

---

## **Engagement work:** Post-16 sector update – autumn 2020

December 2020



# Engagement work: Post-16 sector update – autumn 2020

This report summarises the findings from engagement calls made to further education colleges, work-based learning training providers, adult learning in the community partnerships and learning in the justice sector provision between the end of September and early October 2020. This report is based on the information discussed during remote meetings between post-16 link inspectors and senior leaders. The main focus for each discussion was on approaches to continuing learning and on blended learning, and how providers and partnerships were providing support for learner wellbeing and engagement. The report was written before the firebreak lockdown at the end of October 2020 and the information provided by senior leaders in the providers and partnerships presents an update on the current situation following on from the period noted in the Annual Report thematic section 2019-2020. This information will also help to inform thematic reviews of blended learning approaches and learner wellbeing, to be published later in the spring term 2021.

**This report is also available in Welsh.**

## Contents

<b>Key findings</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Moving forward with blended learning.....	1
Recruitment and enrolment.....	2
Learner and staff mental health and wellbeing.....	2
Qualifications .....	2
<b>Detailed findings</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Work-based learning engagement calls: September – October 2020 .....	4
Further education engagement calls: September – October 2020.....	9
Adult learning in the community partnerships engagement calls: September – October 2020 .....	15
Learning in the justice sector: September – October 2020 .....	21

## Key findings

### Moving forward with blended learning

Since the last engagement meetings with post-16 providers in June and July 2020, providers and their teachers, trainers and assessors have faced unprecedented challenges in supporting their learners to not only develop their skills and knowledge but to give ever increasing levels of personal support. All providers reported that they have developed contingency planning for local lockdowns or outbreaks of COVID-19 and continue to amend aspects of the delivery of teaching, training and assessment across the sectors.

Some venues for learners to receive face-to-face teaching or training have had to close due to local lockdowns or positive cases of COVID-19. The restrictions on access to learners' workplaces continue to be a major barrier, with providers offering online activities to maintain learner engagement and interest. Some adult learning in the community partnerships are only using local authority-owned venues as they are more confident that appropriate health and safety risk assessments and arrangements are in place for these.

Most work-based learning providers state they would incorporate some aspects of blended learning into programmes moving forward. A few providers feel that blended learning is essential for the COVID-19 crisis period, but that work-based learners should return to their normal activities post crisis. They feel the model should be flexible otherwise learners will not develop key and essential employment skills such as working with others, team working and communication skills.

To address digital poverty, sectors have responded by sourcing, loaning and ordering IT equipment, but problems remain because equipment ordered has not arrived (further education), and work-based learning providers are disappointed not to receive similar funding for equipment that further education and adult learning in the community have had. It remains a challenge to ensure that all learners have access to the resources they need to undertake remote learning.

Leaders report that many staff and learners have significantly developed their digital skills over the last few months. However, digital skills of learners vary in all sectors and can be a barrier for some learners. Likewise for staff, although the sectors have been responsive in arranging training sessions and using Jisc to support in training 'digital diamonds' or champions to train other staff in work-based learning, further education and adult learning in the community. Many providers have updated their induction procedures for new learners to capture digital skills and availability of IT equipment.

While staff training appears to be focused more on using IT and developing online resources, there has been less discussion about course or programme design and blended learning pedagogy. Most leaders recognise that there is a need for continued professional discussion and learning about the best approaches for remote and blended learning.

Providers report that many learners have engaged positively in the new approaches to learning. However, the way that providers measure learner engagement is

inconsistent across the sectors. Leaders and staff report that they are starting to focus more on evaluating the impact of teaching strategies on progress, rather than just identifying attendance or engagement with materials.

A key challenge on vocational programmes and courses is maintaining the engagement and motivation of learners during periods of lockdown or self-isolation. These learners selected practical-based courses and with the current crisis this aspect is often paused or significantly reduced. Providers report that higher level learners on higher level programmes, even those undertaking academic courses and programmes, may not make the progress that was initially expected due to family reasons such as childcare restricting their study time.

## **Recruitment and enrolment**

Recruitment shows interesting variations across and within sectors and learning areas. Where enrolments in specific courses, such as engineering, construction or hairdressing and beauty therapy, appear to be higher than anticipated in colleges, this is being attributed mainly to low levels of apprenticeship vacancies due to the ongoing pandemic. In work-based learning, there is regional variation in recruitment across learning areas. A number of sectors have been hit harder than others, including aeronautical engineering, hospitality and catering, and there are regional variations in engineering and construction. Adult learning in the community partnerships have found it difficult to engage learners with low levels of literacy and English (pre-entry to entry) on distance-learning and blended-learning courses. This is because of a lack of confidence in some cases and the preference to be in a classroom with a tutor where they feel more secure.

## **Learner and staff mental health and wellbeing**

Overall, providers report that they continue to focus on the wellbeing of learners and staff. For example, leaders in further education colleges describe how they have made a greater range of wellbeing resources available to learners. Where appropriate, face-to-face support services have been reintroduced. There have been increased wellbeing and safeguarding concerns in some colleges and work-based learning providers, although not the case in adult learning in the community partnerships. Learners in work-based learning are often worried about the loss of employment and being made redundant.

Providers report that staff were anxious about returning to face-to-face delivery, but have received support to help them overcome their concerns. Across providers, communications have been further strengthened during the COVID-19 crisis, with managers and leaders in regular contact with staff to give updates and support.

