



# Welsh Network of Healthy Schools Scheme National Quality Award Insight Report

Version 1.0

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is available in Welsh



## Contents

<b>Acronyms and abbreviations</b> .....	3
<b>1 Key findings</b> .....	5
<b>2 Background</b> .....	6
<b>2 Current practice</b> .....	7
<b>3 Data collection</b> .....	8
<b>4 Analysis methods</b> .....	9
<b>5 Data handling</b> .....	9
<b>6 Findings</b> .....	10
• <b>Recognising and awarding excellence</b> .....	10
• <b>Capacity</b> .....	11
• <b>Structure and process</b> .....	12
• <b>External independent verification</b> .....	13
• <b>Community and support</b> .....	13
<b>8 Discussion</b> .....	14
<b>ANNEX A</b> .....	16
<b>ANNEX B</b> .....	16



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## **Acronyms and abbreviations**

HSC- Healthy Schools Coordinator

NQA-National Quality Award

PHW- Public Health Wales

SHRN- School Health Research Network

WHO- World Health Organisation

WNHSS- Welsh Network of Healthy School Schemes

WSA SET – Whole School Approach Self-Evaluation tool

WSAEMWB- Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being

## **Purpose and Summary of Document:**

This document describes the process of, and the findings from, insight work regarding the role of recognising and awarding excellence within the Welsh Network of Healthy Schools Schemes (WNHSS).



## 1 Key findings

There was consensus that recognising and awarding excellence is important and should remain a feature of the future delivery model. Recognising and awarding excellence served multiple functions including:

- Providing an opportunity for celebration/recognition of hard work for the school community
- Supporting inward and outward communication of commitment to approach
- Providing assurance to the school and an opportunity to gather feedback on the approach taken
- Identifying good practice to share and spread learning across settings
- Providing evidence of approach and impact to the accountability environment

Secondly, the current NQA process was valued for:

- Being well-established and providing a thorough description of good practice
- Providing external assessment which carried credibility

However, considerable challenges were also identified:

- The current focus on evidence collection was perceived as too burdensome/onerous and diverting time away from embedding the approach within settings
- The process was perceived by some as a barrier to progressing against programme milestones
- Conflicting views on benefit of an 'end goal' such as the NQA and the promotion of a cyclical process
- The current criteria was perceived to not value that schools have different needs and journeys and face different challenges

## 2 Background

The Welsh Network of Health Schools Schemes (WNHSS) has been operating in Wales for over 20 years with over 99% of maintained Primary, Secondary and Special schools participating in the programme at some time. The externally assessed National Quality Award (NQA), first introduced in 2009, is the current mechanism for recognising and awarding excellent school practice within the programme. Currently 15% of schools in Wales have achieved their NQA. The NQA is awarded to schools that evidence embedding a whole school approach across seven pre-defined health themes including;

- Food and fitness (nutrition and physical activity)
- Mental and emotional health and well-being, including staff well-being
- Personal development and relationships, including sex and relationships education
- Substance use and misuse, including alcohol, smoking and drug use and misuse (legal, illegal, and prescription)
- The environment, including eco-initiatives and improving the school and wider environment
- Safety, including a variety of topics such as child protection, sun safety, internet safety, and first aid
- Hygiene across school and non-school settings

The NQA looks at these 7 health topics and for each of these identifies important aspects of a whole school approach in the following aspects of school life:

- Leadership and Communication
- Curriculum
- Ethos and Environment
- Family and Community Involvement

In Autumn 2022 Public Health Wales (PHW) hosted a Roundtable to bring together senior strategic partners from across the education and health system. The Roundtable discussed the underpinning rationale for health promoting schools and the value of WNHSS in achieving the World Health Organisation (WHO) vision to 'make every school a health promoting school' in support of wider health and education policy goals in Wales. It also provided PHW an opportunity to share, test and refine a set of high-level proposals for programme improvement to the WNHSS to develop a consensus way forward, this included:

- Introduction of a set of minimum standards for health promoting schools in Wales to replace the current NQA
- A review of current practice in monitoring achievement and progress, and recognising and awarding excellence

A series of interrelated work-streams have been identified and scoped to deliver an improvement plan that optimises the potential of the WNHSS programme within Wales. One of which is transitioning from the NQA criteria, which represents ‘achieving’ a best practice standard across a series of seven health topic domains, to a set of National Health Promoting School minimum standards. These new standards will describe the core principles of a whole school approach to health and well-being and will be applicable across a range of health topics dependent on school and local health and well-being priorities. The minimum standard framework will set a baseline for health promoting schools that, over time, we can reasonably expect all schools to achieve.

