

## Section 1

# Sector summaries: Local government education services

### Context

Local government education services include those provided or commissioned by a single local authority as well as those provided in partnership with other local authorities. School improvement services are provided largely in conjunction with four regional consortia on behalf of local authorities, though the model for how this works varies around Wales. This year, the local authorities that were originally part of the ERW region continued to revise their collaborative working arrangements.

This year, we did not carry out inspections of local government education services because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We continued to work with the three local authorities that required follow-up activity as a result of their core inspections.

Our local authority link inspectors continued their regular work with local authorities and regional consortia. In the autumn term of 2020, much of this work focused on the support that local authorities and regional consortia had provided to schools and PRUs to address the challenges caused by the pandemic. This work resulted in detailed feedback to each local authority and consortium to support their self evaluation and the publication of a thematic report, 'Local Authority and Regional Consortia Support for Schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19' (Estyn, 2021p). We published the report in January 2021 and it contains five recommendations for the Welsh Government, local authorities and regional consortia. We discussed the progress made with these recommendations with officers in the summer term. We sent letters giving details of this progress to each local authority and regional consortium. Our findings about how local authorities and regional consortia supported schools to provide distance learning and help vulnerable learners have informed this report.

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# Sector summaries: Local government education services

## Wellbeing

This academic year, schools and PRUs across Wales have prioritised pupil wellbeing. Local authorities and regional consortia responded well by providing guidance, resources and professional learning opportunities to help school staff to address pupils' needs in the changing circumstances resulting from the pandemic. In many local authorities, closer working arrangements were forged between education and children's services. This helped officers to respond quickly and avoid duplication in their support for individual learners, their families and schools. Much of the professional learning and guidance offered to leaders, teachers and support staff focused on understanding how trauma can affect children and young people, and how staff can identify those who are struggling and provide support for them.

In the autumn term, when schools and PRUs re-opened to all pupils, typically around 85% of pupils attended (Welsh Government, 2021b). For most of the term, rates of attendance were between 80% and 90%. However, the number of pupils attending declined through late November and into December as the rate of COVID-19 cases increased across the country. Throughout the autumn term, local authority officers engaged with pupils and their families to encourage them to attend school. Despite this, pupil attendance across Wales varied depending on the context of the local authority. In local authorities that were badly affected by the pandemic, including areas with high numbers of pupils eligible for free school meals, attendance levels were only around 50% by the end of the autumn term. Older secondary aged pupils had the lowest attendance at this time. The Education Policy Institute (2021c) reported that attendance in Wales was lower and varied more than in other nations in the United Kingdom. In the summer term, directors of education remained concerned about attendance levels and barriers to pupils re-engaging with schools. At the end of May 2021, for example, the average attendance level across all local authorities was 88% in comparison to around 94% in 2019.

This year, there has been an increase in the number of parents who chose to educate their children at home. Prior to the pandemic, the number of pupils being educated at home was rising, but there has been a sharper increase this year, with all the local authorities in Wales reporting a higher rate of pupils being educated at home compared to 2019 (Welsh Government, 2021m). The Welsh Government postponed the introduction of statutory guidance and regulations on elective home education due to COVID-19. This means that local authorities still have limited responsibilities and powers around children educated at home. Nonetheless, in many local authorities, officers provided additional support and guidance to families who had chosen to educate their children at home. In Anglesey, officers established an elective home education forum to help to strengthen the procedures around home education. In Blaenau Gwent, officers linked children educated at home with schools to enable them to have support from professionals with home learning. In a few cases, support from local authorities across Wales gave families the confidence to reintegrate their children into school.



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# Sector summaries:

## Local government education services

In January 2021, the Children's Commissioner published a report *Coronavirus and Me* (2021a) based on a survey of around 20,000 children in Wales. The survey questioned pupils about whether they felt happy or were worried, sad, or lonely. Three-in-five seven-year-old pupils reported being happy compared to around one-in-five pupils who were 17 and 18. When asked about support for emotional and mental health, three-in-five pupils aged 12 to 18 said that they were not happy to ask for help from counselling services provided through their school (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2021a). The Welsh Government gave local authorities an additional £1.25 million funding this year to increase the capacity of counselling services. Some local authorities provide these services directly, but more commonly the service is commissioned from an external provider. While some counselling services resumed face-to-face sessions with children and young people during the autumn term, others continued to provide sessions online or over the telephone.

Other local authority specialist services also continued to provide a mix of online and face-to-face support during the late spring and the summer term. This proved difficult for pupils, particularly for those who are vulnerable. In the summer term, a few leaders of special schools and PRUs expressed frustration at the inconsistent approaches to on-site support and therapy across different specialist services and in different local authorities. In around half of PRUs, leaders confirm that support from counsellors, CAMHS and the Youth Service and Youth Justice teams was continuing to take place online.