## **Qualifications**

Providers report that they are continuing to work flexibly to try and create every opportunity for learners to complete their qualifications. In work-based learning and in a large number of college courses, learners have now been on their training programmes and courses longer than planned. Providers are under increasing pressure to make sure learners complete the work they need to, especially

off-the-job, with social distancing rules severely reducing practical workshop and classroom capacity. Leaders are concerned about work placement and progression of traineeship learners, as employers are reluctant to take on these learners for work placement experience.

Providers raise concerns about the limitations of awarding organisation mitigations, such as remote invigilation of essential skills and the lack of agreement for remote assessment. Leaders report that awarding organisations have not been proactive enough in adjusting assessment requirements to reflect the current situation.

Leaders reported concerns over the continued uncertainty regarding assessment and examination arrangements for 2021, in particular in relation to vocational qualifications. Providers identify that there is a strong likelihood that many learners on skill-based 'licence to practice' courses will continue to be unable to complete these qualifications within the expected timeframes due to difficulties meeting practical work and placement requirements.

## Detailed findings

### Work-based learning engagement calls: September – October 2020

#### Moving forward with blended learning

Since the time of the last engagement conversations in June, all providers reported that they have developed and continued to use contingency plans and strategies in an effort to sustain training activities and support learners during this difficult time. In the best cases, providers have developed procedures and protocols that vary the degree and type of activity dependent upon the level of COVID-19 risk. As a result, they feel that they are in a better position to react when restrictions are changed or tightened in order to give greater levels of online support with theory assignments and tasks.

Prior to the lockdown in March, many providers had established online processes for using electronic learner portfolios. These providers have encouraged learners to continue using this system to complete outstanding theory tasks. Learners are able to continue studying key aspects of theory for their programme and benefit from constructive written feedback from their tutors and assessors on evidence in their portfolios, including previously completed workplace evidence, written projects and assessments.

Many work-based learning teachers, trainers and assessors have benefited from training in the use of online resources and encourage learners to use the technology when they join programmes. As a result, leaders have reported that most staff and learners are more comfortable with using distance learning and are more confident and competent in the use of the technology. During the current COVID-19 crisis, staff have generally embraced the technology and different ways of working in an effort to support their learners. Almost all providers are using a policy for blended learning. However, a very few providers are still developing a policy. This is usually due to the fast moving and fluid nature of the pandemic and the capacity of staff to undertake the work.

Two providers delivered intensive training for staff on blended learning. One provider took advantage of professional development activities before the summer holiday. This dedicated training day brought together all work-based learning training officers and managers to engage with resources aimed at developing their assessment skills with a blended learning focus.

During the early stages of the pandemic there were only limited efforts by providers to gauge the quality of remote learning. However, as the use of blended learning has developed, providers feel that it is time to begin to evaluate the standard of remote teaching, learning and assessment in a supportive way. The majority of providers have undertaken monitoring, usually via meetings, discussions with learners and staff and by learner questionnaires and surveys. Checks include the access that learners have to online learning, that learners are safe and well, their current work circumstances and whether they have support with their learning. Most providers comment that they use a range of meetings to review what is happening across the

sector and share information about working practices and resources. They also use these meetings to identify and share stronger practice across their training staff and sub-contractor partners where appropriate.

Two providers work in adapting the channel of communication to suit the systems and applications that are available and used by learners. For example, they use a range of digital meetings, together with printed resources or face-to-face meetings, to support their learners. In one provider, staff send their learners paper resources, such as digital literacy and ESOL grammar workbooks where necessary. One provider has significantly increased the availability of literacy and numeracy sessions by delivering online classes in the evening as well as during the day.

In an effort to address digital poverty, all providers have a laptop loan scheme to make sure that all learners have the technology resources they need to access their online learning. Where learners have been identified who do not have access to the internet, pre-paid Wi-Fi dongles have been loaned. However, providers expressed disappointment that the work-based learning sector was not included in the Welsh Government additional funding stream for information technology and mental health support that was available for further education.

In the best cases, traineeship learners were identified as a key at-risk group and providers maintained regular contact with these learners. Moving traineeships learning online remains a significant challenge for the sector, with most providers prioritising these learners for a return to face-to-face learning. As well as these challenges, securing beneficial and essential work placements for these learners is a significant challenge. The majority of traineeship learners have returned to some onsite activity and are engaged in vocational and essential skills remote learning sessions with tutors continuing to deliver underpinning literacy, numeracy and digital literacy sessions remotely. These learners often have opportunities to develop their Welsh language skills through online resources such as the Work Welsh Welcome course. Overall, providers report a reduction in the number of traineeship referrals they are currently receiving from Careers Wales and Jobcentre Plus from the levels they have previously experienced.

Across the sector, provider staff have been working with employers to look at the logistics of arranging direct learner assessment observations or completion of practical assessments. In front line sectors, particularly in health and social care, employers have stipulated that there is too high a risk of exposure to COVID-19 and have not allowed assessment observations to take place or assessors to enter the workplace. This is hindering progress in a practical way for these learners. The recent local authority lockdowns are severely restricting the access providers have to their learners in the workplace. As a result, learners are not making the progress they may otherwise have in collecting workplace evidence and completing practical assessments. Whilst there has been some dispensation from awarding bodies this is not consistent or timely and as a result a large cohort of learners will not complete their frameworks within the given timescales. However, these learners are working to develop the required theory skills and knowledge and, in a number of cases, they are developing wider skills as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.



