Engagement work:
Primary sector update – autumn 2020

December 2020

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This report summarises the findings from engagement phone calls made to 166 primary schools between the end of September and the latter part of October 2020. This report is based on the information discussed during remote meetings with headteachers and senior leaders as well as findings from stakeholder surveys. The main focus for each discussion was the wellbeing of pupils, staff and senior leaders and either how schools were promoting learning or providing support for their vulnerable learners. Proportions relate to the sample of schools with which we have had contact**.**

This report has been informed by evidence from the following sources:

- Remote meetings with headteachers and/or senior leaders responsible for specific areas
- Findings from surveys for pupils, parents, governors, school leaders, teachers and support staff

This report is also available in Welsh.

Contents

Main findings

Wellbeing of pupils, staff and headteachers

1   For nearly all schools, supporting pupils' wellbeing was the priority as they returned in September. Most pupils were happy to return to school, and many headteachers referred to a notable desire for learning and eagerness for 'normal' schooling, especially at the very start of the autumn term.

2   Supporting the wellbeing of staff has been a priority for senior leaders and headteachers during the autumn term. Often, leaders emphasised that staff worked with great resilience and commitment to support the needs of pupils. Many schools reported raised levels of anxiety in staff as they worked to meet the social and academic needs of pupils alongside a responsibility for implementing stringent health and safety procedures.

3   Headteachers reported an unprecedented degree of pressure on their personal wellbeing as they managed rapidly changing situations within the school communities. Often, they have highlighted the strong support from local authorities throughout this pandemic to support their wellbeing and their roles.

Promoting learning

4   Many schools reviewed their curriculum for the autumn term and created learning opportunities for pupils to discuss their feelings, share experiences and rebuild friendships. Most schools provided increased opportunities for physical exercise and learning in the outdoor environments.

5   Often schools considered ways to develop their support for pupils' wellbeing in the context of their preparation for the Curriculum for Wales. This included focusing on the Four Purposes and improving pupils' skills of resilience and collaboration, as well as developing their self-awareness as learners. Schools that had established and structured approaches to developing these attributes felt that they could adapt their provision effectively.

6   During the first half of the autumn term, most schools assessed the progress pupils had made since March 2020 in a sensitive manner. They used different approaches, including informal teacher observations, standardised tests and the Welsh Government personalised assessment tool.

7   A minority of headteachers felt that where families had engaged regularly in distance learning, generally pupils made suitable progress. However, a majority felt that, overall, there was some evidence of regression in pupils' learning in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. As a result, nearly all schools adapted their curriculum to revisit and refresh pupils' skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT. In many cases, schools used thematic approaches to revisit and develop these basic skills in interesting contexts.

8   Many headteachers expressed concerns regarding pupils' speaking and listening, and social skills in younger or more vulnerable pupils. Often, there was a reduced capacity to concentrate, listen to others or work collaboratively by taking turns and sharing.

9   Most schools who teach through the medium of Welsh also identified a regression in the confidence of many pupils from non-Welsh speaking homes to speak in Welsh. This was often more evident in younger learners. Many schools have adjusted their curriculum to provide more opportunities for pupils to practise these skills. Many have worked with outside agencies and partners to create support packages for individual pupils and their families.

10   Many headteachers identified that pupils who struggled to engage effectively with learning at home often had weak digital skills that acted as a barrier to their learning. To overcome this, many schools have integrated the use of digital tools more regularly into classroom practice to prepare pupils for any further periods of distance learning.

11   Many leaders have begun to think strategically about how to support and upskill pupils to learn more effectively at a distance should the circumstance arise again. They have started to plan a combination of face-to-face and online learning opportunities for pupils both in school and at home.

12   In most cases, schools have had to adjust their teaching to reflect the physical restrictions placed upon classrooms. A few schools noted that delivering a broad curriculum was challenging under current guidelines and they have had to limit learning experiences such as singing, school visits and more practical tasks.

13   Most leaders have developed approaches to minimise the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on foundation phase practice. Many schools have adapted their outdoor provision and developed strict cleaning regimes to ensure pupils can still carry out practical tasks safely. Leaders highlighted the importance of maintaining foundation phase pedagogy, involving active and experiential learning, wherever possible.

14   Many schools have used technology to enable staff to take part in a range of online professional development.

Supporting vulnerable learners

15   Almost all schools have placed a specific emphasis on supporting families with vulnerable pupils. Many have strengthened their communication to better understand the needs of these pupils and to find ways to support them and their families.

