribution to financial sustainability. The opening section of this report concludes that the EAS is achieving both economy and efficiency in the use of resources. This conclusion, allied to prudent financial management, provide evidence that the established model of service delivery, and its more recent adaptation to meet the demands of the pandemic, are financially sustainable. The adaptation referred to above meant that changes to the original agreed budget were inevitable and that a revised budget had to be prepared. The eventual budget outturn was one of an overspend of some £29k which was offset against the company reserves of £245,607.

Resource sustainability is typically viewed through the lens of recruitment and retention but in the current circumstances retention, through the provision of wellbeing support, has taken precedence over recruitment. As detailed earlier in this report the EAS has provided an extensive programme of support to its in-house workforce and this has been instrumental in ensuring staff wellbeing and hence facilitating retention and sustainable provision of services. The positive

findings, and outcomes, from the IIP accreditation process provide further evidence of effective people management which encourages a sense of being valued and promotes retention.

Recipient sustainability is a concept that has been constructed specifically for the purposes of this review. Essentially it refers to the extent to which service provision was designed and delivered in a way that maximised support, while not exacerbating the pressures that schools were already experiencing. In recognition of the need to achieve this somewhat delicate balance, support was made available to all schools and settings on the understanding that schools and settings were facing different challenges at different times. It was left to school leaders to determine the most appropriate type and timing of attendance at any or all of the support on offer in line with their priorities.

The EAS was aware of the need to over communicate with clarity to provide reassurance regarding advice, guidance, support and expectations. As a result, existing delivery models were re-purposed to support schools and settings in a time sensitive manner. The EAS also worked with Local Authorities to minimise any unnecessary bureaucracy for schools and settings to ensure they were able to focus on their most important priorities. The timing, delivery and focus of support was carefully considered, taking into account the challenges that the pandemic presented to schools and settings. It was recognised that that many schools would be facing periods of time when both staff and pupils would be required to isolate.

With this in mind, there was recognition of the absolute necessity to continue to support schools in developing effective strategies for teaching and learning, in the context of distance and blended learning. This included the blend of some class-based learning (synchronous) and some online (synchronous and asynchronous) learning. The EAS also provided a range of guidance and professional learning for schools on what effective pedagogies could support the approach to 'blended' learning.

The balance that was struck was appreciated by schools as the following quote from a headteacher in the survey response indicates:

*'I certainly feel that EAS has listened and responded to feedback from heads - no additional pressure at times of enormous challenges for schools and heads.'*

Findings from the headteacher survey and outcomes from the IIP accreditation process provide valid evidence from both a service delivery and recipient perspective, which allied to prudent financial management, paint a picture of overall sustainability.

## Conclusion:

As stated in the introduction to this report, the context within which the EAS was operating in 2020-21 was unique. This unique context presented the organisation with unprecedented challenges and any VfM judgement must recognise this. Essentially when looking at 2020-21 the key question is:

*How successful was the EAS in responding to the pandemic to mitigate the impact on schools, learners and its own workforce?*

Impact mitigation required an amended approach, with wellbeing taking an even greater role than the already prominent role afforded to it. It should be recognised that promoting wellbeing is both an end in itself and a means to an end. In the short term the judgement is about the impact on wellbeing as a means to help people cope with the impact of the pandemic. In the longer term it is about the extent to which preserving wellbeing has a positive impact on educational outcomes. It is to be hoped that the successful approaches adopted will benefit learners in the future.

While the context and consequent challenges were unique, the underpinning considerations for a VfM judgement remain unaltered. To demonstrate that it is providing good value for money the EAS has to demonstrate that it was providing a service that was:

- doing the right things;
- doing them well;
- having an impact; and
- sustainable .

The evidence available to this review demonstrates that the EAS, through the adoption of a responsive, flexible and supportive approach chose the right things to do, did them well, had the desired impact and achieved sustainability.

All of which support the overall conclusion that EAS continues to provide good VfM in terms of the services it provides.