Many employers have accepted a blended learning approach during the COVID-19 period and have an understanding of electronic portfolios. However, supporting learners to access online content can be more of a challenge in the workplace. Employers may not have the available space to facilitate learning or assessment, and security systems may prevent internet access or restrict photo recording of portfolio evidence. Smaller employers often have limited resources, and employers are currently under so much pressure they have little time to support learners with their online activities.

The Welsh Culinary Association have recently produced online videos about different cooking techniques and culinary themes, such as food to make you feel good and combat depression. The staff at one provider have created many of these resources for the Association.

A number of providers are using digital workshops for learners to share their digital expertise and a varied delivery schedule has been created to fit around learners' home working, family and shielding commitments. Training centres reopened following the directive from the Welsh Government. Providers are working around the difficulties of learners attending training centres due to COVID-19 restrictions and having to put social distancing arrangements in place. Only a very few providers have the space and capacity within their training centres to accommodate learners safely without difficulty.

Across the sector, staff are working from home where appropriate and have access to the range of equipment they need. Professional learning activities have had a focus on wellbeing, digital learning, delivery platforms and resource development. The capacity for provider staff to develop their digital skills was initially mixed with substantial number of staff needing mentoring and support to make the changes to online working. As a result, tutors, trainers and assessors have become more confident and competent in sharing documents during online training sessions. However, the continued development of digital skills for provider staff to support high quality teaching and learning remains a significant challenge across the sector.

### **Recruitment and enrolment**

In work-based learning, there is regional variation in recruitment across learning areas. A number of sectors have been hit harder than others, including aeronautical engineering, hospitality and catering, and there are regional variations in engineering and construction. Recruitment is not holding up well in the tourism and hospitality sectors, which are currently struggling. However, providers report that these learning areas are generally better than initially thought across a number of regions. Providers report that recruitment in health and social care is generally strong with demand in NHS clinical roles.

### **Learner engagement**

During the early stages of the pandemic, there was a lack of engagement from a number of learner groups, including learners from higher level programmes, such as higher apprentices. This is due to these learners needing face-to-face support as well as the problems arising from learners being required to work from home and



having to undertake child care and home schooling at the same time. Currently, providers report that learner engagement is generally positive, as reflected in monthly attendance data submissions to the Welsh Government. However, there is currently variation in the ways in which providers measure learner engagement. Provider staff work hard to ensure that learners continue to be engaged in their learning with many staff producing and using tailored resources to support their learners. However, the range, quantity and quality of online teaching and learning resources remain variable.

Providers undertake digital learner progress review sessions remotely with their learners. In general, training staff are flexible in adapting their working hours to support flexible delivery of the training programme. Training staff carry out routine learner wellbeing checks and target appropriate interventions and support when a need is identified.

Many learners are worried about the prospect of being made redundant and this also places a lot of pressure on assessors who are now undertaking a greater amount of pastoral and wellbeing support than they usually provide.

Staff at one provider designed a suite of training modules for learners who have been made redundant. These resources include job application, letter writing, interview skills, and confidence building and finance management. Staff hold live question and answer sessions with learners who have been made redundant to give them an opportunity to learn about opportunities in alternative learning areas. One example of this focuses on what it is like working in hospitality within the health and care sector, with information about working conditions, work and management opportunities and salary packages.

### **Learner and staff mental health and wellbeing**

Providers report that the majority of staff were anxious about returning to face-to-face delivery, but have received beneficial support to help them overcome their concerns. Across providers, communications have been further strengthened during the COVID-19 crisis, with managers and leaders in regular contact with staff to give updates and support.

In one provider, all staff benefit from the introduction of a half day Friday, which enables them to take time-out of the business and focus on their own wellbeing and health. Staff use this time to undertake any activity or relaxation they find is best suited to them.

All providers state that they have policies and procedures in-place to keep learners safe online. A number of providers have seen an increase in the number of safeguarding concerns including general reported concerns and referrals to the police and social services. Providers generally report an increase in the number of counselling referrals. These are for a variety of reasons including anxiety, depression, self-harm and family issues. This year, the impact of COVID-19 has seen an upward trend in young people with issues such as mental health and unhealthy relationships. A number of providers also report an increase in the number

of staff who report issues due to COVID-19. These include self-isolation, anxiety and worries regarding supporting learners online.

In one provider, staff and learners have access to a local food bank run by a charity with which the provider works in partnership. The chef at the provider's cookery school designs and produces simple nutritious meals for learners, staff and the community. Over the period of COVID-19, approximately 72 families each week have been supported by this initiative.

Most providers promote mental health issues through regular communication with learners to help maintain engagement and motivation. Providers share a range of documents and links as well as details of how to raise any safeguarding concerns.

Providers recognise that many apprentices have faced the challenges of home working. Tutors and assessors are flexible with targets and deadlines where learners are under pressure due to the COVID-19 situation. Many staff have developed their knowledge and understanding of mental health awareness and issues. Providers have placed a clear emphasis on safeguarding and staying safe online and raised awareness of issues such as online and fraud scams.

There is a variation across providers in claiming additional funding for ALN learners. A very few providers do not currently claim any additional learning support funding, and a very few have not submitted any extra claims since lockdown, whereas some use these funds regularly.