16   Nearly all leaders have worked closely with their local authorities to make sure that their schools remain safe and inclusive places for their vulnerable pupils. Schools reported that support staff have worked diligently to ensure safe practices and routines are in place.

17   Schools generally worked closely with partner agencies, including educational psychologists and behaviour support teams to secure support for vulnerable pupils. Many leaders have identified how cluster-working helped them to support pupils with special educational needs. For example, additional learning needs co-ordinators formed supportive relationships to share expertise and provide effective support.

18   Most leaders have worked closely with local authorities to ensure statutory processes for vulnerable pupils continued remotely over the lockdown period. A majority reported a rise in child protection cases during this time. Schools appreciate the work of the police and other services in informing them if children have witnessed domestic violence so that staff can offer them support.

19   Most schools have started employing additional members of staff or increasing the hours of existing staff using the 'recruit, recover and raise standards' funding. Many are using this resource to address gaps in pupils' literacy and numeracy skills or to increase emotional support. A few schools have prioritised the development of independent learning skills for these vulnerable pupils.

Wellbeing of pupils, staff and headteachers

Pupil wellbeing

COVID-19 has resulted in a sustained period of disruption for pupils across Wales. Time away from peers, friends and the 'safe space' of school, as well as ongoing uncertainty, were all factors that schools considered in planning their provision for September.

For nearly all schools, supporting pupils' wellbeing was the priority as they returned in September. Most pupils were happy to return to school, and many headteachers referred to a notable thirst for learning and eagerness for a taste of 'normal' schooling, especially at the start of the autumn term. When schools reopened in September, nearly all leaders reported that attendance levels were below normal. This was often because a few pupils were either isolating or awaiting the results of a COVID-19 test.

For most schools, although addressing issues related to COVID-19 has been challenging, it is also a matter of building upon existing practice to support pupils' wellbeing. These schools often used existing assessment procedures to determine pupils' wellbeing and identify areas for improvement. Other schools introduced new processes that allowed staff to highlight concerns around individual pupils' wellbeing and for pupils to express their worries and concerns. For some pupils, particularly the youngest, school provides a stable and secure environment where staff model important social skills, such as listening to others and turn taking. In many cases, schools have reported a deterioration of these skills.

One school established a referral system to help staff communicate their concerns about pupil progress and wellbeing. This consisted of a simple sheet for staff to complete to identify the support needed for pupils, for example issues related to bereavement in the family or sporadic attendance. Weekly meetings between the headteacher, wellbeing lead and additional learning needs co-ordinator were held to consider these, review the support that was in place and make improvements where necessary. The school also introduced a system of 'worry boxes' for pupils to share their concerns. Class teachers reviewed these on a daily basis and passed them on to the Wellbeing Team where there were concerns.

A few leaders described the first couple of weeks in September as an 'easing in' period. This was an opportunity for staff to introduce pupils to their adapted routines. Many schools reviewed their curriculum for the autumn term to ensure opportunities to address wellbeing issues. Often schools considered ways to develop their support for pupils' wellbeing in the context of their preparation for the Curriculum for Wales. This included focusing on the Four Purposes and improving pupils' skills of resilience and collaboration, as well as developing their self-awareness as learners. This helps pupils to direct their own learning during periods when they are unable to attend school and to cope better with anxiety arising from COVID-19. In a few cases, schools worked collaboratively across their clusters to create a short-term wellbeing curriculum and some created a specific recovery curriculum focusing on pupils' personal, social and emotional development. Often the plans incorporated

opportunities for pupils to reflect, ask questions and learn more about the effects of COVID-19 and the reasoning behind the rules and regulations devised by the Welsh Government.

Most schools have dedicated more time for pupils to discuss their feelings and any anxieties they may have. Staff have introduced different methods for calming pupils, helping them to concentrate and relax. Many headteachers described the need for pupils to work on rebuilding friendships and reforming positive relationships. For example, one school worked with a national charity that delivered virtual sessions about 'what is a healthy relationship' and 'how to develop a positive relationship'. One school chose the theme 'belonging' as the basis for all pupils' work for the term, while another chose to address the question 'How can we make the world a better place?' A few schools re-engaged with structured approaches to developing perseverance and resilience that were the cornerstone of their existing provision.