These significant shifts in the national model means the process by which we recognise and award excellence as a separate but still critical function of the programme needs to be reviewed. This paper presents system insights into the role of recognising and awarding excellence, the relative benefits and challenges of the current NQA process and recommendations for the future through a range of insight mechanisms with key stakeholders including workshops and interviews.

## 2 Current practice

Under the current NQA framework schools, supported by their local healthy schools coordinator (HSC), are responsible for collating evidence to demonstrate they have achieved a whole school approach to health and well-being. Once they are satisfied they meet all the criteria, and sufficient evidence is gathered in support, they are externally assessed via an independent inspector who visits the school, reviews the evidence gathered and provides the school with a personalised report commending areas of excellence and making recommendations for further development. The independent inspector makes the recommendation for the NQA which is awarded by Welsh Government.

Prior to the pandemic, approximately 26 schools per year achieved the NQA. Following a twelve-month suspension to the process in 2020-2021 there has been a slight decline in annual assessments. Table One provides the current and overall figures from the inception of the NQA in 2009 through to 2023 including the annual average number of schools.

**Table One- Number of schools that have achieved the NQA since 2009**

Years	Primary	Secondary	Nursery	Special	Independent	Total number of schools	Annual average number of schools
2009-2023	194	23	5	9	1	232	26



Schools who have achieved the NQA via independent inspection can then be reassessed by their local WNHSS team every two years. How this is carried out varies across the regions and local schemes.

### **3 Data collection**

A range of communication and engagement activities were carried out to gather insight into the role of recognising and awarding excellence, the relative benefits and challenges of the current NQA process and recommendations for the future. These included workshops, interviews and feedback via communication channels with a range of partners including HSC's, learners, schools and partners.

- **School Engagement**

A series of school engagement workshops were held in April 2023 and provided an opportunity to examine school experiences of the levers and barriers to embedding a whole school approach to health and well-being within the school setting, to test and refine proposed changes to the WNHSS delivery model and examine both the value of the existing NQA and the needs of the sector in relation to recognising and awarding excellence. The delivery of the workshops is summarised in a separate report.

- **HSC engagement**

A workshop with the Wales-wide WNHSS and Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being (WSAEMWB) workforce was held in May 2023. This was followed by an additional workshop with a self-selecting smaller group of coordinators who volunteered to contribute more detailed insights.

- **1-2-1 Interviews with schools and Consortia**

Following the series of engagement workshops with schools, participants were invited to attend a 1-2-1 interview to share further insight. Four interviews were carried out in total with senior leadership members from schools across Wales using Microsoft Teams. A further interview was carried out with the health and well-being lead from one of the consortia in Wales. The regional education consortia in Wales work with schools to raise standards and provide a range of support, which includes professional development and intervention programmes. The interview was recorded and lasted roughly 45 minutes via Microsoft Teams using the same method as described above.

## 4 Analysis methods

Data from the workshops and the interviews were analysed using thematic content analysis using inductive approaches to identify patterns. Following multiple initial readings of transcripts, reflection, and through discussion, a member of the team carried out initial coding to develop a general overview of the data, but also incorporating emerging codes and unplanned content categories. Line by line coding was then carried out using colour coding, organising the data into the final categories (Figure 1) which were then summarised under the different themes identified.

**Fig 1- example of responses using colour coding**

Questions	Responses/Themes
<p>Is it important that progress is recognised and celebrated by the programme. Why?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Everybody loves an award</li> <li>▪ The support received</li> <li>▪ Lots of people had an input</li> <li>▪ In recognition of the work by staff and pupils</li> <li>▪ Acknowledge continuing hard work</li> <li>▪ It is a big task but nice to celebrate award</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most support some sort of award as recognition of hard work</li> <li>- An award is a constant reminder for achievement and work to do</li> <li>- Inspires others to achieve and good for morale of children, staff and parents</li> </ul>	

## 5 Data handling

Interview recordings and transcripts were removed from Microsoft Teams and stored on Public Health Wales managed file storage as soon as possible following the interviews/workshops and were password protected. During analysis, data was extracted from the transcripts and were then inputted into a word document saved on Public Health Wales managed storage.

