
Engagement work: Maintained special school and pupil referral unit (PRU) sector update – spring 2021

March 2021

This report is also available in Welsh.



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This report summarises the findings from 25 engagement phone calls made to maintained special schools and PRUs between the end of October 2020 and the beginning of February 2021. Throughout this period, leaders confirm that their schools and PRUs have remained open, including through the recent lockdown to provide education for vulnerable learners and the children of critical workers, in line with relevant Welsh Government guidance. However, there is significant variability across Wales regarding the proportion of pupils identified as eligible to attend the school or PRU regularly for on-site provision. Due to the restrictions health and safety guidelines place on capacity, maintained special schools in particular have been unable to respond fully to parental requests for placements. In addition, local authorities have interpreted Welsh Government guidance that these settings should remain open to support vulnerable learners differently.

The report is based on the information discussed during remote meetings with headteachers and senior leaders. The main focus for discussion was how schools and PRUs continue to support and promote the wellbeing and learning of their pupils.

Proportions relate to the sample of 25 schools and PRUs with which we have had contact.

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Key messages

Promoting wellbeing of pupils and staff

Leaders in nearly all PRUs and special schools confirm that they continue to prioritise pupils' wellbeing and refine the successful approaches that they have developed since the start of the pandemic to support pupils both on-site and remotely. They describe a range of approaches and interventions to underpin pupils' wellbeing, including revising staff responsibilities for welfare and engagement calls to individual pupils and their families.

Nevertheless, many leaders of PRUs confirm that the complexities of their pupils' needs have become more pronounced over time. For example, they report an increase in pupil anxiety levels during the recent national lockdown and in referrals for pupils with mental health difficulties requiring home tuition.

Nearly all special school and PRU leaders continue to confirm that relationships with families have strengthened considerably since the outset of the pandemic. However, most leaders note that that parents report increasing pressures in managing home learning during this recent lockdown. While most leaders of special schools confirm that the attendance of pupils eligible for on-site provision during this period is good, many leaders in PRUs contacted report that pupils' attendance for on-site provision is generally low.

Nearly all leaders confirm that maintaining staff wellbeing remains a key priority. Most leaders describe how they have adapted to and accommodated the specific health needs and caring responsibilities of staff. They describe a range of strategies they have put in place to support staff wellbeing and manage anxieties,

Promoting learning

Leaders in nearly all special schools and PRUs report that staff have built on the lessons learnt during the first national lockdown to improve the co-ordination and delivery of teaching for on-site and remote learning, including online and remote hard copy learning packs. They confirm that provision continues to be led by the needs of individual pupils within the school or PRU, with a strong focus on developing the skills identified in each pupil's individual education plan.

Overall, teaching staff at most special schools and PRUs continue to provide a mixture of online activities and packs of learning resources for pupils and their families to engage with. Many leaders across both settings describe how staff have increased and refined the use of digital platforms to enhance teaching and learning experiences. However, leaders in special schools and PRUs continue to report difficulties for particular groups of pupils in providing online learning. Many PRU leaders report increased demands from pupils and parents for hard copy learning packs in preference to participation in on-site or online learning.

Many leaders of special schools and PRUs outline that staff have further strengthened strategies to help parents and carers to support their children's learning. However, most leaders confirm that the challenges faced by many parents

and carers in supporting their children's learning at home have increased since the previous period of national lockdown.

In nearly all cases, leaders confirm that they monitor pupils' level of engagement closely during this period of lockdown. Overall, leaders of special schools maintain that pupils' engagement with their learning is good. However, many PRU leaders report pupils' level of engagement with their learning is variable.

Leaders in nearly all PRUs and special schools maintain they continue to adapt to the changing demands of the pandemic by providing as broad a range of learning experiences as possible to reflect the differing needs of individual pupils. However, most leaders across both settings continue to express concerns about the impact of the narrowing of the curriculum caused by the pandemic on the development of pupils' skills. In particular, they report that work related and practical life skills sessions have been severely affected.

Across both settings, leaders report that older pupils in particular have suffered from not being able to access a range of support and learning experiences that assist them in making informed choices about their futures. In some cases key stage 4 pupils are not applying for college placements because they are reluctant to think about their next steps. As a result, in around half of PRUs, leaders are concerned by a potential increase in those pupils who may become engaged in education, employment, or training (NEET) when they finish their PRU placement.

While most leaders across both settings confirm that the fundamental philosophy, principles and purposes of the Curriculum for Wales are at the heart of their work, many leaders report that progress in preparing for its implementation is at varying stages of development.

Provision and therapy

Generally, nearly all leaders across both settings confirm that statutory processes for annual reviews have continued to take place throughout the pandemic in accordance with required timescales. Multi-disciplinary meetings between representatives from the school, social care and health services have continued throughout the pandemic to support pupils' identified needs. However, many leaders express concerns about the slow pace and limited extent of the return to face-to-face working. They describe how most support from allied health professionals continues to be provided via online platforms and that there has been little change in how services operate since the first lockdown period.