> Before COVID-19, one school had adopted a systematic whole-school approach to developing pupils' resilience, confidence and ability to overcome challenges. It adapted lesson plans for September to revisit the main principles of this approach. This helped pupils to settle into a familiar routine, while providing them with a familiar structure for overcoming problems and resolving conflicts. For example, pupils learnt how a difficult challenge might initially make them feel worried. They discussed the learning opportunities that can arise from such challenges and devised strategies for overcoming any frustrations they may feel.

Some schools have adapted their timetables to better support pupils' social and physical health. Most schools increased their use of outdoor areas, for example by providing opportunities for pupils to take part in team-building or problem-solving activities. A very few schools worked with external partners to enrich their curriculum for example to provide outdoor adventure activities, to build Celtic roundhouses, or to work as a team to make willow structures.

Staff wellbeing

Supporting the wellbeing of staff has been a priority for senior leaders and headteachers during the autumn term. Often, leaders emphasised that staff worked with great resilience and commitment to support the needs of pupils. Many schools reported raised levels of anxiety in staff as they worked to meet the social and academic needs of pupils alongside a responsibility for implementing stringent health and safety procedures. All staff have been working under great pressure as they dealt with the implications of the COVID-19. In many cases, staff have been unable to take regular breaks as they were needed to supervise pupils within their 'bubble'.

In many schools, senior leaders have considered carefully the workload of staff, for example by reducing the length of staff meetings. Many have built flexibility into timetabling, by ensuring the availability of cover within bubbles to allow staff to leave at short notice if necessary. Similarly, many leaders have introduced greater flexibility around teachers taking their planning preparation and assessment time to allow staff to work at home and complete tasks at a time that best suits their needs. Many headteachers continue to express concerns about the wellbeing of teachers, particularly linked to the expectation that they are constantly available to respond to communication from parents.

Headteacher wellbeing

Headteachers reported an unprecedented degree of pressure on their personal wellbeing as they managed rapidly changing situations in their school communities. The challenge that headteachers faced to support the learning and wellbeing of pupils while ensuring the safety of the school community was a source of significant anxiety. Headteachers have needed to respond rapidly to changes in national policy and guidance. However, they often became aware of these changes at the same time as parents, which gave them little time to consider the school's response.

Where the local authority and regional consortia have provided clear guidance and channels of support for headteachers, this was beneficial to their wellbeing. For example, local authorities ensured regular meetings with the director of education or other officers with specific skills, such as human resources. This supported headteachers in addressing specific issues as they arose. In many local authorities, headteachers received fortnightly support calls from their challenge adviser and headteachers valued the opportunity to discuss how they were coping and to seek further support where they needed it. A very few provided headteachers with opportunities to engage in specific training on dealing with workplace mental health issues for leaders.

Promoting learning

Operational matters continued to take precedence during September. Ensuring that the school could operate safely from one day to the next was the main aim for leaders. Despite the significant challenges, nearly all schools have succeeded in reintroducing valuable learning opportunities for pupils from September.

Planning for progress

Schools have used different approaches to assess pupils' progress on their return to school. These approaches included informal teacher observations, standardised tests and the Welsh Government personalised assessment tool. Many leaders explained that they had conducted such assessments in a sensitive manner and at an appropriate time depending on how well pupils had settled back into school life.

A minority of headteachers felt that where families had engaged regularly in distance learning, generally pupils made suitable progress. However, a majority felt that, overall, there was some evidence of regression in pupils' learning in literacy, numeracy and ICT skills. Older pupils in key stage 2 were most likely to have made progress, as they had the skills to access written materials and to cope better with a distance learning offer. Conversely, pupils in the foundation phase were least likely to have made progress.

Most schools identified pupils' standards in literacy as their main concern. The most common concerns were about pupils' speaking and listening skills in both Welsh and English. A few pupils had become too reliant on using colloquial and informal vocabulary and sentence patterns during an extended period away from school. Staff have concentrated more on consolidating pupils' previous learning and have

had to revise skills previously taught. Headteachers indicated that where parents supported their children's learning effectively, or where pupils had well-developed independent learning skills, they made more progress.

