
Engagement work: Secondary sector update – autumn 2020

December 2020



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This report summarises the findings from engagement phone calls made to 114 secondary 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.

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Key findings

Wellbeing of pupils, staff and headteachers

Nearly all schools report that pupils are happy to be back in school. They have adapted well to new arrangements and appreciate the opportunity to see their friends and teachers. Many schools are particularly concerned about current Year 11 pupils who are anxious regarding the uncertainty over examinations.

Nearly all leaders feel that the pandemic has strengthened the sense of community within their school and that the teamwork and adaptability of staff have been particular strengths. Nearly all schools have provided support for staff wellbeing although, leaders are very concerned about the wellbeing of their staff, both in terms of the sustainability of current arrangements and the longer-term impact.

Several factors have impacted negatively on the wellbeing of headteachers and senior leaders. These include responding to changing guidance, concern for the wellbeing of the school's community and the additional workload caused by operational issues. Headteachers value the support from other headteachers but have had little respite since the beginning of the pandemic.

Promoting learning

Nearly all schools reacted quickly to provide distance learning for pupils during the lockdown period and most adapted their professional learning provision swiftly to focus more heavily on developing practitioners' digital skills. Most leaders feel that their provision for distance learning improved as teachers' confidence in using digital platforms increased.

Pupil engagement during the lockdown period was variable. In particular, the engagement of current Year 11 pupils was the weakest. In general, leaders are concerned that pupils lack the basic ICT skills required to engage with digital learning and make effective progress at a distance. This was one of a number of factors that impacted on engagement levels during the summer term. In response, since September, many schools are providing increased opportunities for their pupils to practise these skills during face-to-face teaching. Most schools are also focusing on pupils' literacy and numeracy skills as they have noted that, overall, these have deteriorated.

Most schools monitored engagement during the lockdown period by considering pupil logins and downloads. Many schools used parental and pupil surveys to support this. A few schools developed approaches to monitor the quality of work being set.

Leaders are having to adapt their provision in line with COVID-19 guidance. This presents a number of challenges. In particular, they are adapting approaches to face-to-face teaching and assessment in line with guidance around social distancing, developing approaches for distance learning to prepare for any further disruption and trialling approaches to live-streaming of lessons to increase engagement with any distance learning. Due to the need for leaders to respond regularly to COVID-19

operational guidance, leaders report that they have less time to think and plan strategically.

The current situation where pupils are either in school or at home means that most schools are either providing face-to-face or distance learning. Schools are beginning to explore approaches to blended learning as this situation changes.

All secondary school leaders are concerned regarding the uncertainty around the arrangements for examinations in 2021. In particular they have concerns about those subjects that include practical elements and the variation in disruption from school to school. A few subjects are finding working within the COVID-19 restrictions challenging, particularly when planning and providing opportunities for practical work.

Bilingual or Welsh-medium schools are particularly concerned that pupils' ability and confidence to communicate through the medium of Welsh has declined. This is because pupils have had fewer opportunities than they would normally have had to practise writing or conversing in Welsh.

Supporting vulnerable learners¹

Schools have prioritised pupil wellbeing and considered how vulnerable learners in particular are affected by the pandemic and how they can support them. Most vulnerable pupils have welcomed the return to school, and the structure and routine. A minority of pupils have found the re-integration challenging.

Most schools provide ongoing support for families of vulnerable pupils and this has had a positive impact on how these families engage with the school. In preparing for return of pupils to school in September, many schools provided clear guidance to parents and pupils regarding health and safety aspects. A few schools provided opportunities for vulnerable pupils and their parents to visit the site.

Schools report that the gaps in learning are generally greater for vulnerable pupils. In particular, their basic literacy and numeracy skills are weaker than before. Schools report that the lack of activities related to creativity and practical work has had an adverse effect on the engagement of vulnerable learners in particular.

Provision of alternative curriculum courses for vulnerable learners is variable. A large number of practical external courses have not been able to run and this has led to a few pupils displaying challenging behaviour or disengaging.

Overall, schools, local authorities and specialist services have worked well together to continue their support for vulnerable pupils. However, the pandemic has led to difficulties with the delivery of some of these services. Support from the police service and youth services has been particularly valued by nearly all schools. Many schools offer training and development opportunities for key staff that support vulnerable learners.

There has been an increased demand for mental, general health and counselling services. Overall, referrals from schools to specialist services have increased and schools are increasingly concerned that more pupils are unable to access specialist assessment or support.

Generally, schools benefited from working with other schools and local authority officers to share resources, discuss issues and problem solve in order to meet statutory duties.

Nearly all schools report that arrangements to continue with statutory assessment processes for statements of special educational needs (SEN) have continued since March. Schools have continued to conduct annual reviews, making adjustments where necessary. Schools are now beginning to increase the level of support for pupils with SEN via school based interventions. The operational workload caused by the pandemic has slowed progress towards the planning for the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal [Wales] Act.

Detailed findings

Pupil, staff and headteacher wellbeing

Pupil wellbeing

Nearly all schools report that pupils are happy to be back in school and have generally adapted well to the new arrangements. They appreciate the structure and routine that school provides and the opportunity to see their friends and teachers. However, schools are concerned about the long term impact of the lockdown on specific groups of pupils, such as those who have chaotic home lives and lack support at home.