In our survey with pupils, parents and school staff in autumn 2020, we asked about the opportunities that pupils had to take exercise. Seventy-seven per cent agreed that the school was offering them sufficient exercise opportunities. In many local authorities, youth, play and sports team members provided support for schools to engage pupils in physical activities. In Newport, the 'Get Active Primary School Challenge' was launched to help improve children's fitness levels following the school closure periods.

### Teaching, learning and the curriculum

This year, nearly all pupils in Wales worked remotely for at least part of the spring term. This meant that local authorities and regional consortia needed to continue to adapt their support and guidance to schools around teaching and learning to help school leaders and teachers to manage rapidly changing circumstances.

In our survey in the autumn term, many of the headteachers who responded felt that local authorities had been proactive in providing digital devices and internet connectivity to pupils without access to these at home. Teachers and governors were less positive about this support. Around half of governors said that local authorities had provided effective support in this area. Although many teachers from primary schools and PRUs, and a majority of those from special schools, said that schools were helping pupils to overcome barriers to learning at home, only around half of the secondary school teachers and a minority of the teachers from all-age schools who responded to our survey agreed with this. In the spring term, when schools



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## Sector summaries: Local government education services

closed again to pupils, it was still the case that not all pupils could access online learning. The Children's Commissioner's report (2021b) identified that 12% of the schools that responded to their survey indicated that they have more than 20% of learners without access to a device, and almost all indicated that some proportion of their learners were sharing devices. Local authority officers identified an increased demand from families for support to help pupils to learn remotely in the spring term. In addition to pupils having to share devices with family members, local authorities identified other barriers to remote learning, including pupils living in rural areas where mobile wireless internet coverage is poor and an increase in the number of pupils recognised as disadvantaged though their eligibility for free school meals. Directors of education recognise the need for a long-term strategy to address digital exclusion. They are aware of the need to build on the work done so far to improve access to technology and recognise that this is key to ensuring that pupils are prepared well for a society where there is an increasing focus on working in an online environment. They also recognise the benefits that the enhanced digital skills of both teachers and pupils have on ensuring the provision of rich and varied learning experiences. Ceredigion County Council established their e-sgol provision prior to the start of the pandemic. One of the original objectives of the provision was to broaden the choice for A level pupils by delivering remote lessons. During the pandemic, this resource was used to enrich the education of pupils in Ceredigion and across Wales. Officers secured tutors in 10 subjects for pupils in Years 11 to 13. Sessions were offered bilingually where possible. Three hundred pupils in Ceredigion and 3,000 pupils across Wales attended sessions.

In the autumn term, pupils had fallen behind with reading and writing skills, and school closure periods had a negative impact on the speaking and social skills of younger pupils in the foundation phase. These issues remained in the summer term. Across Wales, local authorities and regional consortia continued to work with schools to address these issues. They retained a focus on supporting schools to develop pupils' skills while taking care to promote positive language around this work for schools, pupils and parents, for example avoiding terms such as 'catch up'.

One of the aims of the Welsh Government's (2020e) 'Recruit, recover and raise standards programme' was to provide support for pupils in Welsh medium schools who live in non-Welsh speaking households. These pupils had not had opportunities to hear and speak Welsh as often as usual. Local authorities put a number of initiatives in place to support schools and pupils. Several local authorities, including Gwynedd and Carmarthenshire, used their immersion facilities to provide additional support for pupils, and Cardiff increased its immersion provision to help cope with demand. Officers in the regional consortia also provided support for schools. For example, the EAS placed members of its Welsh support team in Welsh-medium primary schools across the region during the autumn term to support staff and pupils to address the shortfall in pupils' skills.



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# Sector summaries:

## Local government education services

Local authority services to support pupils with special educational needs found ways to continue their support for pupils while COVID-19 restrictions on visitors to school were in place. For example, in Caerphilly, the regional Sensory and Communication Support Service (SENCOM) worked remotely with pupils through video conferencing technology and provided bespoke training to school staff so that they could support pupils with hearing or visual impairments. In the summer term, headteachers from primary and secondary schools reported that they needed more support from local authorities to prepare for the new additional learning needs act.

Across Wales, regional consortia and local authority officers have seen the COVID 19 pandemic as an opportunity to focus on developing the ethos and principles of the Curriculum for Wales, for example through the focus on health and wellbeing and the increase in pupils' and teachers' digital skills. In Powys, challenge advisers promoted the use of the pedagogical principles to enrich pupils' learning. In Flintshire, officers provided training on using the outdoor environment to develop pupils' resilience and perseverance in problem-solving. Despite this positive work, local authority officers recognise that the pandemic has slowed the progress that schools were making in addressing the implementation of the new curriculum. They see this work as a priority once COVID-19 restrictions on schools ease. In our discussions with headteachers in the summer term, many headteachers highlighted the need for support to continue for their work on the Curriculum for Wales. In particular, they feel that there has not been enough focus from local authorities and regional consortia around assessment processes and progression in learning.