Leaders of special schools and PRUs continue to emphasise the impact on pupils' progress and development where services offer only online counselling and interventions. While leaders value this provision overall, nearly all emphasise their view that online support is not as effective as face-to-face working in meeting the needs of pupils. A few leaders in both special schools and PRUs reflect the frustration expressed by school staff around the differing expectations of school and local authority specialist staff and health professionals for face-to-face working with pupils.

Professional learning

Nearly all leaders across both settings report that they have continued to provide a broad and varied programme of relevant professional learning activities to support the needs of pupils throughout the period of the pandemic. This includes required training in mandatory areas such as safeguarding and food hygiene, as well as whole school professional development to meet the identified priorities in the school or PRU's strategic improvement plan.

Around half of leaders in both sectors describe how they have continued to strengthen opportunities for staff to develop their understanding of how to support the mental health and resilience of both of pupils and staff. This emphasis reflects concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the emotional and mental wellbeing of pupils. In a minority of settings across both sectors, leaders confirm that the main focus of professional development over the last few months has been to develop approaches to the use of online platforms to support remote learning and hold meetings.

Detailed findings and cameos

Promoting wellbeing

Pupil wellbeing

Leaders in nearly all special schools and PRUs confirm that they continue to prioritise pupils' wellbeing and refine the successful approaches that they have developed over time to support pupils both on-site and remotely. For example, many describe how they have strengthened approaches towards recording and monitoring the wellbeing of pupils, in particular those learning at home, during this national lockdown, including revising staff responsibilities for welfare and engagement calls to individual pupils and their families. Many settings have identified and selected key staff to contact families regularly. This includes telephone calls and door step visits depending on the needs of the family.

Leaders in **Swansea PRU** report how they have adjusted the responsibilities of teaching assistants to provide greater wellbeing support for pupils, including designating 'PRU key workers'. All pupils now have a key worker to provide them with stronger wellbeing support. The PRU key workers make daily contact with the most vulnerable group of pupils, and every two to three days or weekly with others, depending on their needs. Doorstep visits by a PRU key worker replace calls if a pupil and their family are unavailable. The PRU key workers also deliver learning packages and go through learning tasks with pupils. This contact is in addition to contact from teaching staff.

Similarly, leaders in a few special schools describe how family engagement officers work closely with families to provide continuity of support, both face to face as well as virtually.

At **Ysgol Bryn Derw**, the role of the family engagement officer has become increasingly important during this current national lockdown. She provides an alternative approach for parents and carers to communicate their support needs. The school has used its recruit, recover, raise standards (RRRS) grant funding to develop this role. The school benefits further from the contribution of a Barnardo's support worker who works at the school for one day a week to support the work of the family engagement officer.

Many leaders across both sectors describe how they continue to develop a range of approaches and interventions to promote pupils' wellbeing. These include trauma informed approaches, strategies to develop resilience and the use of staff skills in areas such as counselling and mentoring. Many leaders report the benefits of having their own staff who are trained and qualified to use these approaches, particularly as access to specialist services is inconsistent. As a result, many leaders report how they can provide increasingly individualised support for pupils' wellbeing needs. For example, one PRU provides one-to-one and small group sessions on mindfulness, while many others balance learning activities with social and emotional health and wellbeing sessions for all pupils.

A few leaders report they have refined further their formal monitoring of pupils' wellbeing, for example through their use of online wellbeing assessment tools.

Staff at the **Western Learning Federation** use an online tool which identifies, assesses and addresses the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people. This enables the school to ascertain a wellbeing baseline for its pupils and identify appropriate support strategies for pupils. The collated data suggests that currently many pupils show high levels of fear, panic and anxiety. Consequently, the school adapts its timetable of provision to ensure therapeutic interventions for the identified pupils. This provision is delivered by qualified support staff both at school and remotely. In the view of the Headteacher, the wellbeing support for pupils has become increasingly individualised and responsive.

Many leaders of special schools in particular detail the extensive arrangements staff make to ensure consistency in the provision of therapeutic interventions to support the wellbeing of pupils learning at home.

At **Ysgol y Gogarth**, a wide range of specialist support staff help to provide targeted interventions remotely. These include staff responsible for assistive technology, speech, language and communication, manual handling, the family and community engagement officer and the behavior analysis team. These staff produce individualised guidance and resources, providing opportunities for discussion and collaboration with families in tackling an array of challenges during this period. This support includes the maintenance of devices to support pupils' mobility, specific speech and language resources, behaviour plans and movement programmes developed for the home setting. As well as direct contact with families, these teams provide additional general guidance and digital resources and make these available through a number of web-based platforms.

Despite these arrangements however, many leaders in PRUs confirm that the complexities of their pupils' needs have become more pronounced over time. For example, they report a general increase in pupil anxiety levels during this national lockdown. In particular, several leaders responsible for managing home tuition services as part of the PRU and local authority provision for education other than at school report an increase in referrals for pupils with mental health difficulties requiring home tuition. In a very few cases, leaders report pupils have been taken into care by the local authority and are rejecting offers to return to the PRU, with staff working closely with social care staff, other agencies and these pupils to support their wellbeing and safe return to education.