## Further education engagement calls: September – October 2020

### Moving forward with blended learning

Since the last series of engagement calls, colleges have continued to refine course timetables and have maintained a substantial proportion of remote learning on most learning programmes whilst gradually reintroducing on-site face-to-face learning. Growth in the use of online synchronous learning has been maintained as well as further increases in the volume of online resources uploaded to virtual learning environments and online portals for learners and staff.

Colleges have assessed the digital capacity of the many new learners and staff who have started this year and continue to monitor existing learners and staff in terms of access to suitable equipment, digital connectivity and digital skills and experience. Substantial additional quantities of equipment have been loaned out to learners and provided to staff as well as widespread dissemination of guidance on how to access and use online platforms. Colleges have welcomed the additional funding support made available through the Welsh Government to help them fund the costs of these additional resources. However, most colleges are facing considerable supplier wait times before they receive further equipment required to satisfy ongoing demands for resources. In the short term, many colleges are repurposing existing resources such as those from laptop trolleys used in classrooms to satisfy urgent learner needs.

Colleges are now using a wider range of indicators, especially data analytics linked to online platforms, to monitor learner engagement. However, indicators to measure the overall quality of engagement or the impact on learning are in the early stages of development. Early lessons learned from the initial lockdown period included the need to move from the initial focus on digital skills capacity to an increased focus on supporting the development of pedagogy for blended and online learning.

Learner and staff 'quick surveys' and frequent staff team meetings continue to provide useful feedback to inform the ongoing evaluation of blended learning models and help identify areas for improvement. For example, several colleges are now making much wider use of webcams to facilitate synchronous delivery to around half of a course group while remaining learners engage remotely in order to maintain the necessary social distancing in teaching rooms.

As lockdown restrictions eased and learners have returned to college sites for at least some of their learning time, colleges have developed contingency plans based on moving to and fro along a continuum of full on-site learning to full remote delivery depending on curriculum needs, official guidance and the local and national COVID-19 situation. Many learners are currently undertaking at least half of their learning activities remotely. A very few learners, such as those on ILS and ESOL programmes, are now receiving most or all of their learning on-site due to difficulties in delivering these areas of provision effectively on a remote basis. Full remote learning is also being used in exceptional circumstances, such as when a whole course or 'bubble group' of learners is required to self-isolate or when a college site is closed temporarily. Colleges anticipate that blended learning will continue on many courses for the foreseeable future with continued use of blended delivery beyond the pandemic. Nevertheless, colleges anticipate further moves along the

continuum to increase the amount of time learners spend in college as it becomes safe to do so.

Independent living skills (ILS) learners at one college are able to attend all their classes on-site. A designated bespoke area of the college has been established to cater for the needs of over 70 ILS learners. Detailed individual risk assessments were carried out and health care plans drawn up to ensure that learners are safe in college. All learners are engaging well and they, along with their parents and carers, appreciate the resumption of on-site provision.

On-site attendance of learners and staff is being managed by the colleges with continued application of two metre social distancing requirements in and around college buildings. Reduced group sizes, prioritising practical sessions, managing learners in 'bubble groups', staggering learners' days of attendance, staggered timetabling period start, finish and lesson break times, extended college days and more condensed on-site learners' timetables all feature in delivery strategies adopted by colleges to help manage risks of virus transmission.

When deciding on the mix of different learning activities and modes of delivery, consideration is being given to the nature of the subject area, course and qualification requirements, course level, nature and learning style of learners. Other factors taken into consideration include the availability of resources including workshops, salons and other specialist facilities for practical activities. Another potential influencing factor for colleges delivering full-time AS and A level provision is the nature of delivery being adopted for similar provision in neighbouring competitor schools and colleges, both in Wales and across the English border. For example, at one college all AS and A level classes are delivered face-to-face on-site unless any groups of learners are self-isolating. Targeted individual support and priority for on-site attendance is also being given to vulnerable and disadvantaged learners where appropriate.

Two colleges have extended the ways in which they are supporting learners to improve their GCSE English and mathematics skills. One college has expanded its English and mathematics lessons and support sessions to be available in the evenings, as well as during the daytime, via synchronous online sessions in order to provide learners with more choice and flexibility during these difficult times. Learners undertaking GCSE resits in these subjects are able to choose from a suite of daily support workshops. Learners and staff appreciate the flexibility that this approach provides in supporting learners to achieve these important qualifications. Another college uses a feedback bot, a personalised learning bot for mathematics and English GCSEs. The feedback bot sends the learner personalised content based on feedback given by their teacher. The software application is integrated into the learner portal and learners are awarded virtual badges when they engage with the content. The resources are linked to specific topic areas, so the learner only reviews those areas of the subjects where they need to develop their skills further.

College leaders and staff have responded well to the many challenges arising from the lockdown and the recent resumption of on-site activities. They have reported that

most staff have shown great flexibility and resilience in adjusting to new ways of working in unprecedented and difficult times. Colleges are continuing to provide support and professional learning opportunities to staff linked to online and blended learning – including virtual conferences, online training sessions, bespoke support for individual and small groups, through staff such as ‘IT champions’ and teaching and learning coaches, as well as by making resources available through online portals. Staff are also being supported to help them find ways of delivering on-site learning effectively when faced with the challenges of maintaining a two metre social distance from learners at all times and where they are required to teach both on-site and remote learners within the same class at the same time. Staff teams are also providing mutual support among peers and examples of good practice are being shared across departmental boundaries in some cases.