Many schools report that pupil behaviour is generally better than it was prior to the lockdown and are engaging well with learning in school, though less so when having to learn from home. Leaders feel that, in a few instances, pupils who had displayed poor attitudes to learning in the past have realised the benefits they get from attending school. A few leaders report that younger pupils are displaying less maturity than they would under normal circumstances. In addition, they say that pupils are becoming less adept at social interaction as a result of social distancing. In general, pupils are getting fewer opportunities to exercise.

Since September, nearly all schools have prioritised pupil wellbeing, building on their work to support wellbeing from the beginning of the lockdown period, as well as their usual practices. Most have completed audits of pupil wellbeing in order to identify those pupils in need of support. This has enabled schools to provide bespoke support to these pupils. In many cases, schools have adapted their personal, social and health education provision in response to the issues brought about by the pandemic. For example, schools have introduced socially distanced walks and chats outside, focused virtual assemblies on wellbeing matters and introduced a specific wellbeing lesson into the school day.

Many parents who responded to the survey believe that the school cares well for their child's wellbeing. From the start of term, many of these parents believe that school staff have supported their child to settle back into school well. The majority believe that the school makes appropriate arrangements for their child to discuss their feelings, health and wellbeing, or concerns.

When pupils initially returned in September, many schools report that attendance was positive, though often lower than they would normally expect due to pupils self-isolating or awaiting test results. Across Wales, there is considerable variation in the amount of school time pupils have lost due to having to self-isolate since September. Some schools have experienced a high number of COVID-19 cases, with several year groups and high numbers of staff having to self-isolate. In a few cases, year groups have had to self-isolate more than once, thereby missing more than half of the first half term. Other schools have not experienced any disruption of this kind since September.

Many schools are particularly concerned about current Year 11 pupils who are anxious regarding the uncertainty over examinations. In addition, a few schools note that their BAME pupils have concerns about family health and wellbeing due to the impact of the pandemic on their community.

Staff wellbeing

Nearly all leaders feel that the pandemic has strengthened the sense of community within their school and that the teamwork and adaptability of staff have been particular strengths. Many teachers and support staff feel that school leaders have provided them with sufficient support to enable a successful return to school. However, leaders are very concerned about the wellbeing of their staff. In addition to their anxieties about the virus, staff are having to constantly adapt to new ways of working. For example, staff are having to clean areas of classrooms between classes or when they move, and cannot interact with pupils or colleagues in their usual way. They are also having to provide online lessons in addition to face-to-face teaching. Leaders note a particular concern for the wellbeing of staff when they have to move from class to class in order for pupils to stay in the same classroom all day. Many teachers indicate that they find it particularly challenging to manage planning face-to-face learning alongside providing distance learning. They indicate that this is having a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Nearly all schools have provided support for staff wellbeing. This has included regular phone calls, the offer of counselling or occupational health support and specific wellbeing programmes. Where staff have specific health issues, schools have completed individual risk assessments to enable their safe return to school. Many schools have conducted staff surveys to gauge their wellbeing and their views about the school's work, and have adapted their provision accordingly.

Headteacher and senior leader wellbeing

Several factors have impacted negatively on the wellbeing of headteachers and senior leaders. The highly pressurised situation since March and managing the anxiety of staff, pupils and parents has been challenging. Headteachers express frustration at having to react to guidance at short notice and not being given advance warning of any changes, thereby having to deal with responses from parents and staff before they can process the information themselves. Since March, most headteachers and many senior leaders have had very little respite or holiday time. In addition to their usual responsibilities, from March to the summer, a great deal of leaders' time was spent keeping up with and implementing frequent changes to guidance, keeping abreast of emails and updates regarding the pandemic,

communicating with staff, parents and pupils and preparing for the ‘catch-up’ period prior to the summer holidays. Many leaders were also responsible for running hubs. Leaders worked during the summer holidays in order to prepare for September and deal with the repercussions of the situation regarding examinations.

Since returning in September, leaders have found that much of their time is being taken up with managing and supervising new systems such as multiple lunchtimes, one way systems and the wearing of masks. Schools who have experienced cases of COVID-19 comment on the workload involved with managing the associated processes and the need to be ‘on call’ in the evenings and on weekends. The amount of time taken up by COVID-19 related activities has decreased the amount of time available to leaders to plan strategically and attend to their usual work.

Most headteachers report that fellow headteachers have been an important source of support. This has been particularly valued by headteachers who took up their posts during or immediately prior to the pandemic. In most cases, headteachers have met frequently throughout the pandemic to share experiences and ideas and to work collaboratively.

Promoting learning

Distance learning

During the initial stages of lockdown, schools reacted quickly to provide distance learning for pupils. This was either online digital resources or paper copies. The schools that had already made substantial investments in online learning were able to provide digital distance learning materials from the outset. Most leaders feel that the quality of online provision has improved over time as teachers rapidly became more confident with using online software.

Cameo

Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Is Coed

As part of its approach to distance learning, the school provided pupils and parents with a comprehensive digital booklet that included a range of learning opportunities. This included short videos to explain key concepts in Welsh, and answers to frequently asked questions to support parents and pupils.

Many secondary schools began by providing pupils with work in line with the full school timetable. However, feedback from teachers, pupils and parents suggested that most pupils were finding this level of work difficult to engage with from home. As a result, most schools reduced their provision to provide a more focused range of learning whilst aiming to maintain a broad and balanced curriculum.