### Leadership

In the autumn term, local authorities and regional consortia worked closely together and with the Welsh Government to respond to the evolving context caused by the pandemic. They collaborated to support pupils' full return to school and provide support and guidance to school leaders to help them to manage the impact on schools of COVID-19 outbreaks. Through the Association of Directors of Education Wales (ADEW), senior leaders provided good support for each other and worked together effectively to create shared approaches and resources.

In our survey in October 2020, the majority of headteachers agreed that their local authority involved them effectively in discussions about local education services. However, a few school leaders did not feel involved enough. In the summer term, headteachers were positive about the support that they had received from local authority officers. Many felt that it was easier to attend meetings that were held remotely, enabling them to attend more regularly. This led to better communication between local authorities and schools, and more regular contact improved the working relationship between officers and headteachers.



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## Sector summaries: Local government education services

Local authority officers worked closely with school and PRU leaders across Wales to ensure that school sites were safe for pupils to return to school in the autumn and spring terms. They carried out risk assessments with school and PRU leaders and held drop-in online meetings for headteachers to discuss health and safety issues.

In the autumn term, regional consortia and local authority officers supported schools to plan how they could best use the funding from the Welsh Government for the 'Recruit, recover, raise standards' programme. The Welsh Government issued guidance for schools to support the use of the grant, acknowledging that, while many pupils had not progressed as well as they could, there were specific groups of pupils for whom the impact of the pandemic was greater. These included pupils in year groups preparing for examinations, pupils who had made the transition from primary to secondary school and vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils. As a result of these findings, the Welsh Government has put additional funding in place for the coming academic year, including for the youngest pupils whose education has been disproportionately affected.

In the autumn term, the professional learning provided by regional consortia and local authorities focused mainly on supporting pupils' wellbeing as they returned to school and on helping teachers to improve their approaches to distance and blended learning. Officers from local authorities and regional consortia had used the initial lockdown period to engage with national and international research and used professional learning opportunities to share their findings with schools. In Bridgend, school improvement partners highlighted evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation (2020) that the quality of teaching is more important than how it is delivered. This helped schools in the local authority to think about their approaches to distance and blended learning. In Carmarthenshire, officers supported schools to move learning from the distance learning model used during the school closure period to a model that could be used as schools re-opened fully. In the spring term, regional consortia and local authority officers faced challenges in monitoring the effectiveness of provision while schools were teaching remotely. In the summer term, school improvement partners were able to resume visits to schools. Although they could not carry out their full range of usual activities, many headteachers told us that they found it helpful to be able to hold face-to-face discussions about teaching and learning and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the school's work.



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# Sector summaries:

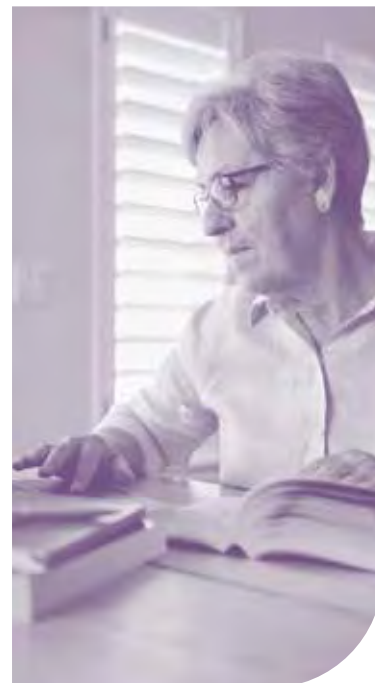
## Local government education services

Our local authority link inspectors continued to hold assurance and risk workshops as part of our joint working arrangements with Audit Wales and Care Inspectorate Wales. This year, these took place remotely with nearly all local authorities. The workshops focused on the strengths and shortcomings that the three inspection and regulatory bodies identified during their work with local authorities. These were presented to senior officers and elected members of the council to enable them to consider the work of individual service areas in a wider context. This year, the common assurances related mainly to the local authorities' responses to the COVID 19 pandemic. Leaders in schools and PRUs in many local authorities were positive about the support provided by officers, for example to help them with their provision of digital devices to support distance learning. Links between service areas in local authorities and officers' communication with schools improved. The main concern this year across nearly all local authorities was the variation within and across schools in the provision of distance learning experiences for pupils. In addition, long-standing issues for the local authorities remain from prior to the pandemic. The most common across the local authorities are the performance of secondary schools over time, attendance and exclusion rates, the progress of pupils eligible for free school meals and the quality of self-evaluation in education directorates.