One college has shared details of eight models of blended learning with its staff via an online portal and through associated professional learning sessions. This allows staff to try out and choose delivery models that best suit their curriculum content and learner needs rather than following a ‘one-size fits all’ approach. In another college, the college’s existing learning observatory is used to share professional development training on blended and remote teaching and learning. Senior leaders have developed additional innovative practice guides as a result of a staff survey conducted in September and these guides are accessible online via the observatory. The observatory also includes other resources and videos forming a coherent package of professional learning on teaching development.

Support for vulnerable learners and learners with special needs is also being maintained as much as possible. Colleges report that they have evolved support provision along a similar blended route to learning activities as site restrictions have eased. In many cases, colleges prioritise vulnerable and disadvantaged learners for on-site attendance and support. Staff such as learning support assistants are providing individual and small group support through a mix of online and face-to-face activities. For example, colleges are making increasing use of features such as ‘breakout rooms’ available through online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet and Classrooms, and Zoom to provide learner and learning support during online sessions. Other support such as counselling and wellbeing officer support is conducted by telephone as well as, in some cases, through online or through face-to-face contact. Increased use of the ‘record functions’ within online meeting platforms is also helping colleges support learners who find it difficult to access scheduled sessions or who wish to revisit sessions in order to consolidate their learning.

The teaching and assessment of practical subjects remain particularly challenging due to restrictions to group sizes in practical areas to meet social distancing requirements with resultant pressure of space availability and costs. Work placement opportunities remain severely restricted due to the pandemic despite the gradual easing of restrictions across many occupational sectors and this is also influencing the overall blend of teaching, learning and assessment activities in some subject areas. In areas such as health and social care, where there are mandatory requirements relating to placement hours, colleges and learners are especially anxious about the impact of these difficulties on the ability of learners to satisfy qualification assessment requirements this year. College leaders report their

concerns about the lack of, and delays in receiving, clear guidance from regulators and awarding organisations on any amended arrangements for assessment and accreditation for 2020-2021. In the absence of such guidance, colleges are doing their best to cover a range of different potential scenarios for assessment when planning their delivery.

Quality assurance arrangements are continuing to evolve to reflect the much wider use of blended learning approaches. In the best cases, these arrangements are being implemented through joint discussions with staff in order to avoid placing undue additional pressure on them during these difficult times. In general, colleges have adopted a light touch approach to quality assurance of blended learning delivery during the early stages of the pandemic in recognition of the pressures staff already face and an understanding that many staff are delivering learning in ways with which many staff are unfamiliar. Overall, the approach being adopted is one of greater emphasis on support with less immediate pressure of scrutiny. This approach aims to encourage innovation and experimentation as well as allowing a period for upskilling and experience building. Colleges note that joint working with staff representatives is also helping colleges work their way through a difficult scenario and implement sensitive approaches to quality assurance activities including, in a few cases, protocols for the observation of the delivery of online sessions.

Although emerging interesting and innovative practice is being identified, caution must be given to highlighting these as 'effective' practice until the impact on learner progress and standards is able to be evaluated more thoroughly. As one college leader commented, the value of 'doing simple things very well' during these difficult and complicated times should not be underestimated.

### **Recruitment and enrolment**

Colleges note that some learners who received centre-assessed grades in the summer are struggling to cope on their new courses, either through lack of independent study skills or gaps with literacy and numeracy skills.

Many colleges continued to accept late enrolments until the October half-term and also encouraged learners to swap courses rather than drop out of college where initial course choices did not prove suitable. Where enrolments in specific courses, such as engineering, construction or hairdressing and beauty therapy appear to be higher than anticipated, this is being attributed mainly to low levels of apprenticeship vacancies due to the ongoing pandemic.

### **Learner engagement**

Colleges continue to state that learner engagement across most programmes is generally strong. Although colleges are beginning to make use of a wider range of data analytics related to learner engagement, such as those available through online platforms including Microsoft and Google, it is too early to make any robust evaluation of the overall effectiveness of learner engagement.



IT teachers at one college are using a free instant messaging application that was designed for creating communities among gamers to communicate and interact with their learners. Feedback from learners is very positive and staff report encouraging levels of further engagement.

All colleges report that they have identified learners who are struggling to engage or sustain motivation with remote learning activities. Learner services and wellbeing teams often provide valuable support to teaching staff by following up on learner non-attendance at online sessions as well as for those who are absent from college based lessons. This is helping colleges maximise levels of engagement as well as identifying those learners who may benefit from additional help and targeted support. A substantial number of learners who were unable to complete their qualifications last year, due primarily to constraints arising from assessment requirements, are being prioritised and supported to complete these qualifications as swiftly as possible this year.

All colleges have continued to undertake surveys during the period since lockdown to gain feedback on a wide range of issues from learners and staff. Colleges have analysed responses and implemented appropriate actions for improvement where required. Many colleges have told us that both learners and staff are keen for blended learning delivery to continue even where it is safe to increase further the proportion of on-site delivery. They also report that learners and staff are particularly anxious about not knowing what the final assessment arrangements will be for 2021.

Learners identified as being at particular risk of disengaging from learning are supported by teachers and specialist support staff as appropriate. During lockdown most support was provided remotely, for example by telephone, although some face-to-face contact including welfare check-in visits to the homes of learners with whom contact had been lost or where particularly high risks were identified did take place.