Learning from September

Leaders have planned for a range of situations, for example when individual pupils, staff or other groups have to self-isolate or other periods of disruption such as national or local ‘fire breaks’.

Many schools are using online learning resources to trial and develop teaching approaches in preparation for any further disruption. For example, schools have piloted a distance learning approach in class to practise how to use the digital platform effectively when asking and answering questions through online chat facilities. A few schools are offering workshops to support parents to improve their confidence when using ICT.

Cameo

Bassaleg School

The school has produced a practical guide to blended learning for [parents and pupils](#). The guide explains what kinds of learning experiences may be provided by teachers if pupils need to work from home, for example pre-recorded video tutorials, live webinars and independent learning tasks using a digital platform. Video links are included within the document to allow pupils and parents to see an example of how these types of lessons may look. In addition, the guide includes information and links to videos which explain how to use the school's digital platform. The 'do's and don'ts' of online learning are outlined to ensure that both pupils and parents understand the expectations around behaviour when taking part in an online lesson.

There are several challenges that arise from guidance on how to respond to COVID-19. Leaders have had to adapt their approaches in a variety of ways. In particular, social distancing makes face-to-face classroom teaching more challenging. For example, under current restrictions there are difficulties with organising group and paired work, and circulating the classroom to monitor and promote pupil progress. As a result, a majority of schools are encouraging other approaches to check pupils' understanding, such as carefully planned quizzes, the use of mini whiteboards and visualisers. Marking pupils' work presents several health and safety challenges. In response to this, a minority of schools are requiring pupils to only submit work online. In a very few schools, teachers are providing feedback to pupils through audio or video clips.

Most schools have experienced disruption since their return in September, in a few cases there have been examples of extremely high levels of disruption. In most cases, where groups of pupils are required to isolate, schools are providing distance learning. Many schools are beginning to develop the use of pre-recorded lessons alongside distance learning tasks. A majority of schools are beginning to develop their approach to live streaming lessons. Until recently, leaders feel that the guidance around safeguarding for live streaming has been unclear and often contradictory. In addition, they report several difficulties with this approach, which include a lack of ICT equipment at home, poor quality Wi-Fi signal, difficulties with logging in to the school's network and pupils not turning up for these sessions. However, where schools have used this methodology, leaders feel that it has increased pupils' engagement in learning.

Blended learning

Blended learning is a planned combination of face-to-face and distance learning that complement each other. The current situation means that pupils are either at home or in school, therefore their provision in general does not involve a blended learning approach. A blended learning approach would involve a cohesive, intentional plan for pupils' learning to involve a combination of learning in school and at home, which is not the case in most schools at the moment. Schools are beginning to explore how they can incorporate elements of blended learning into their provision.

Cameo

Cantonian High School

To support distance and blended learning, the school has developed booklets for each subject. These condense work and key features/concepts from each subject. Currently, in face-to-face lessons, teachers use these booklets and model how they can be used when pupils need to learn from home. This approach is intended to help pupils be confident about how they can continue to access learning materials if they are out of school for a period of time and how the teacher will interact with them digitally.

The school regularly trials different approaches to distance learning to provide staff and pupils with valuable learning strategies should there be a need to isolate. They test these out when pupils are in school so that they can be put into practice quickly should there be periods when pupils are not in school. For example, a recent trial tried to pre-empt a scenario of what learning might look like if a teacher has to self-isolate but pupils are in school.

The school is beginning to ask pupils to engage with activities at home that prepare them for face-to-face learning.

Pupil engagement

All leaders report that engagement with learning was variable during the lockdown period. In particular, they indicated that the current Year 11 pupils engaged least in distance learning.

In general, leaders are concerned that pupils lack basic ICT skills when using laptops or personal computers. A minority of pupils struggled to log into Hwb or submit work online. This shortcoming was a barrier to learning during this period. Since returning, schools are focussing heavily on developing pupils' ICT skills in order to prepare them for periods when they may have to learn from home. Many pupils and around half of their parents feel that schools are preparing them well to engage with online learning.

Leaders of schools with sixth forms feel that, because pupils in Year 11 missed preparing for their summer examinations in 2020, many Year 12 pupils lack the basic study skills that would usually be developed as part of their preparation for examinations.

Quality assurance and monitoring

During the lockdown period, most schools monitored engagement with distance learning by considering how many pupils logged in or downloaded work. However this approach did not provide schools with an accurate picture of engagement with learning as pupils could log into systems or download activities without necessarily taking part in any work. In response, a majority of schools began to track the submission of work to enhance their monitoring processes. Many schools made use of surveys for pupils and parents to seek feedback and adapt their provision in light of this. A few schools reported that they had developed approaches to monitoring the quality of work set. For example, leaders in one school checked the quality of resources provided by different departments and identified areas where the level of challenge was insufficient.

Since September, leaders and staff have had to continue to respond to the pandemic. This is substantially reducing the time they have to think and plan strategically. As a result of this and health and safety measures, a majority of schools have reduced their monitoring and evaluation activities.

Cameo

Caldicot School

Leaders in the school have shared a helpful guide for staff, which outlines clear expectations for teaching in school and when groups are required to isolate or if there are any future lockdowns. The headteacher has provided opportunities for staff to pilot these approaches and through running practice responses to scenarios. As a result, the headteacher feels that nearly all staff are well prepared for any future adaptations that may be required.