> One headteacher was concerned about pupils' delayed vocabulary and language skills, particularly those in the reception class. There was evidence that this group of pupils had missed out on crucial opportunities to develop their language skills during the summer term. The headteacher identified the need to target young pupils' speech development. The school deployed additional teaching assistants and provided them with specialist training to enable them to work with half a class while teachers worked intensively with the other half to develop speech and language. Teaching assistants often engaged in outdoor learning and wellbeing activities such as circle time that provided pupils with additional rich opportunities to practise their speaking and listening skills.

Learning from September

A few leaders stated that they felt that pupils were eager to return to normality at the beginning of September and, by mid-September, nearly all pupils were ready to learn. A very few schools informed parents prior to the summer holiday that their child would remain with their existing class and teacher for a period at the start of September before moving on. In these cases, schools felt well placed to gauge the emotional and academic impact on the pupils and to plan timely interventions for them.

Nearly all schools have ensured that pupils have frequent opportunities to revisit, consolidate and improve their literacy, numeracy and digital skills within a broad and engaging context.

Many schools have chosen to adapt their normal curriculum for the autumn term. A few have opted to introduce whole-school themes. For example, one school has used the books of a popular author as the stimulus for the term, with each class studying a different novel. This approach has encouraged collaborative planning and has aimed to make learning at home more manageable for parents by providing similar activities with varying degrees of challenge across the age-range. A very few schools have collaborated with others to plan their revised curriculum.

A few leaders highlighted some narrowing of the curriculum due to safety restrictions. For example, one leader explained that pupils no longer have opportunities to sing in school, while another explained that teachers were finding it challenging to plan some practical activities in science, art, or physical education. A very few leaders explained that pupils have had fewer opportunities to engage with the local community. For example, one class would usually base its work at that time of year around a visit to a local supermarket, while another held 'Magic Mondays' where older pupils would learn in the local community during normal times. A few schools have organised 'virtual tours' to replicate such educational visits where possible.

One school adapted its theme – 'Colour', which it often uses at this time of year, to focus more on the symbol of the rainbow. As a result, staff have been able to

combine elements of their existing planning with a new focus on celebrating and giving thanks to key workers, such as doctors and nurses. This has provided many opportunities for pupils to talk about shared experiences during the COVID-19 period. Many leaders have viewed this period as one of opportunity as well as adversity. For example, they have noted ways in which dealing with the impact of COVID-19 has accelerated or consolidated their preparations for the Curriculum for Wales. Many have seen the current emphasis on pupil wellbeing as fitting in well with their school's vision for the 'health and wellbeing' area of learning and experience. Nearly all schools have seen an improvement in pupils' ICT skills. However, leaders have also identified ways in which this period has affected negatively on their intended preparations for the Curriculum for Wales. A few explained that guidance for pupils in key stage 2 to sit in rows facing forwards makes group work difficult. Prior to COVID-19, one school, for example, prided itself on fostering pupils' independent skills during the 'learning detective' sessions that allowed them to decide on their method of working to the extent that they could choose to work in different parts of the school and collaborate with pupils in other year groups. In many others, teachers have been innovative in adapting and strengthening their existing practice. For example, a school that developed a peer assessment system that included pupils annotating each other's books has moved these dialogues online.

Distance and blended learning

Over the COVID-19 period, leaders and teachers have provided pupils with a range of distance learning opportunities. These have included synchronous and asynchronous activities designed to engage pupils and support their wellbeing, literacy, numeracy, creative and physical development. In doing so, many schools have aimed to ensure that pupils have access to a broad range of activities, closely reflecting the experiences they enjoy when at school.

> One school engaged the services of specialists such as a graphic artist and beat boxer to provide creative activities for pupils. This was successful in engaging all pupils, including the harder to reach families, as they had a broad appeal. Another school has provided explanatory webinars for parents on how to access the different platforms and applications that pupils used. It has also presented work through simple slide shows that included clear guidance notes for parents.

Most leaders have monitored their school's provision effectively through informal discussions with pupils and their families, staff and governing bodies. As pupils and staff developed more confidence in using distance learning approaches, leaders began to place more of an emphasis on evaluating the quality of the learning opportunities they offer them. In a few cases, leaders analysed questionnaires to gather relevant information about practical elements of distance learning. For example, having analysed feedback from stakeholders, one school introduced live online teaching sessions for pupils.