Colleges report that they are working hard to identify and support those learners who may be struggling to meet the demands of their courses, for example where the impact of centre assessed grades at GCSE level appears to overstate learners' ability either overall or in specific subjects such as English and mathematics. For example, many colleges have identified a slightly higher proportion of learners than in previous years studying A level or level 3 vocational programmes who have struggled to make the transition to advanced level study. Restrictions in the amount of practical work undertaken last year on many vocational courses are also contributing the challenges faced by a few learners when progressing to higher level courses. Many colleges are encouraging learners to swap rather than drop courses where they are struggling to cope even with the provision of extra help.

### **Learner and staff mental health and wellbeing**

Colleges have updated key policies and procedures, including safeguarding and online safety guidelines, to reflect the context and impact of COVID-19 and to make sure they are in line with updated guidance from the Welsh Government.



Since the return to wider on-site working arrangements for staff and increased in-person learner attendance, most colleges have made face-to-face support more widely available subject to risk assessments and adjustments to help maintain social distancing. In a minority of colleges, this has been accompanied by the introduction, or continued implementation, of triage arrangements to prioritise face-to-face contact according to need and to help mitigate the ongoing risks of virus transmission.

Colleges have developed and implemented strategies and procedures to support learners remotely during the COVID-19 crisis. Online wellbeing resources, guidance documents and support information have also been made available to all learners and referral systems for safeguarding and specialist support have been amended to suit the unprecedented situation faced by learners and staff.

At one college, progress coaches and personal tutors are arranging sessions to support learners' physical health as part of the college's overall wellbeing strategy. Learners and staff also have access to dedicated health and wellbeing areas on the learner and staff portals.

Safeguarding issues are followed-up using college protocols with appropriate liaison with all usual external agencies as required. A minority of colleges have identified that the number of safeguarding referrals dipped during lockdown but have started to increase in line with expected levels since learners have begun to return to college campuses. Colleges have heightened the emphasis on learners and staff staying safe online to reflect the prevalence of home-based study and home-working arrangements. They have circulated updated useful information and guidance to help learners and staff make sure they have safe remote access to college systems.

Colleges have continued to make counselling services available for learners and staff where required. Colleges recognise an increase in mental health concerns among learners and staff, especially in relation to anxiety and depression. Nearly all counselling support continues to be provided remotely by telephone or online with few colleges as yet offering a return to face-to-face sessions due to ongoing concerns about the risks involved in prolonged face-to-face close contact during counselling sessions. In a few cases, colleges were unable to confirm whether counsellors had received specific training to extend and update their knowledge and skills to include online or telephone counselling.

One college has increased the capacity of its counselling service in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A college counsellor was available to support learners throughout the summer period as well as during term-time and overall capacity has now been increased to 1.5 full-time equivalent staff.

## **Adult learning in the community partnerships engagement calls: September – October 2020**

### **Moving forward with blended learning**

Since the last series of engagement calls, all partnerships have continued to focus on doing their best to remain in contact with the hardest-to-reach learners and with helping to ensure learners had ways to continue their learning. All partnerships now have online learning platforms of some kind. Partnerships report that simplicity of use and ease of access are critical for ensuring that learners engage. A few partnerships report the challenge of working within their partner provider's (a college or local authority IT security systems, which have been set up for school or college learners. All partnerships state that they had made progress in adjusting to this new way of working, and describe a 'cultural shift' in the way they provide courses, engage with learners and train staff.

Although no partnerships have carried out a formal evaluation, all have reflected on the lessons learned. All partnerships report that they have thought through contingency plans but none have fully articulated these in writing. In general, partnerships' priorities are based around:

- retaining the learners they already have in order that they can continue their learning
- recruiting new learners, assessing learners' digital needs and ensuring that they access to suitable devices and the internet
- upskilling new learners and helping them to become digitally independent

The beginning of the new academic year has very quickly seen new local restrictions in place. This has different impact in different places. For example, libraries in one local authority in lockdown are not open, therefore not allowing learners to access computers should they need them, while in other areas, community centres owned by the local authorities have re-opened and providers are able to schedule smaller classes. Broadly, the pattern of delivery falls into three categories:

- All or nearly all centres are closed for in-person learning. All or nearly all provision is delivered online.
- A portion of the partnership's centres are open, albeit at reduced capacity to allow social distancing. Online learning supplements in-person delivery. Timetables and attendance patterns may be adjusted to allow in-person attendance on alternate weeks, for the first few weeks of a courses or with priority given to specific courses.
- All or nearly all centres are open, albeit with reduced capacity to allow social distancing. Specific courses are prioritised for in-person delivery. A few courses may be delivered online only. Materials to support online delivery have been prepared to supplement in-person delivery or are in preparation.

In all cases, partnership are continuing to prioritise the delivery of their core Welsh Government remit courses of essential skills, ESOL and digital skills. Where they can, they are also offering or facilitating leisure courses.

The proportion of the online to in-person delivery varies depending on the local circumstances, as described above. Where centres are open, partnerships are using them to deliver their priority courses, and to upskill and prepare those who have poor digital skills for online learning.

In general, learners express a preference for in-person learning, although there is increasing acceptance of blended learning approaches, and a minority express a preference for this kind of delivery. Reasons for this include:

- saving time travelling to and from the venue
- possibility to work asynchronously at more convenient times for work/home/family life
- preferring the comfort and convenience of working from home
- can choose their course from a global range of providers
- reducing potential exposure to COVID-19
- easier to make adaptations to personal preferences or disabilities; for example, hard-of-hearing learners are able to control the volume of recordings, or replay to make sure they had understood

At the time of the engagement calls, none of the partnerships had a formal policy for blended learning. However, many have developed a set of protocols to ensure clear expectations and boundaries for tutors and learners.