In order to continue their focus on improving teaching, leaders have developed a website to share effective practice. Teaching and learning leads review and quality assure this work and, generally, staff are responding positively to this approach. The school has paused lesson observations and has implemented more frequent monitoring of pupil work.

Operational arrangements, including health and safety

Nearly all schools have placed key stage 3 classes in class, band or year bubbles. In many schools, these pupils stay in the same classroom with teachers moving in between lessons. In a minority of schools, pupils move in between lessons with classrooms being cleaned in between lessons.

In most schools, key stage 4 and sixth form pupils have been placed in year bubbles and move around the school so that they can access specialist classrooms.

Leaders in all schools report that they have taken actions to limit the contact between class or year groups. These actions include:

- creating one way systems in corridors

- allocating designated areas of the school site to specific year groups
- increasing the number of spaces used to serve food
- introducing staggered start and end times to the school day
- introducing staggered lunch and break times

Many schools note that these arrangements have led to a calm and orderly atmosphere and generally improved pupil behaviour.

Many schools have retained their usual timetable structure. A minority of schools have increased the length of lessons to minimise movement around the school. In these instances, school leaders have provided specific guidance and training for their teaching staff on how to maximise learning during longer lessons.

Most schools received helpful support from their local authority or regional consortium to produce general and specific risk assessments. These included individual risk assessments for pupils and staff, where necessary. For example, one school completed personal risk assessments for pupils with specific needs such as visual impairment and diabetes. Schools have developed guidance and risk assessments to allow practical subjects to proceed safely.

Schools report that a few subjects are finding working within the COVID-19 period challenging, particularly when providing pupils with opportunities to complete practical work. Schools have employed additional cleaning staff to sanitise equipment between lessons particularly in design and technology, science, art, music and PE.

Where drama is offered, provision has been adapted in a few schools to focus on theory, working on silent performances and wearing of masks when completing practical tasks. Some schools are allowing pupils to attend school wearing PE kit to avoid pupils congregating in small unventilated changing rooms. Other schools have adapted their schemes of work to include individual sports, athletics and non-contact sports such as tag rugby and cricket. In a few schools, departments have adapted their schemes of work to overcome practical difficulties such as not being able to use specialist rooms.

Cameo

Ysgol Gyfun Aberaeron

The school has encouraged subjects to adapt their learning programmes during the COVID-19 period to mitigate practical difficulties. For example, the design and technology department has introduced knitting into the curriculum as key stage 3 pupils do not move around the school building to attend lessons in specialist rooms. They have also used Teams to enable pupils to design digitally at home and then use sublimation printing and digital embroidery techniques to produce items in school. Art lessons involve teachers using large pieces of scrap paper to protect desks. In music, pupils use digital applications to record themselves singing and playing instruments at home. These video recordings are viewed in class where they evaluate each other's work.

Where sixth forms are working with other providers to offer post-16 provision, live lessons have been offered online to minimise contact and reduce travel.

Planning for progress

Nearly all schools have used their tracking and monitoring of pupils' engagement during the lockdown period to identify a group of pupils who had not engaged well with the work. Schools are using this information to target their support to help these pupils with any wellbeing issues in order that they re-integrate with school life and re-engage with learning. Where schools encounter difficulties in ensuring that these pupils return to school, local authorities have provided valuable support in this area. Nearly all headteachers stated that they were planning regular assessment of pupil progress, in particular Year 11.

Most schools noted that pupils' literacy skills have deteriorated during the lockdown period. In particular, pupils' writing and speaking skills are weaker now than then they were prior to March. Nearly all schools are targeting the development of these skills in lessons and are planning a programme of literacy and numeracy interventions for those pupils who require additional support.

Many schools planned a range of online transition activities to support their pupils to progress to the next stage of learning. Many leaders feel that the staggered start to the term has had a beneficial effect and has led to Year 7 pupils settling well in their new school. However, in a few schools, leaders feel the lack of formal transition adversely affected Year 7 pupils.

Accelerating learning (Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards grant)

Overall, many schools have received information about the Welsh Government's 'Recruit, Recover, Raise standards: the accelerating learning programme', from local authorities and regional consortia. However, the support offered to schools to help them plan how to use and monitor the grant varies across Wales.

Schools have adopted a wide variety of approaches when planning how to use the grant. Many schools are using this funding to support pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. A minority of schools have appointed additional teachers for English, mathematics and Welsh to reduce class sizes and to allow more flexibility when allocating staff to target groups. A very few schools are providing targeted support to develop individual pupils' digital competency. Many schools are targeting support for Year 11 pupils particularly in core subjects.

A few schools are planning alternative provision for pupils that have found re-engaging with learning difficult following the initial lockdown period. These schools have appointed additional members of staff, including teaching assistants and learning coaches, to offer a range of activities alongside the core curriculum. Examples of this included running additional wellbeing support sessions and providing revision or catch up sessions after school.

Generally leaders have found it challenging to recruit new teachers, particularly in Welsh medium schools. Many leaders indicated a shortage of mathematics teachers, which has limited their opportunities to plan and spend this grant.

Cameo

Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Is Coed

The school has appointed a full-time language support teacher to work with pupils that have joined the school through a language immersion programme. This teacher will also support pupils who are struggling with language acquisition across the curriculum following the lockdown period.