### Youth services

Many youth workers worked in school hubs. They worked with other educational professionals to provide support for learners, through visiting homes, delivering food and toiletry parcels and medication. Those with play work experience used their skills effectively to support the work in primary school hubs. Youth workers remained active during school holiday periods and during evenings and weekends during the school terms. Many of these practices were recognised in the Wavehill report (Marshall *et al.*, 2021) to the Welsh Government, 'Research to inform development of the youth work strategy'.

Detached and street-based youth workers engaged with young people to ensure that they understood key health messages, such as the need to maintain social distancing. They also ensured that they stayed in touch with young people who did not connect through virtual platforms. In areas such as Rhondda Cynon Taf, the local authority invested in mobile provision such as vans equipped with seating and television screens, and teams used these with groups of young people who had been congregating on streets. As the restrictions lifted in the spring, youth workers in the Vale of Glamorgan developed a 'pop up youth club' offer. Youth workers in authorities such as Conwy and Gwynedd worked closely through outreach programmes with North Wales Police to tackle anti-social behaviour and its causes.



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# Sector summaries:

## Local government education services

Throughout the last year, youth workers worked to support homeless young people at a time when they were particularly vulnerable. They also provided support for other vulnerable groups, such as looked after children, young carers, those experiencing family breakdown and those who are not in touch with other agencies or support networks. For example, youth workers in Blaenau Gwent helped young people to find accommodation and the local authority placed some young people, who would not usually be eligible to access support, in bed and breakfast accommodation to ensure that they had a safe place to live. Youth workers across Wales assisted and advised young people facing unemployment or eviction and gave them help in applying for financial support.

The pandemic has raised the profile and benefits of youth work through highlighting the broad and adaptive skillset of youth workers. The need to recognise the professional status of youth work as an essential key service for young people aged 11-25 was highlighted in our thematic report published this year 'The Value of Youth Working Training: A sustainable model for Wales 2020' (Estyn, 2020j) and discussed in our blog [Understanding the value of youth work and youth workers](#) (Estyn, 2021v).

This was also emphasised in the first report of the Interim Youth Work Board for Wales (January 2021) [Time to deliver for young people in Wales](#).

### School re-organisation

This year, 14 local authorities consulted on proposals for school re-organisation. Around a quarter of the proposals were to increase provision for pupils with special educational needs. The majority of these consultations propose to increase the capacity at existing schools and units. A minority consider the establishment of new schools or units. Almost a quarter of all proposals this year focus on increasing Welsh-medium education provision. These proposals consult on a range of strategies, including increasing provision in established Welsh medium schools, changing the language medium of existing schools from English to Welsh and one proposal of a new Welsh medium primary school in Blaenau Gwent. Six consultations include schools identified as rural schools, which require the proposer to follow a more detailed set of procedures and requirements in formulating a school closure proposal under the School Organisation Code (Welsh Government, 2018). Two of these consultations advocate merging the small school with another local school. However, four propose closing the school. Four proposals from four local authorities consult on the establishment of all-age schools, continuing a trend from previous years. This includes the proposal for a first all-age school in Monmouthshire local authority. In January 2020, there were 22 all-age schools in Wales, so these four proposals would mean an increase of almost 20% nationally.





# Sector summaries:

## Local government education services

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### Follow-up activity

When we judge that a local government education service is causing significant concern, we hold a post-inspection improvement conference around three months after the core inspection, followed by progress conferences. Senior leaders from the local authority and other stakeholders attend these conferences, which focus on the authority's plans to address shortcomings and the progress officers are making to address the recommendations. In the autumn term 2020, we held progress conferences with Powys, Pembrokeshire and Wrexham. We took a tailored approach to this work, holding discussions with senior officers in these local authorities about the best way to carry out the conferences.

In November 2020, we held our first conference with Pembrokeshire and Wrexham local authorities. The conferences ensured that officers and elected members had a shared understanding of the challenges facing the council and were in agreement about how they would address these issues. Following the conferences, both local authorities identified ways in which their action plans could be strengthened to ensure progress in addressing the recommendations in their core inspection reports.

We held a progress conference with Powys County Council in November 2020. This was the local authority's second conference following its core inspection in July 2019. During the conference, the local authority demonstrated that it has begun to make sound progress since the inspection. Officers show a clear commitment to addressing the issues that were raised as well as making purposeful evaluations of the progress made as a result of actions implemented from their post-inspection action plan. We held a meeting with senior officers and elected members in the spring term 2021 to determine the best time to hold a formal monitoring visit, during which inspectors will judge the progress made since the core inspection in 2019.

