

Section 1

Sector summaries: Independent specialist colleges

Context

In January 2021, there were seven registered independent specialist colleges in Wales. This is the same as in January 2020. These colleges educate around 200 learners aged 16 years and over. The colleges provide for a diverse range of learners' needs, including autistic spectrum condition, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and profound and multiple learning difficulties. In four of the colleges, many learners live in residential homes attached to the college.

As part of our engagement work with the sector, we contacted all independent specialist colleges remotely at least twice. The focus for each discussion with heads of education was the wellbeing of learners, staff and senior leaders, how colleges were supporting teaching and promoting learning, implications for the college in the future, and leadership throughout the pandemic.

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Wellbeing

In all colleges, leaders made many adjustments throughout the year to promote the safety and physical wellbeing of learners. They implemented measures to mitigate the risk of infection, in line with relevant guidance from the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales. This included reviewing arrangements for social distancing, movement around the college campus, regular cleaning, and the wearing of personal protection equipment.

The colleges' therapeutic provision, in areas such as occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, continued to support learners throughout the year. By the summer term, this support had resumed on a face-to-face basis in all colleges. Where learners and their families had been isolating or shielding, therapists engaged remotely to support learners, their parents and their families. In general, multi disciplinary meetings and annual reviews continued online, with external specialist staff visiting only where necessary.

Generally, learner wellbeing remained strong throughout the year. In residential colleges, where learning continued on-site for most of the year, learners returned to college in September enthusiastic to learn. They attended and engaged well despite the many changes that they experienced over the year. Most learners responded positively to infection control measures. However, in three of the colleges with residential homes attached, the physical and emotional wellbeing of learners became a concern when they had to remain in the homes for extended periods, following cases of infection there.

Similarly, in four colleges, infection control measures restricted transition arrangements for new learners joining the college in September 2020. College staff had limited opportunities to visit learners' previous schools to assess their needs and abilities, and learners were unable to attend the college in advance to familiarise themselves with their new staff and surroundings. In two cases, these restrictions impacted negatively on the attendance and engagement of a few learners.

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Teaching, learning and the curriculum

All leaders continued to adjust the colleges' usual arrangements for teaching and learning over the year, to take account of the changing context and to implement measures to reduce the risk of infection.

In the autumn and spring terms, adjustments focused on reviewing groupings of learners to reduce social contact across the college and to enable physical distancing in workshops and classrooms. In residential colleges that also educate day learners, for example, leaders made separate arrangements for day and residential learners. In colleges that cater for day learners, these changes included part-time models of attendance with provision for distance learning made for the days that learners were not on-site.

In three colleges, teachers' planning focused strongly on activities that address learners' wellbeing explicitly.

The teaching staff in all colleges adjusted their planning creatively to overcome restrictions. However, increased health and safety measures had a negative impact on the breadth of learning experiences available to learners. For example, the loss of access to off-site providers and the wider community limited their leisure and work experiences and opportunities to practise independence skills or access therapeutic provision. In addition, providing distance learning for this group of learners was particularly difficult. Some could not engage with online platforms meaningfully, while others required more specialised support to learn at home than was available to them in that setting.

All leaders confirmed that most learners were on track to achieve their accreditation outcomes. However, they acknowledged that extended periods of lockdown of the residential houses had considerable impact on the progress of learners. For example, restrictions limited their opportunities to develop their social, communication and independence skills. Leaders have significant concerns about the readiness of learners in the final year of their course to progress successfully to their next stage of life and learning. In one college, the head of education had received no information from local authorities about the proposed destinations of leavers by Easter, and so college staff were unable to plan meaningfully to support them.

A recovery curriculum focusing on health and wellbeing

Leaders at National Star in Wales – Mamhilad described how they implemented a recovery curriculum in the autumn term to ensure a greater focus on the health and wellbeing of learners. This included relaxation sessions at the end of each day and a focus on learners' health and emotions in the content and delivery of sessions. Leaders encouraged teaching staff to reduce the pressure on learners wherever they felt this to be beneficial, for example when reviewing learners' progress against their targets or completing the assessments of new learners.

Wellbeing breaks

At Coleg Elidyr, leaders described how staff planned wellbeing breaks within their teaching sessions. These activities included small animal therapy, aromatherapy, art, yoga, music and dance. Each learner's individual learning plan included a strong focus on their wellbeing and staff reviewed their progress in this area regularly. In addition, the college moved its 'student forum' meetings online to enable learners from different 'bubbles' across the college to provide their feedback and help shape different aspects of their learning experiences during the pandemic.

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Leadership

The priorities of all leaders throughout the year were to ensure the wellbeing of staff and learners, and to maintain continuity and quality in the learning experiences they provided to learners. In four colleges, the impact of adjustments to the colleges' usual ways of working on staff wellbeing over the year was significant. In one residential college, for example, leaders referred to the demotivation of staff caused by the extended closure of the residential homes and the impact of this on the quality of learning experiences teaching staff could provide. In the spring and summer terms, the availability of testing and vaccination helped to improve staff confidence and wellbeing.

In four colleges, leaders felt considerable pressure from the volume of guidance they had to interpret over the year, and the challenges caused where operational guidance did not refer to the context of residential colleges. In particular, there were additional difficulties when guidance from different public bodies conflicted and created further uncertainty and anxiety among staff.

Generally, where colleges belong to wider organisations, leaders valued the support they received from colleagues in these organisations. In addition, their membership of the professional association of specialist college leaders provided them with useful opportunities to share experiences and learning.

In the three colleges that cater exclusively for day learners, regular communication with parents during this period helped to strengthen relationships with parents and carers. Parents appreciated the contact and support provided by staff, particularly where learners were being educated mainly in the home environment.

In residential colleges, communication between the educational and residential staff strengthened during the pandemic, as these different teams worked together to address the challenges presented.

All leaders continued to adapt professional learning over the year. They encouraged staff to take part in a wide range of learning that reflected the specific needs of learners, as well as strategies to support learner wellbeing and distance learning. Increased access to professional learning online improved the potential to tailor professional learning to individual staff members' development.

A new approach to professional learning

At Beechwood College, the adaptations they had to make to arrangements for teaching and learning during the year caused them to review their approach to professional learning. They reported that these opportunities increased significantly as staff worked together to share ideas to support learners' wellbeing and learning. This included a greater emphasis on communication strategies and the use of online platforms to capture learners' progress and engagement. Leaders extended their approach to professional learning by including opportunities for this to take place in daily briefings and staff wellbeing sessions on a 'bite-sized' basis. Leaders reported that these approaches helped staff to respond flexibly to the changing circumstances the college faced during the year.