The majority of leaders began to develop a focus on digital learning when pupils returned to school. They recognised that a blended learning approach involves a cohesive, intentional plan for pupils' learning involving a combination of learning in school and at home. Many headteachers felt that pupils who struggled to engage

effectively with learning at home often had weaker independent learning skills and digital competence. To ensure that pupils have consolidated these skills and are better prepared for any further periods of distance learning, many schools have planned for more regular opportunities to combine online activities with face-to-face learning. Many teachers have strengthened the links between their class-based work and homework in order to facilitate continuity and have talked to pupils regularly about how they could approach certain tasks if they were working at home. In a few cases, schools have organised peer support networks where pupils could meet online outside of the classroom to work together on tasks that were an extension of learning carried out in the classroom.

Professional learning

In many schools, the focus for teachers' professional learning has been developing their understanding of effective distance learning. Schools have provided teachers with useful 'how to' videos to improve their digital skills and support them to prepare online resources for pupils and their families. Leaders have often collaborated effectively to provide all staff with an interesting range of professional learning activities. In the best examples, leaders also provided teaching assistants with an effective range of online training sessions. For example, teaching assistants selected valuable activities that addressed their interests and professional needs, such as 'children's perspective of play' and 'understanding numeracy'. As a result, many have developed a deeper understanding of their role.

One school has provided webinar sessions for staff on how to use the outdoor area to support learners' wellbeing. In another school, a senior leader with responsibility for supporting and developing blended learning, encouraged staff to share effective practice across the school. Teachers agreed minimum expectations and gained confidence in ensuring appropriate challenge through worthwhile activities.

Foundation phase practices

Schools reported that it was often more challenging to provide an effective distance learning offer for foundation phase pupils than it was for those in key stage 2. This reflected the key role that adults play in engaging with pupils purposefully to develop their skills and extend their learning during classroom activities. The ethos of the foundation phase, for pupils to be involved in active and experiential learning, does not always lend itself well to pupils accessing pre-recorded online learning. Teachers showed great imagination in facing these challenges, providing pupils and parents with suggestions for activities that they could do at home in line with effective foundation phase practice. In a few schools, teachers decided that for their youngest pupils they needed to provide live sessions where they could communicate directly with pupils and parents in addition to providing pre-recorded sessions or sending work home by email or post.

In one school, nursery and reception staff very quickly decided to provide live sessions to share information, deliver circle time and suggest fun and practical activities. Parents watched these sessions with their children and were able to ask questions and seek support. The feedback from parents was extremely positive and the school acted on their suggestions to adapt and improve the sessions. Teachers were able to tap into pupils' particular interests and suggest other activities if a pupil did not find their initial suggestions particularly engaging.

Since the return to school, all schools have had to consider carefully how to structure learning to meet the needs of pupils in the foundation phase. Most leaders acknowledged the importance of maintaining foundation phase pedagogy while making adaptations to the classroom environment and resources to reduce the possible spread of COVID-19. Where this was particularly effective, schools increased their use of the outdoor space to maximise the time that pupils spent outdoors. In doing this, they considered carefully how they could make the best use of the outdoor environment to promote learning and often enhanced their existing provision. For example, one school considered how it could enhance its outdoor environment for all its pupils and asked the local authority to support teachers in risk assessing existing and newly developed areas.

Many leaders reported that, although their foundation phase classrooms looked slightly different from how they did previously, with enhanced and more regular cleaning regimes, they were able to provide active and play based learning. Some schools provided pupils with individual supplies of sand and dough for specific activities, but a few schools avoided doing this. Some schools continued to send reading books home and to quarantine them for seventy-two hours on their return. Other schools encouraged parents to access reading materials online and provided information to enable them to do this.

One school had run a reading café for the last 15 years. This moved online. The headteacher and the deputy headteacher recorded videos of themselves reading stories to promote wellbeing and for pupils to hear stories in Welsh. Nursery and reception teachers recorded themselves telling nursery rhymes including simple Welsh songs and rhymes.

Welsh language

In Welsh-medium schools, most teachers identified that the Welsh skills of many pupils had regressed during the long period away from school. Pupils from homes where there is little, or no Welsh spoken often showed a decline in their confidence and ability to speak Welsh. As a result, most of these schools have focused specifically on developing these skills. Many have allocated specific daily activities for pupils, such as focused oral discussions and reading groups, and informal yard games. This has provided them with consistent opportunities to re-gain their confidence in their use of Welsh. A few schools have arranged virtual performances by educational drama companies and literacy workshops with famous authors and poets as engaging activities for pupils to develop their skills further.

