

Context

In January 2021, there were 22 registered pupil referral units (PRUs) in Wales. This is the same number as in January 2020. There were approximately 850 pupils educated in PRUs in January 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021m). There are three local authorities without a registered PRU. PRUs are the largest group of providers for pupils educated other than at school (EOTAS).

This year we contacted all PRUs at least once as part of our engagement work. Senior leaders in all PRUs engaged with us through remote meetings and we carried out a very few engagement visits. The focus for each discussion was how PRUs promoted the wellbeing of their pupils and staff during and after lockdown, support for teaching and learning, and leadership and management throughout the pandemic.

Sector summaries: Pupil referral units

Wellbeing

All PRU provision remained open throughout the year, including during the second national lockdown, to provide education for vulnerable learners and the children of critical workers.

Many pupils were generally pleased to return to their PRU in September and were mostly keen to see their peers and staff. Incidents of poor behaviour were lower than usual.

Leaders continued to prioritise supporting pupils' wellbeing during the year and had built on the effective practice identified and shared from the first national lockdown. For example, many refined the categorisation of pupils' vulnerability and needs to ensure that the most suitable member of staff was in regular contact with them to support and respond to their needs.

Many leaders expressed concern about how the pandemic had affected pupils' wellbeing overall. As the year progressed, staff observed increasing evidence of the social and emotional trauma that pupils experienced during lockdown, particularly when pupils did not attend the PRU. For example, pupils lacked suitable behavioural boundaries at home or access to the usual support structures they needed for their emotional and mental health. In several cases, multi-agency working was beneficial in supporting the wellbeing of these pupils and their families, particularly those hardest to reach or engage.

Supporting pupils and their families

In Ceredigion PRU, staff responded flexibly and provided valuable support for the individual needs of pupils and their families during periods of remote learning. This approach included support such as frequent contact with pupils that were not attending the PRU, door step visits and remote wellbeing activities, followed by structured wellbeing sessions when pupils attended the PRU.

Multi-agency working during this time, mostly virtually, was a strength. The multi-disciplinary team of staff from the PRU and other agencies met weekly to discuss concerns about any pupils. During the second national lockdown, the team evolved to include representation from health and social care, Team Around the Family, the Youth Justice Service and Drug Aid. The headteacher confirmed that this approach has resulted in prompt responses and appropriate follow-up and referrals being made, if needed.

Enhancing support for pupils' wellbeing

Leaders in Maes Derw PRU in Swansea adjusted the responsibilities of teaching assistants to provide greater wellbeing support for pupils, including designating 'PRU key workers'. For the autumn local restrictions and second national lockdown, all pupils had a key worker to provide them with stronger wellbeing support. The key workers made 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 key worker replaced calls if a pupil and their family were unavailable. The key workers also delivered learning packages and went through learning tasks with pupils. This contact was in addition to contact from teaching staff.

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Nevertheless, during the spring and summer terms there was too much inconsistency between organisations and between local authorities in the provision of support and therapies to promote pupils' wellbeing and meet their needs. This was generally because of large differences in the speed at which services returned to face-to-face provision or were available at all. As a result, leaders increasingly developed their own staff in a range of approaches and interventions, such as trauma-informed therapies and strategies to encourage resilience, to provide their own wellbeing offer for pupils. This allowed staff in the PRUs to deliver increasingly individualised support for pupils' wellbeing needs through activities such as counselling, mentoring and mindfulness, and relaxation sessions.

Teaching, learning and the curriculum

Akin to Carpenter's (2020) 'Compassionate Leadership', nearly all leaders' approach to the curriculum was flexible and responsive to pupils' behavioural, emotional and learning needs. The initial focus for pupils' return in September was on reintegrating pupils safely, re-establishing relationships and helping them adjust to new routines and arrangements. This focus was to keep pupils and staff safe, and promote pupils' health and wellbeing, before progressing specific skills, subjects or learning areas.

For the spring and summer terms, leaders in many PRUs put a stronger focus on assessing pupils' core skills and reviewing their individual learning programmes. In several cases, assessment showed evidence of regression in numeracy and literacy, particularly reading, spelling and comprehension. Leaders in many PRUs adapted the curriculum to include enhanced provision for these core skills, including one-to-one and small group support and interventions.

For the summer term, many leaders also had a stronger emphasis on learning in the outdoors, including developing the learning environment. These adaptations have been useful in promoting pupils' learning as part of planning and preparation for the Curriculum for Wales, as well as in response to the pandemic.

Adapting the curriculum

In the spring and summer terms, leaders at Glanynant Learning Centre refined teaching on-site and for remote learning during the mornings to follow a broad three lesson structure: literacy, numeracy and topic(s). Teaching staff usually designed and planned short tasks to keep pupils focused, particularly those learning at home. In addition, pupils completed their own online learning skill challenges in literacy and numeracy. During the afternoons, teaching focused on topic work, including health and wellbeing tasks, such as a scavenger hunt or physical activity.

Extending provision through outdoor learning

Staff at Y Tŷ Dysgu Homfrey continued to work with partners in the community to extend provision during the second national lockdown. For example, pupils accessed outdoor education with the support of a local charitable trust. During this period, the trust provided the PRU with exclusive use of its community facilities. Careers Wales secured, one day a week, work experience placements for a few Year 11 pupils with a local woodland and community garden centre. These pupils developed a range of skills from horticulture through to bridge building as part of an accredited programme of study.

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Developing the learning environment

This year, Tŷ Gwyn PRU developed its learning environment to provide extended and improved opportunities for pupils' social interaction and enhancing their physical and mental health. For example, a new running track and basketball court were installed and seating is now available in the main outside area and the inner courtyard, which pupils can choose to use if they prefer to have quiet time. In addition, the PRU entrance has planters and bird boxes designed, constructed, and maintained by pupils as part of their art and design technology lessons.