## 6 Findings

From the thematic analysis of data sources from the workshops and interviews, the following themes were identified:

- Recognising and awarding excellence
- Capacity
- Structure and process
- External independent verification
- Community and support

### • Recognising and awarding excellence

The majority of participants across all engagement activities agreed that recognising and awarding excellence is a good thing that should be retained within the programme as an important part of the health promoting schools journey. Schools that have been recognised as 'excellent' can provide positive case studies for others with the need to share information across schools and regions, and the value of a reward as a vehicle to do so, was clearly articulated:

*"[We] become part of a professional learning community, so we have them as like our flagship schools" (HSC)*

Others recognised the value of an award in terms of raising the profile of the work within the school as well as the school itself:

*"Nice to have an award or something (maybe a logo, letterhead, badge, certificate etc.) to display for the attention of all pupils, community and any school visitors and raises the profile of the school" (School)*

*"Helps to raise awareness and high standards and gives something to build on" (School)*

*"I wouldn't use the phrase showing off, but you know there are schools who do really enjoy getting their teeth into something and doing it first and doing it to the best of their ability. So, I think there should be some celebration around excellence" (Consortia)*

There was also a strong consensus of the importance of the NQA in bringing the school community together including the learners, both through the process, which places a strong emphasis on community engagement, and as an opportunity for shared celebration. It was discussed during one workshop that it created opportunity for everyone to be part of the scheme and the celebration around it and ensured quality standards which is then verified externally.

*"The NQA has been seen to be a prestigious award and was well recognized both with parents, governors and the rest of school staff" (Consortia)*



*“Excellent way for the children to learn and stay focused on health and well-being and be involved in activities to improve the environment and their own health” (School)*

Most felt the current NQA model was effective in identify excellence and providing an opportunity for celebration. In particular the value of a clear framework for excellence was noted and recommendations made that any future model should also clearly articulate a pathway to ‘excellence’:

*“a structure and a framework and common things to work towards is what schools are taking out of it” (HSC)*

*“Providing a set of national standards allows there to be comparability between schools” (HSC)*

*“NQA does recognize the level that those schools are at and they're often quite, they're quite far advanced to other schools” (HSC)*

However, some challenge was provided to what was perceived as a prescriptive description of excellence as it failed to recognise excellence could look different depending on the needs, priorities, challenges for that school. What might be perceived by one school as a small win can be a big achievement for others and thus, for that school, worthy or recognition and celebration. Inequity was also noted in terms of school size, with smaller schools struggling to evidence excellent practice due to workforce capacity:

*“So schools with very small staff would never be able to achieve the NQA, they just don't have the capacity or the time to dedicate to the evidence and the collation of it” (HSC)*

*“So that's the only thing with excellence...I don't think anyone likes to be just shown something that's amazing. And, as a school you know that you never going to be able to get there. It's got to be achievable” (Consortia)*

Further, others highlighted the importance of retaining emphasis on embedding practice and felt a ‘one-off award’ may not be conducive to a culture of continuous improvement:

*“So you never really fully finished. It's meant to be an ever-evolving cycle. At what point are you meant to give them (schools) excellence? Because in theory, they'll always have something to do and improve on” (HSC)*

*“it's about the children being aware of what they can do to make sure that they live a healthier lifestyle, and that they get all the tools and all the little steps to help them be successful in their life as they go along, and that's not necessarily reflected in a certificate on a wall” (School)*

- **Capacity**

Participants across discussions described the commitment as large and that the work required to secure the NQA award can become the responsibility of one person:

*“It is a huge beast, but worth it in the end” (School)*

*“Just tends to fall on one person to do everything” (School)*

*“We [senior leadership] didn't really know what went into it behind the scenes” (Consortia)*



When this is the case this was both burdensome, a cause for inequity and not conducive to embedding the approach across the culture and ethos of the school. In particular, the evidence gathering element was perceived as diverting capacity away from embedding actions:

*"The amount of time that would have taken when it was all paperwork. I'm sure online and the way it's moving forward, it would be a bit easier and a lot more eyes on it at the same time rather than one person around with this great big file saying what we got on and photocopying loads of stuff"* **(Consortia)**

- **Structure and process**

Feedback from schools around being awarded a 'plaque' was positive with participants highlighting how schools valued the process surrounding the NQA. This included being able to work through various aspects towards excellence:

*"It's just about being able to prioritise one thing at a time"* **(School)**

*"They've always valued the process of doing the NQA, it's not necessarily for them about having the plaque"* **(HSC)**

However, there was also challenge to what was perceived as a retrospective approach to evidence-gathering:

*"it's almost like they (Schools) are writing it in retrospective about what they have done, not what they are doing. And I think that makes it less valuable"* **(Consortia)**

One element of the process which was consistently identified as challenging was the sheer amount of evidence and paperwork that was required to complete the award, both perceived as time consuming, challenging to maintaining momentum and not always adding value:

*"it's hard to keep momentum over such a long period of time with the level and amount of evidence required"* **(School)**

*"the feeling that if you haven't taken a photo of an activity that you have carried out, that it hasn't happened"* **(School)**

Whilst effort is necessary, participants felt that evidencing excellence needs to work alongside what schools are doing and help with what they're doing. It needs to help them achieve a better outcome for their pupils, not be cumbersome, overweighted and overbearing.