Despite challenges, many schools have concentrated on maintaining a range of extra-curricular activities designed to encourage pupils to participate and enjoy themselves through the medium of Welsh. For example, one school held its annual Eisteddfod virtually, providing pupils with a range of activities that supported their language development and cultural awareness successfully. Many schools have worked with partners, such as the 'Mentrau Iaith' and 'Mudiad yr Urdd' to encourage parents and their children to engage with the language, especially when supporting the younger pupils who were most adversely affected by not being able to attend school.

In one school the 'Welsh Pupil Council' came up with ideas about how best to support pupils who did not speak Welsh at home. It shared links to a range of resources and provided support materials that pupils and parents could use.

Many schools have been keen to maintain the impact of the 'Siarter Iaith' and 'Cymraeg Campus' initiatives to continue to raise the profile of the language. For example, members of the governing body at one school have supported the staff in arranging a week of celebrating popular contemporary Welsh music, which the pupils enjoyed.

Most leaders have appreciated the support provided by local authorities and regional consortia across Wales in improving and maintaining pupils' Welsh language skills as schools have reopened. They feel that Welsh advisory teams have often provided them with a wealth of resources, which have been valued by staff. Provision for older pupils new to Welsh-medium schools has generally been maintained effectively by providing them with a range of bespoke support packages.

Support for vulnerable learners

Nearly all schools have identified pupils who they considered to be vulnerable during the autumn term. This may have been due to concerns about their welfare, or because schools felt their learning had been disproportionally affected during the pandemic. These pupils were not always those who had been identified as vulnerable prior to the lockdown period in March. From September onwards, schools have supported their vulnerable pupils by promoting their wellbeing, adapting the curriculum, and creating a safe environment for them.

Promoting wellbeing

Since returning to school, staff have prioritised pupils' health and wellbeing and have continued to monitor this, particularly for those who are identified as vulnerable. Returning to full-time education has been a challenge for a few pupils. As such, at the beginning of September, the primary focus for most schools has been to provide vulnerable pupils with a settled learning routine. Many of these pupils have benefited from schools' emphasis on promoting wellbeing through the curriculum. For example, teachers have provided pupils with opportunities to talk, rebuild relationships, and engage in physical activities, creative tasks and outdoor learning.

Staff in many schools have provided vulnerable families with additional support to encourage them to ensure that their children attend school. For example, staff have made doorstep visits and phone calls to vulnerable families to talk to them about the importance of children attending school. Many schools feel that due to the positive relationships established over the COVID-19 period, when pupils could not attend, staff have gained the confidence and trust of parents resulting in a positive impact on pupils' attendance overall. In a very few instances, headteachers state that parents have opted to educate their children at home and have taken their names off the register.

One school has appreciated a closer link with its Educational Welfare Officer since September. From September, the officer has been based at the school one day a week, working closely with administrative staff to follow up cases where pupils are not attending school. The headteacher feels that this has been helpful for parents who are too anxious to send their children back to school. Since this intervention, the school has noticed an increase in vulnerable pupils' attendance.

Curriculum and learning

Schools have reported varying levels of engagement in pupils' learning during the COVID-19 period when schools were closed, for a range of reasons. As a result, many headteachers state that the learning gap between a minority of vulnerable pupils and their peers has widened. Conversely, a few acknowledged that a few vulnerable pupils returned to school in September having made good progress. This was often attributed to cases where parents had worked closely with their children on a consistent basis. A few schools observed improvements in pupils' confidence after using approaches to online learning that allowed vulnerable pupils to work at their own pace and with fewer distractions.

Many headteachers have expressed concerns that younger vulnerable pupils regressed more than their peers. Particular areas of concern were speaking and listening, self-regulation and social skills, such as taking turns and sharing. Many schools have responded to this by adapting their curriculum for younger pupils to include more tasks related to personal and social development.

One school noticed that many of its vulnerable pupils have become more reluctant to play outside and are lacking in confidence. The school has developed activities that place a strong emphasis on outdoor play using natural, everyday materials and objects that stimulate pupils' creativity and imagination. The school is also developing a project to develop pupils' listening and speaking skills for different purposes. Staff feel that this is vital as many pupils have had significantly reduced opportunities to use their language skills formally or extensively.