Pupils make effective use of the outdoor facilities to develop their physical health and, where necessary, to remove themselves to the seating areas if they feel they need time to calm down. Leaders confirm that this is a positive development, which has contributed towards fewer incidents of poor behaviour.



In nearly all PRUs, leaders have placed a stronger emphasis on developing pupils' and staff digital skills in anticipation of further lockdowns or self-isolation arrangements. Many leaders identified the use of digital technology as a positive development, which they continued to build on during face-to-face lessons, where appropriate. However, many leaders also recognised the limitations of digital technology for remote learning with particular groups of pupils. These concerns included where pupils lack the required behavioural control or where the home environment does not enable them to engage and learn safely with digital devices.

Pupils in key stage 4 did not always have access to their usual full curriculum, for example due to restrictions in attending off-site facilities where they needed to practise with specialist equipment. Often these facilities did not become accessible until the summer term. In a few cases, this proved significantly de-motivating for pupils, and staff found it difficult to engage them in arrangements for their examinations and qualifications.

Overall, many pupils' levels of engagement with their learning were too variable, similar to the findings by WISERD (2020) in their multi-cohort study 'Life in Lockdown'. In cases where PRUs identified that pupils' overall levels of engagement were high, this was most often where there was intensive support in place to assist pupils' engagement.

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Leadership

Maintaining staff wellbeing has been one of leaders' key priorities throughout the year. This required vigilance and careful management to keep PRUs open throughout this time. This was most evident when staff were balancing on-site, remote and blended learning provision during the second national lockdown. Many leaders affirmed the hard work and personal commitment of their staff during this difficult period, and their willingness to respond positively to frequent changes in what was asked of them.

In most PRUs, increased communication with pupils and their families throughout the year strengthened relationships considerably. The keeping in touch arrangements during the first national lockdown were built on in preparation for the second, such as identifying when families were struggling with their child at home. In several cases, the empathetic response of staff, and the targeted provision arranged to help the parents support their child's specific behavioural or learning needs, led to the development of significant trust during this difficult time.

Staff benefited from a wide variety of professional learning activities throughout the year, from mandatory safeguarding training through to accessing courses with a strong emphasis on supporting pupils' emotional health. In the spring and summer terms, the ongoing emphasis on developing staff digital skills lessened, with a focus instead on professional learning to support the wider strategic priorities identified in each PRU's improvement plan. During the summer term, professional learning opportunities included consolidating preparations for additional learning needs (ALN) reform and the Curriculum for Wales.

Developing approaches for the Curriculum for Wales

At Pembrokeshire Learning Centre, part of the PRU's professional learning activities involved teaching staff planning and developing their approaches to the Curriculum for Wales. The teacher-in-charge recognised that it had been even more critical at this time to deliver high-interest bespoke lessons to engage pupils. Teachers shared best practice from their lessons as examples to discuss with colleagues and used these experiences to inform their mapping and planning arrangements for the Curriculum for Wales. Additionally, the PRU is developing teaching assistants' role to include increased opportunities for them to contribute to and support curriculum development.

Developing a virtual parent support programme

Due to COVID-19 restrictions in the spring term, Tai Educational Centre was unable to invite parents on-site for its weekly parent support programme. The programme is designed to improve parenting skills and foster parents' involvement in their child's education, with the aim of reducing behavioural difficulties.

During the second national lockdown, leaders realised that several parents and carers needed this support more than ever. Following staff welfare calls, leaders felt that these families faced significant challenges from having their children at home without the structure, routine and usual support from the PRU. The PRU therefore continued its intensive parent support by adapting the delivery of the programme to offer virtual sessions.

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Many leaders found the health and safety guidance and practical support from their local authority throughout the year helpful. They also expressed frustration that guidance was not always suitable for PRUs, such as in relation to multi-site settings and for pupils who are dual registered with a PRU and their mainstream school. As a result, in several cases, dual registered pupils remained with their PRU for the full year.

Retaining beneficial health and safety routines

Leaders at Denbighshire PRU reported that many pupils returned positively to on-site education at the start of the autumn term, and after the second national lockdown. A few changes introduced because of COVID-19 helped the PRU to run more smoothly. For example, the change of entry and exit points for pupils, and staggered start and finish times, has resulted in less movement about the PRU and led to a calmer learning environment. The headteacher explained how, with only senior leaders and the caretaker allowed in most corridors, opportunities for pupils to congregate or show off and misbehave in front of others during and at the start and end of the day are reduced significantly. As a result, the PRU will consider retaining these beneficial health and safety arrangements introduced during this time.

In many PRUs, leaders used the Welsh Government's (2020e) 'Recruit, recover, raise standards: accelerating learning programme' funding to support pupils' literacy, numeracy and wellbeing skills, such as by appointing an additional staff member to deliver bespoke intervention packages.

Provision in all PRUs remained open throughout the year to provide education for vulnerable learners and the children of critical workers in line with relevant Welsh Government guidance. This meant that PRU staff have been responsible for on-site, remote and blended learning, including provision for many pupils with dual registration throughout the year. As a result, many leaders expressed significant concerns about the sustainability of provision and the capacity of staff to continue working in this way.

Improving the quality of teaching and learning

At Conwy Education Centre, leaders used the current context to prioritise the PRU's professional learning programme to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Activities included a whole PRU approach to evaluating teaching and learning and refining work scrutiny processes, as well as developing a better understanding of aspects particularly relevant to the current context.

Specific focus areas to improve teaching and learning included understanding metacognition and differentiation better, and further exploration of how teaching assistants add value to what teachers do. The headteacher noted that increased opportunities to develop staff professional knowledge and expertise during the days that they did not attend the PRU site have been particularly beneficial.