Most leaders describe how they are continuing to maintain changes to school routines and the physical learning environment to implement robust hygiene procedures and promote social distancing in line with operational guidance produced by the Welsh Government. However, leaders of special schools in particular continue to raise concerns about the impact of health and safety measures on opportunities for pupils to interact socially when they are in school, or to maintain their friendships with their peers when learning at home. Leaders continue to reflect on how they can compensate for these lost opportunities, for example, by including more frequent opportunities for pupils to communicate with each other online.

Supporting the wellbeing of parents and carers

Nearly all special school and PRU leaders confirm that relationships with families have strengthened considerably since the outset of the pandemic. They describe how arrangements for keeping in touch and supporting their pupils and families have evolved during this period of national lockdown. Many leaders report staff welfare calls have identified when families are struggling with their child at home without the structure, routine and support provided by regular on-site attendance at the school or PRU. They describe how this allows the setting to offer additional support to the pupil and family. For example, one PRU has continued its intensive parent support by adapting the delivery of its on-site parent programme to offer virtual sessions for parents and their child. This approach is strengthening the parents' involvement in their child's experiences at the PRU, while reducing behaviour issues and promoting their engagement with learning.

Most leaders describe that the empathetic and positive working relationships between staff, pupils and their families have been key in promoting pupils' emotional wellbeing as well as developing trust during a period of considerable strain on families. Many outline how staff have consistently "gone the extra mile" to address the needs and anxieties of parents and pupils.

Attendance

While most leaders of special schools confirm that the attendance of pupils eligible for on-site provision is good, many leaders in PRUs report that pupils' attendance during the current national lockdown is generally low. They confirm that the rate for younger pupils is mostly higher than for older pupils, particularly those in key stage 4 who do not have access to their usual full curriculum due to restrictions.

Almost all leaders across both settings confirm that they have a good understanding of the reasons for individual pupil non-attendance. For example, they describe how a few parents and carers are shielding and others are concerned about the potential for infection if their child travels away from the home. These parents and carers consider face-to-face attendance at the school or PRU is too high risk, particularly if one or more pupils and staff in the school or PRU previously tested positive for COVID-19.

Promoting staff wellbeing

Nearly all leaders confirm that maintaining staff wellbeing remains a key priority. Many continue to affirm the hard work and personal commitment of their staff during this period in providing face-to-face and remote learning. In particular, staff willingness to remain flexible and respond positively to frequent changes, which are often at short notice.

Most leaders describe how they have accommodated the specific health needs and caring responsibilities of staff, including those shielding due to their own underlying health conditions or those of members in their household. They describe a range of strategies they have put in place to support staff wellbeing and manage anxieties, including providing access to mental health first aiders, establishing staff wellbeing and social media groups, weekly newsletters, virtual shout out walls and virtual coffee mornings.

A minority of PRU leaders confirm a very few staff have tested positive for COVID-19, which has typically led to self-isolation arrangements being introduced across the whole PRU. They confirm how these cases have raised anxiety levels with pupils, parents and staff.

Many PRU leaders report how staff absences related to COVID-19, in one case amounting to half of the staff, have exacerbated the complexities of leading and managing a PRU with relatively small staff numbers to meet the considerable and complex wellbeing and learning needs of pupils successfully. For example, several leaders in the PRUs contacted describe how they manage all-age multi-site provision, including outreach support and home tuition arrangements, as well as specialist support for pupils with complex backgrounds and needs.

Many leaders confirm that they have found the lack of clarity and consistency in the application of Welsh Government guidance that special schools and PRUs should remain open to support vulnerable learners challenging. This inconsistency has contributed to what leaders perceive as unrealistic expectations among parents as to what they can provide, and has compounded the pressures faced by senior leaders as they seek to balance considerations of risk with how they should prioritise and address pupils' and families' needs.

Promoting learning

Teaching

Leaders in all special schools and PRUs confirm that teaching staff use a range of different approaches to support pupils' engagement in learning during this national

lockdown. In nearly all cases, leaders report that staff have built on the lessons learnt during the first national lockdown to improve the co-ordination and delivery of teaching for on-site and remote learning, including online and remote hard copy learning packs.

Nearly all leaders confirm that provision continues to be led by the needs of individual pupils within the school or PRU, with a strong focus on developing the skills identified in each pupil's individual education plan. Many describe how teaching plans reflect the opportunity for pupils to develop additional skills at home, where appropriate. Leaders in most settings explain that the staff have continued to work with their person-centred approaches and continue to address the wide range of needs of pupils in their schools.

At Ysgol Bryn Castell, art therapy, music therapy, ICT, and wellbeing sessions are included in the weekly teaching and learning experiences. 'Mini' projects are used in place of the traditional termly topics to break up the pupils' learning into small chunks and to help maintain their interest across a wide range of different subject areas. For example, pupils engaged in an online activity to construct houses to represent Ann Frank's house as part of Holocaust week. Pupils shared their activities in the assembly.

Overall, teaching staff at most special schools and PRUs continue to provide a mixture of online activities and packs of learning resources for pupils and their families. To supplement these sessions, parents are provided with resource packs which include everything the parent or carer needs to conduct the session at home, for example, instructions, equipment to complete each task and symbol packs where required.

