

### Context

In January 2021, there were 40 maintained special schools in Wales that provide education for just over 5,200 pupils (Welsh Government, 2021o). There are two local authorities without a special school. Many special schools provide education for children from 3-19 years.

As part of our engagement work with the sector, we contacted each maintained special school at least once and visited a very few schools. Discussions with headteachers and senior leaders, held remotely, focused on the implications of the pandemic for the wellbeing of pupils and staff, how schools have supported teaching and learning, and leadership throughout the pandemic. We also discussed preparations for the Curriculum for Wales where appropriate.

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### Wellbeing

Over the year, the wellbeing of many pupils remained good overall, despite the disruptions caused by the pandemic. School leaders prioritised pupil wellbeing, and, in many cases, the support they provided helped pupils to be more resilient than might have been expected. Many pupils adapted readily to different ways of working. However, in some cases, pupils struggled without the structure and routine they were used to in their normal learning environments. Leaders felt that it was too early to evaluate the long-term impact on pupil wellbeing.

Over time, schools strengthened how they recorded and monitored pupils' wellbeing. They identified key staff to engage with families consistently and regularly. This included phone calls, online meetings, and visits to families, where appropriate. Effective internal communication enabled senior leaders to maintain an oversight of pupil wellbeing and liaise with other agencies when necessary.

#### The support of school nurses

School nurses at Ysgol Crug Glas have continued to provide a much-valued service to parents as they cared for their children at home. Regular contact with families was made using online platforms where parents were able to see nurses and talk through their concerns. The nurses were able to advise parents and, where appropriate, liaise with other health professionals on behalf of pupils and their parents. The nurses also undertook home visits. In several cases, their input prevented issues from being escalated.

Schools developed a range of assessments, approaches, and interventions to promote pupils' wellbeing. These included trauma informed approaches, developing resilience, and using staff skills in areas such as counselling and mentoring. These were particularly relevant as access to specialist services varied considerably across Wales. A few leaders note that results of wellbeing surveys and their own observations indicate an increased level of anxiety in pupils and a deterioration in pupils' attitudes to their own confidence and self-esteem.

### Assessing pupils' wellbeing and encouraging them to express their emotions

At Maesgwyn School, the curriculum has been adapted to consider the results of an assessment of pupils' wellbeing. This revealed that pupils were generally more fearful. The school has adapted routines, modified its curriculum, and increased the number of staff to respond specifically to pupils' wellbeing needs, including twice daily 'regulation and reflection time' with form tutors. Each day, staff used a different approach to support pupils' wellbeing and encouraged them to express their emotions. Pupils set daily and weekly wellbeing targets on 'Manifesto Monday', 'Chill out Tuesday' and 'Wellness Wednesday' provided opportunities for pupils to relax together through activities such as yoga or mindfulness sessions. 'Think about it Thursday' allowed pupils to consider how they might respond to different scenarios and 'Friday Feeling' was a positive way to end the school week.

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All leaders welcomed the re-opening of schools. Pupils and staff responded well. For example, one headteacher noted that younger pupils were 'overjoyed' at returning to school. Pupils returned to school on a phased basis that sometimes included part-time attendance or later start and earlier finish times. These approaches helped staff to establish a richer understanding of pupils' needs. Over time, the overall attendance of pupils improved, although separate national level attendance data for special schools is not available.

Multi-disciplinary meetings between representatives from the school, social care and health services continued throughout the pandemic to support pupils' identified needs.

Many leaders were concerned at the slow pace and limited extent of the return of face-to-face working from colleagues in several partner agencies. Overall, there were inconsistencies within and between local authorities and local health boards. Support from allied health professionals and educational psychologists continued to be provided via online platforms through the spring and summer terms, and there was little change in how services operated since the first national lockdown period. Headteachers continued to express concern at the variation in how child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) deliver services across different health boards. This meant that pupils with the same needs received different levels of support depending on where they lived.

### Teaching, learning and the curriculum

The focus for teaching during lockdowns, and when pupils returned to school, was pupil wellbeing and encouraging engagement in interesting and meaningful learning activities.

Over the past year, schools have strengthened arrangements for delivering distance and blended learning, including developing staff skills. As contact and relationships with parents deepened, schools adapted their teaching approaches to meet the changing needs of pupils and their families.