Professional learning

Most schools adapted their professional learning plans quickly to focus on developing practitioners' digital skills. Often this was provided by the school's own staff who had expertise in this area. Many leaders feel that staff are improving their ability to develop digital learning and this is having a positive effect on teaching and learning. A few schools have opted for a calendar of virtual professional learning workshops, recording these workshops and keeping them as a resource. Many teachers have found these recorded workshops useful to refer back to when planning learning for their pupils. Many leaders feel that a positive outcome of the pandemic has been the rapid improvement in practitioners' digital skills. However, a small minority of teachers do not feel that they have had sufficient support in this area.

A majority of schools have developed useful practical guidance for staff for their delivery of face-to face and distance learning.

Cameo

Bassaleg School

Leaders provided detailed guidance for staff to provide clear expectations and support for blended learning. This provided staff with an overview of the planning and learning process and staff were asked to follow a learning cycle of 'purpose, structure, scaffolds and reflection' when planning their blended learning approaches. They agreed that all synchronous learning will be recorded. This includes any material that is presented on screen and any conversations, comments made during the lesson. The school provided a clear behaviour policy in order to support staff to manage synchronous learning and these expectations were shared with pupils and parents. Parents and pupils were also provided with guidance to help them to understand the school's approach to distance learning.

Many schools supplemented their professional learning programme with online sessions provided by local authorities and regional consortia. In general, leaders felt that local authorities and regional consortia offered useful information regarding distance learning.

Welsh

Many bilingual or Welsh-medium schools are particularly concerned that pupils' ability to communicate through the medium of Welsh has declined dramatically. A

number of schools have therefore focused on pupils' spoken Welsh since their return to school.

In English-medium schools, it has been challenging to support pupils' Welsh language skills due to the lack of opportunities for teachers to engage pupils in speaking and listening. In many cases, leaders are stressing the importance of maintaining a focus on the use of Welsh across the curriculum.

All four regional consortia and teachers worked together to develop an extensive range of online resources to support the development of pupils' Welsh in English-medium and Welsh-medium schools. Here are links to these resources:

Y Pair: <https://hwb.gov.wales/networks/191820d6-cc3b-4e62-a0a1-0f119947350b>

Y Gist: <https://hwb.gov.wales/networks/a4e8b2f7-086b-4ff5-abe2-d4c9014f4554>

Qualifications and assessment arrangements

At the time of our engagement activity, all secondary school leaders are concerned regarding the uncertainty around the arrangements for examinations in 2021. Due to the uncertainty, schools are having to plan for a range of examination scenarios in addition to having to plan for a range of lockdown scenarios.

While there is general concern about the disruption to the education of all pupils in examination year groups, there is particular concern about the variation in disruption from school to school and the importance of ensuring that pupils are not disadvantaged. For example, some schools have experienced a high number of COVID-19 cases, with year groups and staff having to self-isolate, whilst others have not experienced any disruption of this kind since September. There is also variation in disruption across subjects. During the lockdown period, pupils chose to engage with some subjects more than others. Schools have specific concerns around subjects involving practical elements and the clarity of guidelines for these subjects.

Teachers and leaders are anxious to ensure that they have sufficient assessment information should centre assessed grades be needed. As a result, pupils in examination year groups are having to complete a considerable number of assessments across all their subjects. This has an impact on the workload of pupils and teachers alike, and reduces teaching and learning time. In addition, pupils are worried that each piece of work they complete could influence their final grade. They are afraid to make mistakes and ask for help. This is having a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Cameo

Ysgol Friars and Newbridge Comprehensive School

On returning in September, leaders in a few schools asked departments to consider the elements of examination courses that would be most difficult to teach or deliver through a blended or distance learning model. They were also asked to consider how health and safety restrictions impacted on their subject and what would be practical and possible to deliver in school under those circumstances. This was in addition to any adjustments made to examination specifications by the examination boards. In light of this information, departments rearranged their learning plans so that they maximised the time in school and prepared online resources for topics that would better suit this type of delivery. One school also prepared a document for parents and pupils to explain the changes that had been made in all subjects.

Supporting vulnerable learners

Promoting wellbeing

Nearly all schools have procedures in place for identifying vulnerable learners. These are based on a strong knowledge of the needs of individual pupils and their families, and co-operation with the local authority. Many schools have considered how vulnerable learners might be affected by the pandemic. This involved engaging, for instance, in one to one discussions with pupils during the summer return and the use of surveys to find out about the concerns of parents. As a result, they have adapted their processes to identify and support vulnerable learners. This has included responding to the emotional and wellbeing needs of a wider range of pupils, increasing the number staff available to support pupils and introducing more efficient ways of reporting wellbeing concerns, such as the use of a wellbeing app.

Cameo

Eirias High School

During the final week of the catch up and prepare period in the summer, the school carried out a survey to assess the impact that the school closure period had on pupils' wellbeing. The assessment considered 10 criteria in all and evaluated matters such as pupil engagement during this period and parental engagement with the school. The aim of the assessment was to evaluate the impact of wellbeing provision on vulnerable pupils to ensure that they returned to school in September. In addition, the school wanted to identify what the specific concerns of vulnerable pupils were and how they could address these in a targeted way.