As well as their focus on ensuring pupils' wellbeing, most schools have increased the emphasis on improving pupils' literacy, numeracy and digital competency skills. They have often provided additional support for those pupils who were unable to engage fully in learning activities arranged during the period when they were away from school. Staff recognised that vulnerable pupils, in particular, often had difficulty engaging in online learning due to their limited digital and independent learning

skills. As such, many schools have integrated the use of technology into their classroom experiences more frequently to ensure it becomes a natural part of the learning process. In a few cases, schools have provided training sessions for parents to help them develop skills to support their children at home. In one school, teachers used video conferencing facilities to demonstrate educational software to parents and to provide tips on staying safe online.

Headteachers have found that, in many cases, intervention groups could not run as normal either due to lack of space, or to ensure that 'bubbles' were kept secure. As a result, many have deployed their support staff in classes rather than running small intervention groups for vulnerable learners. In a few cases, headteachers have reported that this has been positive for vulnerable pupils as it promotes continuity of approaches and creates less interruption in their learning. A few schools have continued to run small group sessions outside of the classroom, making adaptations to take into account the operational guidance provided by the Welsh Government.

Health and safety

Nearly all leaders have worked with their local authorities to make sure that their schools have remained safe and inclusive places for their vulnerable pupils. This has included collaborating on risk assessments and handling plans to support individuals where necessary. Many leaders have valued the range of exemplar risk assessments their local authorities provided. They ensured that vulnerable pupils understood and followed health and safety guidance. They have appreciated the work of local authority officers in providing them with bespoke support, such as a clear input from educational psychologists, special educational needs advisory teachers and health professionals to co-write risk assessments and health care plans for pupils. As a result, vulnerable pupils have been better placed to adhere to the requirements of social distancing, good respiratory hygiene and regular hand washing.

In many schools, teaching assistants modelled safe practices and spent time with individual pupils to provide them with reassurance and revisited new arrangements until pupils became comfortable with them. For instance, they used social stories and visual timetables to support pupils with autistic spectrum disorder to understand how to keep safe and to explain the reasons why they need to do so. One school created a 'peace haven' by repurposing a space within the school. As such, this has become a comfortable room where staff can support the wellbeing of their vulnerable pupils. Another school adapted its teaching spaces to incorporate sensory areas to support pupils with complex learning needs, when working in their 'bubbles' of pupils.

One school identified potential difficulties in delivering support to vulnerable pupils in different bubbles. Therefore, it introduced a hierarchical system where teaching assistants with specific skills, such as emotional, literacy or numeracy support, oversaw the work of a number of teaching assistants working solely within specific bubbles.

Professional learning

From September, schools have used a mixture of face-to-face and online sessions to provide staff with relevant professional learning opportunities to support vulnerable learners. For example, staff at many schools have received training to help them become 'trauma informed' and to consider how they could adapt their practices so that the school environment becomes a mentally healthy place for all pupils and staff.

Schools have often drawn upon specialist training offered by local authorities and regional consortia. For example, the local authority education psychology service provided training for additional learning needs co-ordinators, teachers and learning support assistants on how to support pupils affected by bereavement, trauma or anxiety. Other specialist training included ways to support pupils with communication difficulties to engage with online learning, and how to support adopted children and children who are looked after by the local authority. Schools have combined this external regional provision with other approaches, such as accessing resources on Hwb, drawing on guidance from public sector agencies, and using the expertise of their own staff to deliver in-house professional development.

Where appropriate, schools have continued with their programmes of learning to support pupils' wellbeing that had already been started prior to schools closing due to COVID-19. These had already been linked to their school improvement priorities, for example supporting pupils with adverse childhood experiences, which continued to be relevant. Where headteachers are leaders of more than one school, they have often shared staff specialist knowledge and skills to support provision for pupils with special educational needs across settings. In a few instances, leaders have encouraged practitioners to access free webinars and to engage in desk-based enquiry projects to support their individual professional learning needs.

During lockdown, one school changed its approach to professional learning. Leaders encouraged staff to engage in personal enquiry projects and to feed back to each other regularly about their learning. These enquiries, which focused on how to support vulnerable learners, were initially desk-based. Upon pupils' return to school in September, staff put their new learning into practice by piloting strategies to support individuals and groups of learners. The projects focused on topics such as support for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder, listening to children, providing behavioural support and using relaxation techniques to support wellbeing. The headteacher felt this has helped to give staff more ownership over the content and direction of their professional learning, while also addressing broader whole-school areas for improvement.