Access to courses remains an issue for learners at pre-entry to entry level of literacy and English. Although partnerships have put out documentation in a range of the languages that ESOL learners speak, quite often learners' level of reading is low in their own language and they do not understand the documentation. Tutors across the partnerships have been working to find creative ways to support these learners so that they continue with their learning.

One partnership had previously developed its own bespoke virtual learning environment (VLE), which includes a virtual meeting tool. The partnership found that accessing the VLE was becoming a barrier for some learners, so they introduced a very simple and easy to access video conference and virtual classroom package that learners are finding easier to engage with. A youth worker in this partnership uses one of their centres to provide tenancy support/training and has developed an online programme that sits on the VLE. It is looking to develop an online induction to use with learners that works in a similar way.

All partnerships comment that they have put significant time and effort into staff development. This has usually been focused on bringing staff up to a basic standard in using communication software and the online teaching platforms used by the partnership (MS Teams, Google Classroom etc). Partnerships report a wide range of digital skills in their staff, wider than they had anticipated.

A minority of partnerships have begun to introduce more in-depth training for staff on blended learning pedagogy and course design. A few have drawn on the broader expertise of their local authority or partner college to tap into digital mentors or specialist support. Accessing this sort of support is more difficult for voluntary providers or those not affiliated directly with a college or local authority. It is not clear

how effectively training resources and opportunities are being shared between partners in a partnership or between partnerships.

Nearly all partnerships are now considering how to train staff in more in-depth blended learning, including the use of JISC training for digital mentors.

All partnerships recognise that learners are at different stages with their digital skills. Nearly all partnerships have included questions in the enrolment and registration forms to capture information about learners' digital skills and access to equipment so that they are better informed as how to support them. Many partnerships reported that they include digital skills training in initial sessions, although in a very few partnerships this kind of helpful provision is not well developed.

In a few cases, partnerships have taken the approach of getting their IT experts out into the community to teach people how to use IT and access online learning.

One partnership has used its IT experts out in the community to teach people how to use IT and access online learning. It has also has started delivering a new family learning programme based around IT skills for children and parents.

Learners' access to suitable internet-enabled devices and good quality broadband connection continues to be a barrier to participation, especially in rural areas. Nearly all partnerships have identified which of their learners have difficulty accessing IT equipment or broadband.

All partnerships have attempted to ensure that learners can access IT equipment and have provided learners most in need with laptops, notebooks and wifi dongles. While partnerships welcome Welsh Government support in the form of grants for equipment, there is criticism that these have only recently been confirmed/awarded, and that partnerships have had to spend considerable sums 'up front'. With high global demand for IT equipment, prices and waiting times have increased, leading to higher costs for providers and delays for learners. A very few partnerships have developed innovative ways of resourcing IT equipment.

One partnership has worked to establish a scheme to find sponsors so that it can buy equipment and 'gift' it to adult learners with three months of free data.

Nearly all partnerships have taken into consideration how to support vulnerable and learners with ALN. However, in a very few cases, this has meant that the provision for groups of adult ALN learners where online learning has not been possible has been suspended. This is usually because suitable venues which allow for social distancing for face-to-face teaching have not been available.

A few partnerships have undertaken an audit of software to decide which might best fit the needs of ALN learners, for example in using speech recognition software that lets the learner dictate their answers while the computer turns the verbal answers into writing.

In a few cases, the changed circumstances have caused a rethink of traditional attitudes towards online learning for some groups of learners. For example, in a

residential home for vulnerable learners where there has traditionally been no internet access, special provision has been made to allow access to online learning materials, and this group are now continuing their essential skills courses online.

A majority of partnerships have begun quality processes which take into account online delivery. In another example, a partnership plans to record sessions to allow tutors and their observer to watch and talk about the session together; while in another case, recordings of sessions agreed to show effective or innovative practice will be made available to tutors as masterclasses.

In one partnership, managers are invited as class members into Google classrooms and can view and participate in lessons. Staff have also carried out virtual internal quality assurance sessions in Essential Skills and sign language classes. This included watching learners' presentations, live, online. Managers have also carried out virtual moderation of GCSE work. A helpful aspect of the virtual moderation was that moderators were able to share and all see the learners' work at the same time. They have found that online participation by learners in these discussion type activities needs a different set of communication skills to in-person discussion (both for teachers and learners), which they are beginning to develop.

However, a minority are less well advanced in these preparations and are still in the planning stages.

There is some debate about whether recording lessons for the purposes of observations is acceptable to unions. Some partnerships' providers have had no problem with this. Others have encountered resistance from their local unions.

### **Recruitment and enrolment**

Partnerships have found it difficult to engage learners with low levels of literacy and English (pre-entry to entry) on distance-learning and blended-learning courses. This is because of a lack of confidence in some cases and the preference to be in a classroom with a tutor where they feel more secure. In the case of those with low levels of English, it is sometimes the case that low literacy levels in the learner's home language impedes understanding and so they prefer being taught in-person. Partnerships are mindful that, with the down turn in the economy, they may well see more learners wishing to return to learning to re-skill later on this term or in the spring term, and that these learners may need a very different range of courses from the current curriculum offer. A few partnerships are developing closer relationships with Careers Wales and Job Centres to plan for courses that will meet these potential learners' needs.