As a result of their evaluation, many schools adapted their support for wellbeing to respond to particular issues that had arisen as a result of lockdown, such as those affecting pupils who did not attend school during the catch-up period in July. For example, a few schools worked with their local authorities to target particularly vulnerable pupils and offer them summer holiday learning activities.

To support the transition of vulnerable pupils, many schools created bespoke transition programmes targeted at those who did not engage with their primary school during the lock down period. Many schools offered individuals the opportunity to visit in person before term started. A few schools have created support zones or bespoke areas for vulnerable pupils in Year 7, which support them to feel safe in school. Other schools have sent out welcome packs to all new starters, set up vlogs and worked with vulnerable families to encourage family learning.

Cameo

Llangatwg Community School

During the summer holidays, the school ran a transition programme for vulnerable pupils in conjunction with Swansea City Football Club Community Trust. The pupils were invited in for one day and completed activities focused around transition and dealing with change. The transition co-ordinator, head of year and form tutors also participated. The feedback from pupils and parents suggests that this opportunity helped vulnerable pupils to gain confidence about starting at their new school.

Attendance

In many schools the attendance of vulnerable pupils has been variable during the first half term. Leaders note the main reasons for this are an increase in infection rates and parental anxiety about the safety of children in school. A small proportion of parents have chosen to educate their children at home. There is general uncertainty about how schools should record attendance under the current circumstances, for example when pupils are self-isolating.

Many schools welcome the support provided by the education welfare service. Education welfare officers (EWO) work with pupils and their families to address concerns and anxieties about attending school. They also work with local authority multi-agency teams to provide specialist support for those pupils who are reluctant to attend school or are learning from home due to health reasons. EWO teams, working in partnership with social services, provide schools with important information about individual vulnerable pupils. This enables schools to respond quickly to their needs.

Cameo

Bishop Hedley High School

Staff in the school were particularly concerned about EAL pupils and pupils from the Gypsy Roma Traveller community. Most of the EAL learners in the school are language competent but parents often have weaker skills so the school was concerned that this might lead to challenges with home learning and communication about expectations on returning to school. The school has a Polish speaking LSA who made contact with vulnerable families to provide advice and support to parents on how they could help their children. The school recognises that pupils from the Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) community are often difficult to engage but the pandemic has made this situation even more challenging. The local authority made contact with GRT families and ran summer holiday engagement activities but parents are still reluctant to send their children to school because of concerns about safety. Currently the school is providing a range of experiences to motivate these pupils, such as participation in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme as well as coaching and mentoring funded from the Recruit, Recover and Raise programme.

Groups of vulnerable pupils

Nearly all schools have adapted their usual approaches to safeguard and prioritise the wellbeing of pupils on the child protection register or those identified as being at risk. For instance, they use digital means to maintain contact with pupils if they are not in school and staff participate in online meetings with social workers and local authority support teams to share information.

Although schools have worked hard to support pupils who are digitally excluded through the provision of digital devices, they remain concerned about pupils who still do not engage in distance learning. Leaders feel that this is either because they do not have the skills to access the resources or because they lack support at home to help them with their work. Schools recognise that more needs to be done to support these learners. Since September, most schools are beginning to address these challenges by providing lessons to develop pupils' skills to enable them to engage with distance learning. In addition, many schools provide IT helplines and advice lines on how to complete work. A few schools are concerned about pupils who cannot access a computer during the day, for example because it is used by a parent or sibling.

Most schools have taken steps to support the wellbeing of pupils with SEN. During lockdown many pupils with SEN lacked confidence to undertake the work provided for them and this has had an impact on their progress in learning. The majority of parents of children who receive additional support who responded to the survey believe that the school is considering their child's needs and providing appropriate resources, support and guidance for them.

Cameo

Bassaleg School

In September, the school restructured its Progress Centre provision to provide mini learning zones for each year group. This enables pupils with SEN to safely access specialist support, gain respite and, if necessary, facilitate a gradual transition to school whilst remaining in their bubble. Support staff have been deployed to provide consistent support to pupils and have been provided with specific guidance on how they can support pupils in a COVID-19 safe way.

Many headteachers comment on the important role schools have in establishing some form of normality for vulnerable pupils. Most vulnerable pupils have responded well to new routines and expectations. Schools comment that these pupils value the structure that school provides. As a result, the behaviour of many of these pupils has improved. However, a minority of vulnerable pupils have found the re-integration into school challenging.

Most schools provide ongoing support for families of vulnerable pupils. This includes socially distanced home visits to maintain contact with targeted pupils. Most schools recognise that families are experiencing increasing financial pressure due to the impact of the pandemic on the economy. These schools provide hygiene packs, food vouchers and learning equipment to help relieve financial pressure. In addition, they support families by providing school uniform and specialist equipment to enable all pupils to participate fully in the life of the school. Many schools report that their work with vulnerable families has had a positive impact on the way in which these families engage with the school.

Cameo

Coedcae Comprehensive School

The school established a successful partnership with the local Town Council to support vulnerable families. The school identified vulnerable families, not on the FSM register but families with increasing financial pressures due to job losses or because of the furlough scheme. With a weekly grant of £250, the school delivered hygiene packs to those families to relieve them of financial pressures where money had to be spent mostly on essentials like food rather than hygiene products. The school as a result built solid relationships with pupils and their families and dealt with the issues and struggles of their school community.