Specialist services

Overall, schools have worked closely with partner agencies to secure support for vulnerable pupils during challenging circumstances. Many leaders have identified how cluster-working has helped them to support pupils with special educational needs. For example, additional learning needs co-ordinators formed supportive relationships to share expertise and provide effective support.

Schools found frequent virtual 'drop in' sessions with additional learning needs professionals valuable. Where possible, from September, specialist teachers have begun to visit schools again, such as behaviour support teams or teachers for the visual or hearing impaired.

A few schools have identified more pupils who require access to counselling services. In a few schools, counsellors and other specialist support workers from external agencies have resumed their visits to schools. Where on-site visits have not yet been possible, schools have benefited from virtual meetings.

Many leaders have reported that welfare support services have provided advice for families with young children who have become less able to manage their own basic self-care and hygiene needs following the period away from school. Schools have signposted families to other sources of support. For example, they worked with national or local charities to help families to access food banks.

Statutory processes

In general, schools confirmed that the process for the statutory assessment of pupils with special educational needs have continued throughout the COVID-19 period. This is also the case for annual review meetings, which schools have conducted remotely in many cases.

The majority of leaders stated that during the COVID-19 period the number of pupils subject to child protection concerns has risen often due to referrals from partner agencies. Headteachers praised the timely information they receive via Public Protection Notices following police attendance at a family home. This timely sharing of information enables schools to provide appropriate support for pupils. This is largely due to the work of 'Operation Encompass', which provides schools with information within 24 hours if a pupil had been involved in, or had witnessed domestic violence.

Recruit, recover and raise standards funding (RRRS)

By the end of September, most schools had planned how they were going to use the recruit, recover and raise standards funding to support their pupils. The few who had not yet developed plans to utilise the grant were keen to wait until pupils were comfortable with the new routines before assessing where the greatest need lay. In most cases, schools have used this funding to employ additional members of staff or to increase the working hours of existing members of staff. This included both teachers and teaching assistants.

One school realised that many pupils had found it difficult to engage in distance learning. In response, staff arranged family engagement sessions so that pupils and parents could improve their digital skills together, enabling them to access the resources provided by the school through its online platform.

Many schools have prioritised the regression in the literacy and numeracy skills of many pupils that staff identified on their return in September. Nearly all schools have deployed the additional staff to support pupils in developing these skills. Many have placed a greater emphasis than usual on developing pupils' speaking and listening skills, particularly in the foundation phase. A few schools have prioritised emotional support for pupils and promoting their independent learning skills. Many schools have extended the use of their existing support packages to target individuals or pupils in small groups. A few smaller schools worked as a cluster to pool their resources, by working together to share the expertise of a new full-time member of staff, for example.

One school identified a group of pupils in the foundation phase who would benefit from additional support in oracy and reading. This included several pupils who spoke English as an additional language and black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) pupils. It used its grant to release an experienced language specialist from her class so that these pupils could receive their education in a smaller group for a short period. She attended planning meetings with the class teachers to ensure that these pupils continued to receive authentic contextualised learning opportunities in addition to the specific interventions on offer to them.

A very few leaders have expressed concerns about the additional pressures on school budgets caused by COVID-19. They commented that while they welcomed the additional recruit, recover and raise standards funding, they continue to face financial challenges.

Annex

Consortium	Local authority	Schools
CSC	Bridgend	7
	The Vale of Glamorgan	7
	Rhondda Cynon Taf	10
	Merthyr Tydfil	4
	Cardiff	14
	Total CSC	42
EAS	Caerphilly	10
	Blaenau Gwent	3
	Torfaen	3
	Monmouthshire	3
	Newport	7
	Total EAS	26
ERW	Powys	12
	Ceredigion	5
	Pembrokeshire	8
	Carmarthenshire	12
	Swansea	11
	Total ERW	48
GwE	Isle of Anglesey	5
	Gwynedd	10
	Conwy	7
	Denbighshire	5
	Flintshire	8
	Wrexham	7
	Total GwE	42
	Neath Port Talbot	8
	Total Neath Port Talbot	8
All primary providers		166
FSM benchmark (3YA FSM 2018-2020)		
Up to and including 8%		46
Over 8% and up to and including 16%		47
Over 16% and up to and including 24%		28
Over 24% and up to and including 32%		19
Over 32%		26
Total		166