Notwithstanding the ongoing difficulty of addressing many pupils' complex needs while learning at home, leaders confirm their aim is to replicate the on-site experience as much as possible. In many special schools, staff have developed a 'virtual' timetable to support pupils in developing a routine for working from home. This includes designated active sessions during the school day to reduce pupils' screen time. In addition, many special schools continue to encourage outdoor learning experiences as part of the remote learning experience.

Online provision

Many leaders across both settings describe how during the period between the first and current national lockdowns, with issues to do with access to appropriate equipment and connectivity largely addressed, staff have increased and refined the use of digital platforms to enhance teaching and learning experiences.

For example, many describe how teaching staff incorporated more online learning into lessons while pupils were on-site in the period from September to December to develop pupils' digital competency skills further and build independence in their learning. A few leaders confirm that this period also provided the opportunity for staff to experiment with different platforms and web services for remote learning. As a result, for this national lockdown they have either moved towards a single platform or web service to minimise any confusion with pupils and parents and carers, or retained different web services to meet pupils' individual learning needs better.

In many special schools, leaders describe how they have allocated staff responsibilities to support and co-ordinate aspects of remote learning. For example, at one special school as well as providing onsite support, teaching assistants support remote teaching through their support and delivery of live teaching sessions. They produce and deliver physical resources and produce videos to promote pupil engagement and role model learning.

School leaders confirm that teaching staff upload a broad range of therapeutic and wellbeing exercises, activities and support resources for pupils and families relative to their needs, age, phase and department, as well as conducting live sessions. Leaders report the progressive development of staff confidence and expertise in using these approaches since the time of the first lockdown. They confirm that parents too are increasingly confident in uploading feedback on learning from home in the form of photos and videos.

A minority of PRU leaders report the more frequent use of live streaming during this national lockdown. They describe how strategies such as keeping to small groups and teaching assistants monitoring the chat for each session, and responding where appropriate, are helping to improve pupils' live online learning experiences.

Many PRU leaders report increased demands from pupils and parents for hard copy learning packs in preference to participation in on-site or online learning. They describe how more parents and carers report a greater reluctance from their children to engage in online learning because they are too easily distracted and want to use the access to devices to game online. Other parents express concerns about their child having too much screen time.

Many leaders of special schools report that the quality, content and suitability of live streaming has improved since the time of the first lockdown. Generally however they confirm there has been no increase in the volume of live interactions. Live streaming is used as one of a possible number of options to deliver teaching. However, many leaders across both sectors continue to report that online learning, and live streaming in particular, does not serve the needs of all pupils with complex needs. For example, leaders report that live streaming can place too much pressure on parents to be ready at a set time. In order to overcome this difficulty lessons are recorded in many schools and accessed as and when suits the family.

Communication with parents and carers to support learning

Most leaders of special schools confirm that staff continue to make increased use of educational communication apps in order to keep in touch with pupils and their families even when pupils are self-isolating or shielding. Leaders at these schools confirm how staff, pupil and parent confidence and expertise has developed in using these approaches as well as the refined use of these devices since the time of the first lockdown.

Many leaders of special schools and PRUs outline how staff have further strengthened strategies to help parents and carers to support their children's learning. Many leaders describe the bespoke guidance teaching staff have developed to help parents and carers to better support their children with online learning. Topics include, for example, how to maintain safe online use and

developing the knowledge and skills to navigate Hwb. In one PRU, staff have adapted teaching activities to include experiences such as 'Fresher Friday'. This activity involves pupils, parents and carers completing an outside task, which they then share online with class members and staff.

Staff at **Pembrokeshire Learning Centre** work with pupils, parents and carers to develop skills in using technology to access live streamed lessons and online learning. Teachers and teaching assistants deliver the lessons, with the use of break out rooms to support smaller groups of pupils or provide additional one-to-one support. If pupils or parents and carers are experiencing difficulties, staff are available to answer any questions. Where appropriate, additional resources are used to target and support specific pupils or families. Leaders report this has been a successful strategy, with very few pupils causing concern and all pupils and families in regular contact with staff.

However, most leaders confirm that the challenges faced by many parents and carers in supporting their children's learning at home have increased since the previous period of national lockdown. This may be because of the complexity of their children's needs, a lack of skills to support learning, as well as the increased pressures parents face in balancing home learning with other responsibilities over this extended period.

Monitoring quality of teaching

Many leaders across both sectors confirm they have refined approaches to teaching and learning over the period of the pandemic as part of their self-evaluation and improvement planning processes. These processes include reflecting on lessons learnt from the first national lockdown, feedback from pupil, parent and carer and staff surveys, and closer monitoring of pupil engagement and the quality of teaching.

Changes made include revisions to the structure of the school day to ensure on-site and remote teaching and learning aligns more closely. Many PRU leaders in particular confirm how remote teaching and learning is now broadly similar to the on-site provision, but adapted to help ensure engagement and challenge for pupils learning at home. For example, a few PRUs have focused more on promoting independent learning through use of skills challenge activities, which pupils are familiar with and respond to positively.

Similarly, staff at one special school have re-evaluated the impact of the school environment on autistic pupils based on their experience of teaching during the pandemic. Eliminating unnecessary interactions and transitions, providing more outdoor learning, and further targeting one-to-one and small group breakaway activities are now strategies which form part of the school's standard way of working.