### **Learner engagement**

All partnerships report reduced enrolments of new learners, and that enrolment is taking place more slowly than usual. Partnerships report challenges in how to promote and market courses, with some of the traditional marketing opportunities, such as leaflets and posters at community venues, unavailable due to venues being closed or operating at reducing capacity.

All partnerships continue to prioritise keeping in touch with their learners. All partnerships comment that they monitor learners' attendance at in-person classes with registers, as normal. Where online delivery is taking place, partnerships use online attendance, whether synchronous or asynchronous, as a proxy for attendance. Most partnerships also use completion of work as an indicator of engagement, and a few are beginning to use the analytical tools available on their online platforms, for example Google analytics. However, there is currently no commonly agreed method in the sector of evaluating learners' engagement online, or of drawing comparisons between providers. A very few partnerships are beginning to consider how to evaluate this aspect of learners' engagement.

All partnerships are using a range of methods to gain feedback from their learners and tutors on their experiences. These include online surveys, learners' one-to-one reviews, induction processes, wellbeing phone calls, in-person feedback, course evaluations, and professional development interviews with tutors. Partnerships report that they have responded to feedback, for example by using software that is easier to access, or through modifying the length and timing of live online classes.

All partnerships have focused their efforts throughout the COVID-19 period in maintaining contact with learners and wherever possible keeping them engaged. In the initial stages of the rescue phase, partnerships prioritised the welfare and wellbeing aspects of engagement over learning. As a pattern of engagement has developed, partnerships are shifting their focus back to progression in learning, as well as continuing to support learners' welfare. A few partners in a few partnerships report losing contact with learners. In general, these have been learners on non-accredited leisure courses.

Most partnerships provide information to learners through online newsletters, webpages and other communications with links to mental health support services, wellbeing advice and up-to-date information from official sources on COVID-19 protection and prevention.

Partnerships have also run a range of online courses focused on wellbeing, such as yoga, mindfulness, relaxation, and exercise.

A few learners have found the situation very difficult to cope with. In a very few cases, through consultation with the learner, partnerships have made referrals to external support agencies.

### **Learner and staff mental health and wellbeing**

The wellbeing of their staff was a high priority for all partnerships during the initial lockdown. In general, line managers made weekly or twice weekly contact with their staff. This is now beginning to tail off as people readjust to the new normal. Most partnerships report that they attempt to keep their staff well informed of developments through newsletters and regular updates.

A few partnerships report that the crisis has made some long-standing barriers to change more easy to move through, as people have tried to make things happen quickly. For example, in one partnership, staff were provided with a work mobile phone – something which managers had been trying and failing for years to achieve.

Overall, partnerships reported that staff morale has been good overall and that “the crisis has brought people together”. However, partnerships also raised concern about a general raised level of anxiety amongst staff, and a sense of fatigue – both of individuals and collectively – beginning to appear: “How long can we carry on running like this?” “We are running to catch up...” “Sooner or later we will run out of steam.”

In general, partnerships have been able to accommodate tutors who were uncomfortable to return to in-person teaching with learners, through reassurance that workplaces had been made COVID-19-safe, through provision of PPE, or in a very few cases through redeployment to roles where in-person teaching was not required.

Overall, partnerships did not report a significant increase in safeguarding referrals.

All partnerships have sought additional funding to support learners, in particular through the purchase of IT equipment for those learners most in need. Partnerships have submitted bids for grants to support mental health by providing bespoke courses, training mental health mentors and one-to-one support sessions.

For those partnerships where learners are enrolled as a student in the partner college, counselling services are available in the college. Partnerships without a college partner refer to external agencies or the social services support within the council’s provision.



## Learning in the justice sector: September – October 2020

### Update on education and training activities

All prisons have undertaken risks assessments of their education, training and work provision in readiness for Home Office guidance that will advise them when they can resume sessions. These risk assessments inform their recovery plans and enable staff to identify how many learners can work in each classroom.

In all prisons, staff have been issuing engagement packs to prisoners. Prisons and HMPPS have shared resources in order to provide material for these packs. Staff in all prisons have consulted prisoners on what materials they would like to have included in packs and have adapted contents accordingly. A few prisoners have submitted materials for inclusion.

While in many prisons staff have been giving prisoners learning materials to enable them to continue with their studies, a few prisons reported that they have enabled learners to continue to gain qualifications. One prison has enabled young people to continue to attend classes for a few hours a day by being teamed into cohorts. Another prison commented that they have succeeded in enabling a minority of learners to access work through Release On Temporary License.

All prisons have continued to involve prisoners in a limited range of workshops and activities that provide essential services, such as tailoring, building maintenance work, cleaning or food pack assembly. A few prisoners involved in cleaning have been specially trained in bio-hazard cleaning to undertake deep cleaning of prison facilities.

A few prisoners have developed facilities for prisoners to maintain contact with their families through video conference calls. Staff in one prison have supported learners in digital storytelling activities, in which learners create and send stories to their children.

A mobile library in one prison has been managed by prison staff, who have reported a surge in borrowing levels. Other prisons have also enabled learners to access library materials, but the quarantining of books once someone has read them has restricted the amount of materials in circulation.

One prison has been using IT tablets to enable learners to engage in learning. Staff have supported these learners further by using in-cell telephones. Another prison has begun producing educational TV programmes for learners, which it will broadcast within the prison to provide learners with additional learning materials.