It was also noted that changes to school personnel; either senior leadership team, or the named healthy schools lead could have a significant impact on progress of achieving the NQA for the school.

*"You know you can have a different head and they have a different view on it, but having the framework ensures that the work that the school does, regardless of who is leading the school, should be of similar quality and then continues to improve and roll on"* **(Consortia)**

*"There is a risk. For example, if you have a change of manager. If you have a change, then it goes on the back burner"* **(School)**



- **External independent verification**

Having an external inspector attend the school, independent of both the school and the programme, was seen as positive amongst all participants across the range of engagement activities; both in terms of providing external validation, maintaining high standards and as an incentive to achieve action within deadlines.

*“Schools generally valued somebody with another fresh pair of eyes walking around the school” (HSC)*

*“Helps to have an outside body checking progress, ensures continuity” (School)*

Reaccreditation every two years was also discussed and considered as a mechanism for ensuring schools who have completed the award continue efforts to maintain the standards. However, it was noted that not all schools pursued reaccreditation and so NQA achievement can, for a minority, result in programme disengagement.

Losing independent validation of excellence was considered a risk to the programme in that it might reduce standards or motivation to engage; ‘stopping’ or ‘just keeping things ticking over’.

- **Community and support**

There was strong recognition for the role of the HSC and how the support they provide during the NQA process and across the programme is valued by all.

*“what we find most valuable at the moment is having that contact with our coordinators. Having those conversations, developing network and raising those discussions, having a really strong link with public health to be able to sign posts to services and other key partners that we need to engage with” (School)*

It was recognised by many that using the School Health Research Network (SHRN) health and well-being school level and local level data to design activities based on local priorities is important. As well as working closely with the designated supporting HSC who is known by the school and can signpost to other partners/agencies / services and provide information and advice.

During the HSC’s workshop there was discussion around schools that are working towards the NQA and how they require intensive support from their HSC. This helps to build strong relationships with these schools with more time being spent at the school and more 1-2-1 support provided. It also gives schools an opportunity to identify gaps in professional learning and identifies opportunities to train and upskill staff within the school.

*“We end up upskilling a lot of the staff” (HSC)*

However, it was also recognised that due to the large number of schools in Wales, this intensive support is not sustainable with the current capacity within the team. With some areas only having one HSC that supports a number of schools in their area, it is not possible to offer 1-2-1 support for all schools.



There was also broad consensus with participants consistently raising the impact it would have if Estyn recognised the award or level of excellence during inspections and include this in their report noting that the school is a 'health promoting school'.

*"recognition from Estyn would go a long way" (School)*

What became fundamentally important during the insight gathering was that schools need a way of sharing knowledge and best practice widely. It was highlighted that it is important the system is flexible and recognises that every school is diverse with a different starting point; evidencing progress and excellence must be achievable for all. A suggestion of a platform to share good practice was suggested by HSC's.

*"I think we share it quite well locally, but I think we're still maybe missing that key link to share the best practice with schools across Wales" (HSC)*

## 8 Discussion

Discussions during the range of engagement activities suggests that participants place importance on progress being recognised and awarded and how recognising excellence is important. However there are different opinions as to how this should be done. It was noted by those who had achieved the NQA award that even though the process is resource intensive, the end celebration and award given showed recognition for hard work and excellence, and that made it worth it to some.

Most agreed that an award of any kind, be it a physical award, a certificate, badge, logo or even a letter head that can be displayed anywhere helps raise awareness that well-being matters at the school. It also informs the local community of the excellent work of the staff, pupils and sometimes parents/carers in regards to building the school's health and well-being profile and sharing best practice. However, there was consensus that the most important thing was the embedding and sustaining of activities and that this was generally perceived as the ultimate goal, rather than the achievement of the reward.

The onerous nature of evidence collection for the NQA is identified as both diverting time away from action to work on other health and well-being work and, for some, a barrier to progression. Although a reward is seen as positive and motivates schools, it needs to be accountable and shouldn't be the main focus of the work. The emphasis should be on embedding practice and so the process should encourage sustainability.