In a few cases, leaders report that teaching staff are trialling different approaches towards pedagogy. For example, staff at one PRU are focusing on pupil-led teaching to help pupils with the transition between the PRU and home during this time, and to encourage greater independence. Leaders in this PRU state that this approach is working well, with an increase in problem-solving and investigative approaches, which pupils respond to positively.

Leaders at **Glanynant Learning Centre** (PRU) describe how they have refined teaching on-site and for remote learning during the morning to follow a broad three lesson structure: literacy, numeracy and topic(s). Teaching staff usually design and plan short tasks to keep pupils focussed, particularly those learning at home. In addition, pupils complete their own online learning skills challenges in literacy and numeracy. During the afternoon, teaching focuses on wellbeing tasks such as a scavenger hunt or physical activities.

A few leaders across special schools and PRUs describe the processes they use for monitoring the quality of online teaching. They confirm that approaches such as monitoring web services daily to review the quality of planning, resources and feedback mirror established quality assurance processes such as scrutiny of pupils' work. In one PRU, this approach has enabled leaders to identify specific areas for improvement, including ensuring that resources are always accessible to all pupils and that the content is appropriate to their individual needs.

Monitoring pupil engagement

In nearly all cases, leaders confirm that they monitor pupils' level of engagement closely. Many leaders report that they check engagement through pupils' participation in online classrooms, view work uploaded and monitor the chat function of live lessons. Overall, leaders of special schools maintain that pupils' engagement with their learning is good and note that increased communication and consultation with parents has helped to improve this.

Generally, leaders feel that the school's monitoring of pupil engagement over time has helped to identify specific areas for improvement. For example, in one special school, pupils who did not engage during the first lockdown have been targeted to attend school on a regular basis. However, a few leaders continue to report that they experience difficulty with levels of engagement of remote learning for a few autistic pupils. They note that these pupils miss the structure found at school which is not easily replicated at home.

In a minority of cases, PRU leaders report that pupils' overall levels of engagement are high. This is most often the case with pupils where there is intensive support in place to assist their engagement with learning.

Leaders in **Pembrokeshire learning Centre** (PRU) has identified a few pupils with behavioural learning difficulties who require intensive support to maintain consistent engagement. PRU staff work with the local authority who, in part, use the wellbeing grant to support targeted activities for this group of pupils. A key focus has been on activities to support these pupils towards their transition to post-PRU placements, including working with other agencies such as the local further education provider, Future Works and Careers Wales. Leaders report that this proactive approach has a positive effect in motivating this group of pupils and alleviating the anxieties they have about their 'next steps'.

Overall, however, many PRU leaders report pupils' level of engagement with their learning is variable. In around half of PRUs, leaders express concern about the decreasing levels of engagement from Year 11 pupils in particular. In a few cases, this is because they are reluctant to attend on-site knowing that their peers in

mainstream schools are not in school and they may feel a stigma attached to having to attend the PRU. In a few cases, leaders affirm that older pupils feel ‘let down by the system’ because they do not have access to their usual vocational and work experience placements or specialist wellbeing support such as face-to-face counselling. In one PRU, leaders describe how Year 11 pupils are increasingly reluctant to engage in on-site and remote learning, but are engaging well with staff for pastoral support. They report how these pupils have lost confidence and trust, and refer to not seeing the point in learning, as ‘there is nothing to look forward to at the end of Year 11’.

In addition, in a few cases, PRU leaders express concerns about pupils with dual-registered placements during this time. They describe how these pupils access on-site or remote learning for the days they are registered at the PRU but do not always receive or access teaching or support from their mainstream schools for the remainder of the school week. For example, where mainstream schools are open, dual-registered pupils often refuse to access split placements. This is partly due to parental concerns about their child having multiple sites to attend for education and increasing the risk of infection. For other pupils, their dual-registered provision is not offering or providing direct teaching and learning support.

Learning experiences

Leaders in nearly all PRUs and special schools maintain they continue to adapt to the changing demands of the pandemic by providing as broad a range of learning experiences as possible to reflect the differing needs of individual pupils. However, most leaders across both settings continue to express concerns about the impact of the narrowing of the curriculum caused by the pandemic on the development of pupils’ skills. In particular, they report that work-related and practical life skills sessions that are so important for developing pupils’ communication skills, independence, team working and self-esteem have been severely affected.

Across both settings, nearly all leaders describe the importance that consistency and routine bring to their pupils in providing a sense of structure and ‘normality’ to their day. Leaders report this is the case for all pupils, whether they are attending on-site provision, learning from home or both. In one special school, for example, all pupils in the senior part of the school log on by 9.15am to register and go through their learning plans for the day with staff. At the end of the day, all pupils and staff meet to reflect on their achievements during the day.

At Ysgol Hafod Lon, many pupils learn at home during the current lockdown. However, the school has endeavoured to ensure there is as little disruption to the normal timetable and curriculum for these learners as possible. Morning activities focus on skills development and individual pupil targets. Afternoon activities for primary pupils are based on thematic work while secondary pupils continue to follow the 6-week rotating curriculum. Every pupil has an online physical education session before lunchtime. Those that are able to are given extra tasks such as cleaning their room, hoovering, or helping with the recycling. There are online singing sessions with the music teacher for most pupils every day and there are ‘books of the week’ for different aged pupils across the school, where teaching assistants read aloud and sign stories to pupils at home.