Teaching consisted of a mixture of approaches based on a secure understanding of the needs of pupils. For example, many schools provided pupils with hard copies of workbooks and other activity materials according to parental preference. In addition, schools delivered live online lessons or sessions that brought classes together where this was appropriate. In general, special schools have adapted well to the challenges in ensuring that teaching approaches continue to meet the needs of pupils.

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Staff provided creative videos or live sessions that explained to parents the purpose of activities, including exercise sessions that supported pupils' gross and fine motor skills. Some schools had daily, and sometimes twice-daily, catch ups with parents. The frequent communication between school and parents provided parents with the confidence to undertake activities at home with their child and schools were able to monitor the progress that pupils were making.

The extent to which pupils and families engaged in learning depended on many factors. In general, pupils with greater needs were less likely to engage regularly. A few schools reported that older, more able pupils did not always engage in blended or distance learning particularly well. Typically, these pupils struggled to adapt to the restrictions of lockdown and continued to socialise with friends in their communities. Established routines, such as rising early in the morning to attend school, were lost. Overall, it has proved more difficult to re-engage these pupils. A small but increased number of pupils returned with significantly more complex social and emotional needs, including a tendency to self-harm and having suicidal thoughts.

All schools have continued to assess pupil progress. Headteachers considered that, overall, many pupils responded well while learning at home. They engaged in learning activities, and some appreciated the relative isolation that working away from their classmates brought. For others, many schools reported that pupils' progress suffered, for example with their communication, numeracy, independence and social skills, and emotional wellbeing. In addition, some pupils returned to school with anxieties related to separation, fear of infection and perceived loss of friendship groups.

Maintaining pupils' and families' engagement in learning was much harder during the second national lockdown. Headteachers attributed this to parents juggling home schooling with work, caring and other family commitments. The lack of wider support services, including respite, added further pressure on families. These findings are echoed by those contained in Crew's (2020) 'Literature review on the impact of COVID-19 on families'. Schools responded appropriately where they could by offering increased hours for children to attend school.

There were appropriate systems in place to ensure the awarding of centre determined grades, which include liaising with other special and mainstream schools. Staff have been flexible and encouraging in supporting pupils to manage the workload and assessment regime as part of this process. For example, schools adjusted staff and pupils' timetables and ensured that staff had more time to support and guide pupils. This was particularly important in keeping pupils engaged in their work and reducing the anxieties that they may have felt.

### Practical activities to engage pupils

Meadowbank School provided pupils with pots, seeds, and soil to grow sunflowers. In addition, the school provided guidance for parents on cooking, storytelling, and doing other practical activities with their children. The school was successful in securing a grant from a charitable foundation. These funds were used to provide various resources such as playdough, wooden jigsaws and playing cards.

### Family engagement worker

The role of the family engagement officer at Ysgol Bryn Derw became increasingly important during national lockdowns. The engagement worker provided an alternative approach for parents and carers to communicate their support needs. The school used its Recruit, recover, raise standards (RRRS) grant funding to develop this role. The school benefited further from the contribution of a Barnardo's support worker who worked at the school for one day a week to support the work of the family engagement officer.

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Overall, many leaders have continued to work with providers to secure appropriate destinations for school leavers. However, arrangements to support the effective transition of older pupils into further education and other destinations have proved challenging. Experiences that pupils would normally have had to familiarise themselves with, such as travel, people, courses and buildings, were not always in place. Overall, for pupils who made the transition in September 2020, there was no clear national picture of whether those pupils remain suitably engaged with their education and training.

Despite the pandemic, the philosophy and purposes of the Curriculum for Wales remained at the core of special schools' work. Most schools continued with their plans for designing and implementing the Curriculum for Wales. A few schools report that, due to the impact of the pandemic, they have not made the progress that they had planned.

### Leadership

All leaders identified that staff in special schools have shown great resilience, ongoing commitment and flexibility. They reported an increase in team and community spirit and a strengthening of relationships over the year. However, they shared how staff have been anxious, frightened and physically and emotionally drained. Many headteachers recounted the traumatic experiences that COVID-19 outbreaks have had on their school communities.

The extent and impact of working through the pandemic and its effects on the emotional wellbeing of staff, pupils and their families may not be known for some time. This is potentially much greater for families, pupils and staff in maintained special schools, particularly as the education, care and support needs are generally greater than for other children and young people. As noted in an Equality and Human Rights Commission report (2020, p.28), 'Families with children who need support in education have faced particular difficulties accessing educational and other support during the period of school closures'. This finding is echoed by (Daniels *et al.*, 2020), quoted in the Wales Centre for Public Policy (2021, p.2), who note that, 'groups with additional needs, and pupils with difficult home environments have not always received adequate support'.