The NQA offers the opportunity to share best practice for schools and this is valued by all. Going forward, maximising opportunities to share best practice is vital.

The celebration element of the NQA was seen as a positive and holding a conference or an annual event was suggested by some as a way of sharing good practice case studies and publicly celebrate some of the excellent work of schools going forward. This could be on a regional or national footprint, and some suggested the potential of a cash prize for annual winners of the



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award with the idea being that money was re-invested in the school's health and well-being plans.

It was highlighted going forward, the process for awarding excellence needs to be easily manageable with a coherent framework e.g., enabling schools to evidence progress through different sized projects in line with school's capacity. The process going forward needs to be simple to follow and complimentary of existing processes.

There was strong consensus that the paperwork burden and evidence gathering needs to be reduced as the demands on schools and teaching staff continue to rise. Capacity within schools is seen as a barrier to succeed with competing priorities.

The continued support of local healthy schools' team and public health teams was perceived as vital throughout all insight work and is valued by all.

## **9 Next Steps**

It is evident that there should remain a mechanism in place to understand school progress in embedding health and well-being and to also recognise and award excellence, both because it helps with the sharing of best practice, it is a valued part of the journey for schools and the whole school community and gives schools an opportunity to celebrate success. The next steps to achieving this includes:

- Explore options for identifying and rewarding excellence within the Welsh Network of Healthy Schools programme
- Make recommendations for the future delivery model

## ANNEX A

### Prompts during workshop

- Is it important that progress is recognised and celebrated by the programme. Why?
- Is it important that excellence is recognised and celebrated? Why?
- What do schools value most about the current National Quality Award? What is least valued?

## ANNEX B- INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE

### NQA Interview Questions

#### Background

With the new curriculum for Wales the landscape has changed and we as the national health promoting schools programme of course welcome the opportunity to substantially increase the focus on health and well-being provided by the new curriculum and want to adapt alongside to ensure we are as an effective support mechanism as possible.

So with this in mind, we are developing an All-Wales Framework providing a benchmark of what good looks like but that this will not be overly prescriptive enabling schools and regions to identify their own local priorities with stronger local programme ownership, so a shift from topic to core-component focused. Reducing variety and differences across schemes. The framework will be supported by a set of principles-based minimum standards that all schools are expected to meet rather than providing a multi-phase multiyear journey to achieving a national mark of excellence as currently in place with our current National Quality Award (NQA). The programme will be based on principles of continuous improvement, and this will be embedded into standards, guidance and the language of the programme to support a sustained shift towards continuous cycles of identifying need, developing co-produced sustainable approaches and evaluating impact. This would continue to be accompanied by a process for recognising and celebrating excellence but we are currently conducting insight work to determine what this should look like.

So we are currently looking at moving from an **NQA criteria** which represents 'achieving' a best practice standard across all series of seven topic domains to a **National Health Promoting**



**School standard** which will describe the core principles of a whole school approach to health and wellbeing. Stakeholders have been clear that both monitoring school progress against standards as well as recognising and rewarding excellence is important. Currently this function is performed by schools, with the support of their healthy school coordinator, working towards the NQA which provides independent inspection and rewarding of NQA status to approximately **28 schools per year**. Schools who have achieved the NQA can be reassessed by their local WNHSS every two years.

Given proposed changes to the programme alongside implementation of the new curriculum for Wales, we are examining if, whether this approach remains the best approach for both monitoring progress and identifying and rewarding excellence in school practice.

### **Questions:**

**Is it important that progress in implementing a WSA to HWB is recognised and celebrated by the programme. Why?**

**Is it important that excellence in implementing a WSA to HWB is recognised and celebrated? Why?**

**What do you think schools value most about the current National Quality Award? What is least valued?**

**What do you want from a system that recognizes and celebrates progress and excellence in embedding WSA?**

***for example how might it:***

- Motivate school engagement with a whole school approach to health and wellbeing?
- Encourage continuous improvement?
- Support schools to evidence their approach to the wider accountability environment?
- Help WNHSS be understood and experienced by schools as an enabling and supportive mechanism?

**Does the current model do this effectively and what might an alternative model look like?**

- does the current NQA model do so optimally?
- How might an alternative model do so optimally
- What would this optimal look like?

**If you were designing a new approach What would you take from the current NQA system to a new model if anything?**

**Do you have anything further that you would like to add or comment on?**

**Thank you for your time and input into this process**



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