Leaders in both settings confirm curriculum arrangements continue to have a strong focus on promoting the emotional health and wellbeing of their pupils. Many leaders of special schools report that teaching staff integrate therapeutic approaches into lessons throughout the day, and through physical exercise sessions such as dance and the daily mile. Many PRU leaders describe how the personal and social education (PSE) curriculum is central to all aspects of the curriculum delivery.

Pupils at **Glanynant Learning Centre** completed wellbeing projects with a strong focus on engagement with the community before and during the current lockdown. For example, at Christmas, pupils focused on the theme of 'thinking of others', which they developed initially through the school council. They planned and organised a large raffle to buy thank you gifts for NHS staff in the local hospital. The pupils collected gifts locally, ran the raffle, sold tickets and wrapped almost 150 gifts for staff at the hospital. Several staff from the hospital, local and national actors, authors and sports personalities commented on the pupils' success on the PRU's Twitter feed. Leaders report that pupils returning to these positive messages in January were highly motivated, and that their involvement in the project improved their confidence and self-esteem greatly.

Provision for skills

Most leaders across both settings describe how teaching staff seek to ensure that learning experiences continue to promote the development of skills relevant to pupils' needs, abilities and future progression pathways. For example, many leaders of special schools describe how planning includes a strong focus on the development of pupils' independence skills.

At **Ysgol Heol Goffa**, staff plan a wide range of activities throughout the school week to develop pupils' social and life skills. For example, staff record tasks such as 'how to make your bed', 'how to change your bed' and 'how to prepare breakfast'. Pupils use the recorded sessions to practise these skills in the home setting. Parents upload pictures of the pupils engaging in the activities using an app. The headteacher reports families have found these activities and the guidance provided by staff in the lessons particularly helpful.

Many PRU leaders confirm how teaching staff are continuing to support and develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, they describe the increased focus on improving pupils' ICT skills during the pandemic and how they have continued to adapt the curriculum to improve pupils' skills in their use of ICT equipment and learning platforms. This focus has enabled pupils to access learning with increasing independence when learning from home.

Responses to restrictions

While most leaders of special schools and PRUs continue to express concerns about the impact of restrictions on pupils' access to practical and vocational off-site opportunities, many provide examples of how staff respond creatively to replicate these opportunities on-site as far as possible. In one PRU where teachers usually plan practical activities for science, staff plan investigations that pupils can access

on-site and at home. For example, recently pupils explored the topic of changing states when making a chocolate cake as part of their science curriculum.

At **Ysgol Tir Morfa** pupils were previously able to work in the school café where they learned valuable independence and communication skills that they were able to consolidate during visits to the local community. In response to restrictions caused by the pandemic, the focus has been on pupils applying their planning and budgeting skills by making online purchases for provisions and having them delivered to school. In addition, the school has made provision for pupils to prepare and make their own lunch.

A few leaders across both sectors describe how they have been able to make use of staff re-deployed from within the local authority to extend opportunities for pupils to access outdoor learning.

At **The Court**, an additional member of staff from the local authority outdoor education centre is based on the site of the school during the pandemic. The instructor offers pupils a wide range of opportunities for creative outdoor learning. The headteacher believes that these activities have helped to build pupils' confidence and wellbeing, as well as providing opportunities to develop important subject knowledge and valuable life skills such as turn-taking, problem-solving, and managing risk.

A majority of leaders describe the opportunities available for pupils who rely on the use of local leisure facilities for access to physical education activities as very limited, as all leisure centres remain closed. There are reduced opportunities also for pupils to participate in outdoor learning activities such as horse-riding and forest schools. Additionally, leaders in a few PRUs describe their on-site provision for physical education as poor, because of a lack of suitable space in which to deliver an alternative range of activities normally accessed in the local leisure centres.

Provision for home tuition

In PRUs where leaders have responsibility for managing the home tuition service, leaders report how adapting the curriculum to enable access for these pupils has been an additional challenge, particularly with the increase in the number of pupil accessing home tuition on medical grounds, most often for reasons of mental health and increased levels of anxiety.

At **Powys PRU North**, the PRU has adapted its digital platform due to an increase in home tuition pupil numbers to allow full access for these pupils. Initially home tuition pupils received tutor input for up to 10 hours per week delivered in their homes. As subsidiary registered pupils to the PRU, pupils could not access PRU resources via Hwb or resources provided by their mainstream school. The teacher-in-charge has now resolved this issue and gained Hwb access for all home tuition pupils. All home tuition pupils now access an online timetable and have full curriculum access including live-streamed lessons delivered by PRU staff.

Destinations and transition

Across both settings, leaders report that older pupils in particular have suffered from not being able to access a range of support and formal and informal learning experiences that assist them in making informed choices about their futures. These restrictions are particularly affecting the engagement of key stage 4 pupils in relation to their qualification outcomes and transition arrangements.