Staff confidence improved considerably with access to regular lateral flow tests and after receiving both doses of the vaccine. In general, those schools that provided intimate care were prioritised for vaccinations but the availability of vaccinations for special school staff varied across local authorities.

Leaders have faced considerable pressures in trying to meet day-to-day operational challenges over the course of the pandemic. These challenges were linked to ensuring pupil and staff safety, while providing on-site, remote, and blended learning to meet pupils' needs. Many headteachers identified the pressure caused by the constant need to adjust provision when pupils and staff self-isolate, and the frustration caused when guidance did not always cover the very specific circumstances of the sector.

### A multi-disciplinary approach to person centred practice and developing the curriculum

Crownbridge School has developed a strong focus on person-centred planning with an emphasis on enhancing pupils' emotional, physical, and social wellbeing. Planning for the curriculum includes advice and guidance from nurses, therapists, and specialist teachers.

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Despite these challenges, many headteachers continued to prepare their schools for the implementation of additional learning needs (ALN) and curriculum reform. Generally, most welcome the individualised approaches of the reforms. They are ready to develop individual development plans and person-centred planning is well established in their provision and annual review processes. As a result, most headteachers are in a strong position for ALN reform. However, a few expressed disappointment that the ALN guidance is directed mainly at mainstream schools with limited regard for developing relevant targets for pupils in the special schools sector. Around a fifth of schools identified that they had integrated the person-centred planning model and their curriculum planning processes.

Many leaders identified the positive developments that have emerged from adapted ways of working and noted that they intend to incorporate these within their future ways of working. These developments include:

- the use of digital technology to support pupils learning on-site as well as from home
- the use of online apps and platforms to support communication between school and parents
- the use of online platforms to support meetings
- improvements to the curriculum to extend the provision of on-site outdoor learning

Throughout the year, leaders have continued with quality assuring teaching and the curriculum in some measure. This included regular discussions with staff, reviewing planning and dropping into virtual lessons. In the summer term, schools started to use the range of quality assurance arrangements that were in place before the pandemic. In a very few schools, observations of lessons resumed.

Many leaders prioritised professional learning opportunities to develop the ability of staff to support the mental health and social and emotional needs of pupils. This included providing staff with a deeper understanding of adverse childhood experiences and trauma-informed practices. At Ysgol Rhyd y Gors and Portfield School, for example, all staff were trained in trauma-informed practices, and a few were awarded level 5 diplomas. In many schools, leaders were able to build on successful existing approaches such as further developing a sensory curriculum that includes reflexology and massage.

Leaders in a few schools continued to provide opportunities for staff to develop their digital technology skills throughout the year, to support the school's provision for remote and blended learning. Increasingly, these focused on meeting the individual needs of staff and pupils as opposed to whole-school approaches. Nearly all headteachers confirmed that professional learning continued to support the school to consolidate its preparation for ALN reform and the Curriculum for Wales.

### Planning for curriculum and ALN reform

Trinity Fields School and Resource Centre and Ysgol Pendalar have continued with their plans for curriculum reform and those required by the new ALN legislation. They have made stronger connections between the two. For example, their approaches to curriculum design and planning are based on the aspirations and expected outcomes that they have for pupils as they progress through the school.

Most leaders appreciated the strong support they had received from colleagues in the local authority throughout the period of the pandemic. Senior officers provided practical advice and guidance as well as personal support for school leaders. In a few schools, leaders benefited from support from their regional consortium, particularly where officers had strong knowledge and understanding of the specialist needs of pupils attending the school.

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Nearly all schools embraced the flexibility and increased opportunities for personalised professional learning presented by online programmes. At Heronsbridge School, for example, leaders moved much of the mandatory professional learning online, providing additional time for staff to meet to evaluate the outcomes of their curriculum development work. Many leaders noted the benefits of online learning for staff wellbeing in enabling them to access this more flexibly and to follow up areas of personal interest.

### **A peer review approach**

Ysgol Tir Morfa received a grant from the regional consortium to collaborate with other schools in a peer-to-peer review project looking at assessment strategies for the new curriculum. This included looking at personalised assessments, the use of IDP targets and their use of an online commercial assessment framework.