Many schools have specific provision or centres for vulnerable pupils, and work in partnership with the youth service and third sector providers. These have a positive impact on the attendance and engagement in learning of vulnerable pupils.

Curriculum and learning

Schools have adapted their curriculum and teaching methods in response to the pandemic and the needs of pupils, particularly those who are vulnerable. In

September, they provided opportunities for pupils to discuss their concerns and provided practical activities to help them get used to learning in the reconfigured school environment.

Cameo

Blackwood Comprehensive School

The school evaluated and revised its distance learning strategy three times during lockdown, in order to improve the provision for vulnerable learners in particular. Leaders initially ran the usual school timetable but this caused anxiety and was not easy to deliver. Pupils felt bombarded with work and teachers found it difficult to provide resources that delivered new learning effectively. Pupils with SEN and vulnerable learners found it difficult to read all the information on Google Classroom therefore the school introduced differentiated videos to explain work and allocated teaching assistants to support learners with their work. New work was not introduced for a while. Instead, the school focused mainly on developing pupils' skills and promoting wellbeing. The school also helped pupils to organise their work and added wellbeing tasks such as going for a walk to pupils' timetables.

When preparing for the return of pupils to school in September, many schools provided clear guidance to parents and pupils regarding health and safety aspects. For vulnerable pupils and their parents, most schools produced visual information such as videos, online presentations and virtual tours. A few schools provided opportunities for these pupils and their parents to visit the site to familiarise with new layouts and arrangements. Leaders noted that this supported a smooth and safer return to school for these pupils.

Commonly, pupils have undertaken assessments of their skills, although the nature of these assessments varies across schools. In the main, schools report that the gaps in learning are generally greater for vulnerable pupils, in particular, their basic literacy and numeracy skills are weaker than before. School leaders say that their evaluations suggest that the majority of pupils, particularly vulnerable learners, have not read often during this period. Many schools are using the outcomes of these assessments to identify and target support. For example, a few schools have reduced option choices for very small numbers of pupils to ensure they have more time to focus on developing their literacy, numeracy and digital skills.

The health and safety constraints affecting practical work is a barrier for many vulnerable pupils who enjoy the variety of experiences in subjects such as design and technology, physical education and science. Schools report that the lack of activities related to creativity and practical work has had an adverse effect on the engagement of some vulnerable learners.

Pupils in key stage 4 following alternative curriculum courses are a particular concern to many schools. There is a great deal of variation in how easily these pupils can access their alternative and off-site provision and this has proved to be a considerable timetabling challenge for schools. Leaders have shared many examples of where external providers have risk assessed and enabled courses to go

ahead. However, a large number of more practical courses such as hair and beauty have not been able to run. Now that they have returned to school, a few of these pupils, particularly those who were previously at risk of exclusion, are displaying challenging behaviour or are disengaging. Schools continue to work with external partners and the local authority to ensure suitable provision for vulnerable learners. Even when these courses are accessible, often it is with a reduced timetable because the provider cannot allow pupils from one school to mix with another. A few schools have set up their own provision, although in the main this had already been planned.

Cameo

Henry Tudor School / Ysgol Harri Tudur

The school had already planned to evaluate and review its vocational provision during the last academic year and this went ahead in spite of the pandemic. As a result, the school has created its own vocational provision. They have employed a qualified teacher to supervise the provision and staff with a range of skills and experiences. The school has worked with the local authority to enable learners from other providers to also access this provision. Around 230 learners currently access the vocational provision as part of their curriculum. Through its vocational courses, the school now provides a crèche, nursery and a motor vehicle workshop that serves the local community.

In schools where provision is available across several providers, pupils have had to revise their choices or have had to accept virtual learning options. This is particularly the case for sixth form pupils who study aspects of their courses in different schools. This has been challenging for many pupils, and in particular for vulnerable pupils who had carefully chosen particular pathways that may no longer be available.

Specialist services and multi-agency working

Since March, schools have received a wide range of support for vulnerable learners from external agencies. These include counselling services, social services, children's services and the educational psychology service. In general, many headteachers feel that working with external agencies through the pandemic has strengthened these links. Schools report that the quality of the support they have received from external agencies has been variable. Where this work can be offered virtually, for example through online meetings, the support for vulnerable learners has been timely and helpful. However, some agencies have been unable to provide their usual level of support. In the case of face-to-face support, this is either due to a lack of COVID-19 compliant physical space or due to the need to reduce the number of external visitors to schools. In other cases, services have struggled to move to online provision. In addition, a few specialist staff have been self-isolating. A few schools report that this lack of specialist support placed an additional workload on leaders and staff, as many parents depend on the school for support. However, this has improved since September and many schools report that with minor adjustments, for example relocating a particular service to a different part of the school and enhanced cleaning and upgrading risk-assessments, nearly all specialist services are beginning to resume.

Many schools have reported an increased demand for mental health support and services. As a result, waiting lists are long and these schools are increasingly concerned that pupils who would normally qualify to receive support are unable to access the services. In a few cases, staff are provided with helpful courses and valuable information to share with parents and pupils in order to bridge the gap and support the vulnerable pupils. General health services are very busy and as a result waiting lists are long.

In general, since re-opening, schools have reported an increase in the number of referrals for counselling. As a result, a few local authorities have increased the counselling capacity within the authority and one local authority has allocated each school an additional counsellor. Many schools offer school based interventions for pupils who are on the waiting list and have been flexible with their approach to counselling with a choice of face to face and online provision.