At **Powys PRUs North and South**, leaders confirm their main concern relates to access to work experience and college placements. These would traditionally be an important aspect of the curriculum for key stage 4 pupils at this time of the year. For pupils planning to access a college placement at the end of Year 11, preparations have been disrupted. For example, leaders consider the option of a virtual tour of college is not adequate preparation for the needs of the pupils. Pupils have concerns that much college learning may be online due to the pandemic, which they would find too challenging. As a result, pupils are reluctant to make college applications.

As a result, in around half of PRUs, leaders are concerned by a potential increase in those pupils who may become not in education, employment, or training (NEET) when they finish their PRU placement. This because they consider it is likely that current Year 11 pupils may not complete or gain the necessary qualifications to support college placements sufficiently well. In some cases key stage 4 pupils are not applying for college placements because they are reluctant to think about their next steps. In one PRU, leaders state that they are discussing options for these pupils with the local authority. They believe pupils would benefit from the opportunity to remain at the PRU for an additional year to reach their goals.

Curriculum for Wales

While most leaders across both settings confirm the fundamental philosophy, principles and purposes of the Curriculum for Wales are at the heart of their work, many leaders report that progress in its implementation is at varying stages of development. The majority of leaders refer to changes in staff roles and leadership responsibilities for the areas of learning and experiences (AOLEs). These settings refer to the opportunities that the pandemic has brought, particularly in relation to adjusted working arrangements providing them with time to reflect and shape the curriculum provision. This includes for example, greater staff collaboration in trialling AOLEs across existing topics, mapping existing and planned provision, and increased opportunities for staff development.

At **Pembrokeshire Learning Centre**, staff are using the current time to plan and develop their approaches for the Curriculum for Wales. The teacher-in-charge reports that it has been even more critical at this time to deliver high interest lessons to engage pupils. Teachers share best practice from their lessons as examples to share with colleagues and use these experiences to inform their mapping and planning arrangements for the Curriculum for Wales. Additionally, the PRU is developing the teaching assistant role to include increasing opportunities for these staff to contribute to curriculum development.

At **Ysgol Penmaes**, the headteacher explained that the school has been working to embed aspects of the Curriculum for Wales into its schemes of work and teaching for some time. It has re-organised its curriculum to align with the areas of learning and experience and to fully incorporate the four purposes into the school's planning. The headteacher welcomes the opportunities for thematic planning these provide and considers they represent a natural progression from the approach the school has always taken. She confirmed that the last few months have allowed for some breathing space to stop and evaluate the school's provision regarding aspects of the Curriculum for Wales. Staff have had the opportunity to discuss and think about different aspects of the reform, working individually or in small groups, with a particular focus on reviewing and strengthening the school's approach to assessment.

A few schools state that they have temporarily slowed down in their planning for curriculum reform. At the current time, they are directing resources at supporting the emotional wellbeing of their pupils and their families.

Provision and therapy

Generally, nearly all leaders across both settings confirm that statutory processes for annual reviews have continued to take place throughout the pandemic in accordance with required timescales. In nearly all cases, schools and PRUs facilitate these meetings online, with leaders reporting high attendance from parents and service providers. A few leaders describe how they make arrangements for parents who do not use online platforms to attend these meetings in person safely.

Nearly all leaders confirm that multi-disciplinary meetings between representatives from the school, social care and health services have continued to support pupils' identified needs. In a few cases, leaders describe how staff from external specialist services now attend on site to work directly with school staff and are beginning to provide face-to-face support for those pupils attending school.

At **Ysgol Cedewain**, the headteacher confirmed that most therapy providers now attend the school in person following guidelines set out in the school's and their own risk assessments. This includes input from physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy as well as hearing impaired and visually impaired services. These staff work individually with pupils and provide advice for school staff, as well as providing therapy for pupils learning at home where health and safety considerations allow.

However, leaders' concerns raised at the time of the last report about the slow pace and limited extent of the return to face-to-face working have increased since our last report. Many leaders contacted at this time describe how most support from allied health professionals continues to be provided via online platforms and that there has been little change in how services operate since the first lockdown period. In one school, for example, the headteacher described how staff from speech and language, and hearing and visual impairment teams have only recently begun seeing pupils in person again, while occupational therapy and physiotherapy services remain much reduced. In addition, as noted in our previous report, because of health and safety considerations, hydrotherapy sessions have not resumed in most settings.

Leaders of special schools and PRUs continue to emphasise the impact on pupils' progress and development where services offer only online counselling and interventions. While leaders value this provision overall, nearly all emphasise their view that online support is not as effective as face-to-face working in meeting the needs of pupils. In particular, leaders continue to express concern at the variation in how Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) delivers its service across health boards nationally, and the increased pressure these services are under. At one PRU, the teacher-in-charge confirmed that the support and therapies provided by both allied health professionals and the local authority's own specialist SEN services have not returned to providing face-to-face work with either staff, parents or pupils. The PRU reports that this is having a detrimental impact on both pupils and parents. Pupils are less inclined to engage in virtual meetings and parents are becoming increasingly frustrated with increased waiting times for assessment, including diagnosis.

In a few PRUs, leaders describe how the ongoing face-to-face support from the youth service and youth justice service continue to support curriculum engagement with harder to reach pupils. However, this support is inconsistent across local authorities, with a minority of PRU leaders reporting that whilst pupils can still access these service providers remotely this is inadequate to meet the needs of the pupils.

Despite these challenges, many leaders of special schools describe how schools are responding creatively to support pupils' therapeutic needs themselves within their daily timetables as far as possible. For example, in one school where the on-site provision for speech and language therapy has not yet resumed, teaching staff have increased pupils' social communication skills sessions as a short-term measure. At another school, the headteacher described how the school has extended its provision for online therapy during this time, and is sharing live and pre-recorded sessions on a wide range of therapeutic interventions, including sensory massage, social stories and play therapy.

Generally, where schools have invested previously in the training or employment of specialist qualified staff, leaders feel confident that school staff have been able to compensate for any shortfalls in the provision of externally provided services.

Ysgol Maes Hyfryd has historically placed a strong emphasis on training staff to deliver therapeutic interventions in-house rather than relying on external staff. For example, one teacher is a qualified occupational therapist who specialises in sensory integration, two HLTAs provide specialist support for speech and language therapy and two teachers are qualified to provide support for pupils with multi-sensory impairments. As a result, the headteacher feels the school has been able to maintain its support for pupils' identified therapeutic needs during this time, even when therapists have been working remotely and provision has been reduced.

A few leaders in both special schools and PRUs confirm the frustration expressed by school staff around the differing expectations of school and local authority specialist staff and health professionals for face-to-face working with pupils. They describe how this has been a cause of resentment among school staff who see this discrepancy as unfair and that it amounts to 'one rule for us, one rule for others'. At

one PRU, the teacher-in-charge expressed his surprise that the local authority's health and safety officer and attendance and welfare officer are able to attend school and meet with key staff while SEN officers do not.

Professional learning

Nearly all leaders across both settings report that they have continued to provide a broad and varied programme of relevant professional learning activities to support the needs of pupils throughout the period of the pandemic. This includes required training in mandatory areas such as safeguarding and food hygiene, as well as whole school professional development to meet the identified priorities within the school or PRU's strategic improvement plan.

At **Conwy Education Centre**, leaders with responsibility for teaching and learning have prioritised a professional learning programme to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Actions include reviewing the whole school approach to evaluating teaching and learning and work scrutiny for example, as well as improving staff's understanding of aspects particularly relevant to the PRU's context, such as approaches to teaching and learning of pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs, nurture class methodology and play therapy.

Many leaders confirm that they continue to plan bespoke individualised programmes tailored to the professional development needs of individual staff members. At one special school, for example, these include opportunities for staff to develop their specialisms further in areas such as sensory integration, communication strategies or in particular curriculum areas, such as mathematics.

Around half of leaders in both sectors describe how they have continued to strengthen opportunities for staff to develop their understanding of trauma-informed practice, the impact of adverse childhood experiences, and how to support the mental health and resilience of pupils. This emphasis reflects concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the emotional and mental wellbeing of pupils.

Many leaders describe how staff have taken advantage of online training providers to enable staff to access professional learning more flexibly, for example, when working from home. This has enabled staff to access a greater range of professional learning at a time that fits in with their other commitments.

At **Ysgol Bryn Derw**, the school has made the most of the opportunities available to staff to develop their professional learning over the last few months. The online professional learning programme has included modules to support pupils' additional learning needs in areas such as developing pupils' communication skills and the use of picture exchange communication systems. The school has also benefitted from videos created by the school's two occupational therapy students for professional learning purposes. The school's home working offer has clear expectations for staff to develop their understanding and practice in aspects such as the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal [Wales] Act, and the Curriculum for Wales as well as producing resources for learning.

However, a few leaders emphasise the importance of retaining oversight of the processes for staff to ask for and access professional learning and development. At one special school, staff now identify particular and personal professional learning needs dependent on their class needs or personal interest and leaders evaluate the suitability of this training against the school improvement priorities. The school is no longer asking for expressions of interest around any new professional learning that is offered, but asking staff who are interested how they plan to lead and evaluate the provision following the professional learning session.

In a minority of PRUs and special schools, leaders confirm that the main focus of professional learning over the last few months has been to develop approaches to the use of online platforms to support remote learning and hold meetings. They report that the current situation has allowed them to move forward with this objective at pace. Over a short space of time, staff have become increasingly competent and confident in their use of digital technology. Staff are increasingly confident in providing advice and guidance to parents on these platforms and in recommending different apps to support home learning.

Many leaders describe how staff at the school or PRU participate in a wide range of local, regional and national networks to develop their understanding of issues relevant to their setting's professional practice. This includes forums facilitated by the regional consortia in areas such as blended learning, developing oracy and the Curriculum for Wales, as well as in research projects led by Cardiff University, for example. In addition, many leaders describe how they are working together with other schools and PRUs, for example through the PRU ADEW (Association of Directors of Education Wales) headteachers network and the South and North Wales Associations of Special School headteachers, to develop practice in relation to the ALN transformation agenda and Curriculum for Wales. Teaching staff belong to Hwb networks for the different AoLEs and are networking to develop resources and share practice.