Cameo

Radyr Comprehensive School

In order to support pupils in need of counselling, prior to the summer break, the school posted mobile phones to pupils who were identified through the counselling service. Mobile phones were also issued to staff who used these to call vulnerable pupils twice per week. This helped to build relationships, identify issues, and enabled staff to support these pupils when they returned to school in September.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, support for schools to address the challenging behaviour is problematic as by its nature it requires face-to-face meeting time between the specialist and the pupil. Most schools have indicated that, on their return to school, a few vulnerable pupils' behaviour has been more challenging. Schools are concerned that, as these behaviour issues are not addressed, the pupils may continue to disengage.

Support from the police service allows schools to identify and support pupils who have been witness to domestic abuse and other events in the home. As a result, staff are able to direct the appropriate services and support to both the pupil and their family.

Support from youth workers has been valued by nearly all schools. They have supported pupils and families during lockdown by delivering food, hosting online meetings with families and visiting pupils to support them with their learning. Their support has been continuous throughout the lockdown and the re-opening phase. Since September, they have continued to offer support especially to those pupils who are not back in school.

Many schools report that local authorities have provided useful operational support for schools to ensure the wellbeing of vulnerable pupils. Generally, local authorities work effectively as a conduit between council departments, external agencies and schools. They share important information with schools and families and provide advice and information on sources of specialist help. For example, they provide

safeguarding information and counselling service information, and signpost emotional health and wellbeing support and guidance. Schools indicate that local authority support has been most effective when the communication is clear and routes for support are simple. For instance, in one local authority the vulnerable learners' panel is an efficient and effective forum to signpost pupils and families to a range of agencies to help them once the support from the school had been exhausted.

Statutory processes and referrals

Generally, schools benefited from working together with other schools and local authority officers to share resources, discuss issues and problem solve in order to meet statutory duties. As a result, schools felt better able to meet the needs of vulnerable pupils and staff were more confident in the support they could provide.

Nearly all schools report that arrangements to continue with statutory assessment processes for statements of special educational needs have continued since March. However, a very few schools would have appreciated more support particularly where they have received new requests for statutory assessments. This led to additional workload for school staff as they had to deal with an increase in challenging phone calls from parents requesting additional support. Schools have continued to conduct annual reviews, making adjustments where necessary. For example, to adhere to COVID-19 restrictions, some schools designated particular areas or offices for the purpose of conducting annual reviews. Others moved the reviews online, or had a blended approach for families and specialist services, with a mix of face to face and online provision. In the very few cases where annual reviews have not been completed, this is due either to parental choice or a lack of specialist support.

A few schools reported that since returning in September, it has been difficult to run a full programme of interventions detailed in individual education plans. This is due to the re-deployment of support staff to ensure that pupils settle into the new routines necessary to adhere to health and safety guidance, and engage with the curriculum. Schools are now beginning to increase the level of support via school based interventions but there is a challenge to make provision in relation to previous or new targets. For example, schools are finding it challenging to provide social opportunities for pupils with autistic spectrum condition or who have social needs whilst remaining COVID-19 compliant.

Cameo

Ysgol Gyfun Penweddig

The school reviewed the support noted in all statements and Individual Education Plans and RAG rated each activity according to whether it would have been possible to continue with the support remotely. Most aspects were classed as green and this support was then provided for pupils. For example, teaching assistants arranged online meetings or telephoned pupils who had SEN at least weekly to support them with aspects of their work. Where it was not possible to carry out the support remotely, possible solutions were discussed with the pupil's parents and a solution was agreed. After the re-opening in September, support plans were again reviewed, RAG rated and solutions sought. For example, visits out of school to support the development of life skills were not possible due to health and safety reasons, but extra staff employed by the school now work with these pupils to create similar in-house experiences.

A few schools feel that the lockdown period has given them the opportunity to pause, reflect and train staff on aspects of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal [Wales] Act. However, although preparations had already begun before lockdown, many schools indicate that their ability to plan for the implementation of the Act has slowed. In general, this is due to the unprecedented operational workload that has been caused by the pandemic.

Overall, referrals from schools to, for example, children's services and health have increased. Referrals to local authority specialist teams have increased also. This has resulted in a growing number of pupils who are unable to access specialist assessment or support.

Professional learning

Many schools offer training and development opportunities for key staff that support vulnerable learners. Most common are training on aspects such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and dealing with pupils' anxiety. Internally, schools share good practice on meeting the needs of vulnerable pupils, such as through mindfulness provision. Teaching assistants benefit from time given to follow online courses on topics related to their work, for example on dealing with anxious pupils and training on specific therapies. Many schools access the wellbeing focused professional learning offer from the local authority and regional consortia and a few schools access training through specialist services such as 'Mind' and CAMHS.

Learners to be considered in the vulnerable group include those who have not engaged in learning at all during the summer term but in particular those learners who may be more vulnerable, including:

- learners with special educational needs (SEN)
- learners who are eligible for free school meals

- learners who have English or Welsh as an additional language or low literacy levels, or who are Gypsy Roma Traveller or from minority ethnic background
- learners who are educated other than at school (EOTAS)
- learners who are on the child protection register, have looked after status, young carers, learners who offend