
Engagement work: Special and PRU sector update – autumn 2020

December 2020



Engagement work: Maintained special school and pupil referral unit (PRU) sector update – autumn 2020

This report summarises the findings from engagement phone calls made to 20 maintained special schools and 19 PRUs 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. In the context of special schools and PRUs, all learners are considered vulnerable. However, we have retained the use of this term for reasons of consistency and to facilitate reference to our findings in other sectors. Proportions relate to the sample of schools and PRUs 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 and PRU leaders, teachers and support staff

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Key findings

Promoting wellbeing of learners, staff and leaders

Leaders report that they have continued to focus primarily on supporting pupils' wellbeing and attitudes to learning since September. They describe how staff have worked creatively to enhance the learning environment and provide nurturing experiences. They plan activities that allow pupils to discuss their anxieties and feelings in a safe and supportive environment.

Most leaders of special schools report that pupil attendance has improved throughout the term with only a very few pupils shielding at home due to significant medical risks. In many PRUs, leaders report that attendance rates were high at the start of term but have declined since then. In most settings, leaders report that pupils have responded well to adjustments to minimise the risk of infection such as changes to movement around the building, adherence to social bubbles and to staff wearing protective personal equipment (PPE).

Nearly all leaders across both sectors confirm that maintaining staff wellbeing has been a key priority since the start of the period of school closure. The majority of leaders refer to the challenge in managing ongoing patterns of staff absence.

Nearly all leaders of special schools and PRUs report the significant challenges they have faced since September. Many leaders express significant concerns about the sustainability of provision and capacity of the school and wider staff group to continue working in this way indefinitely.

Promoting learning

Many leaders confirm the challenges they faced when schools and PRUs closed in developing a model of distance or blended learning that met the widely differing abilities and needs of all pupils in the school. Many referred to the difficulties parents and carers faced in supporting their children's learning at home, either because of the complexity of their children's needs, a lack of skills to support learning, including digital skills, or restricted access to information and communication technology (ICT) equipment. Generally, settings have adopted a mix of ICT platforms combined with physical packs of learning resources that best reflected the ability of pupils and their families to engage with them.

Since September, many leaders have focused on the assessment of pupils' current levels of achievement, with particular focus on literacy, numeracy, behaviour, social interaction, and independence. In many settings, staff are taking a gradual approach to assessment and to re-introducing previously established approaches to learning to reduce pupils' anxieties.

Most leaders across both sectors describe how staff use this information to adjust pupils' individual learning programmes to allow for additional interventions and support for pupils. For example, leaders in most PRUs confirm that the results of baseline assessments indicate that most pupils' literacy and numeracy levels have declined. In many special schools, leaders report pupils' levels of independence skills have regressed, particularly in regard to their personal care skills.

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In many special schools and PRUs, leaders report that COVID-19 related health and safety considerations have restricted access to important aspects of the setting's curriculum. For example, special schools have curtailed opportunities for pupils to practise independence skills in the community and PRUs report less access to work-placements and vocational training opportunities with external providers.

Staff in special schools and PRUs have engaged in relevant professional learning since March that has prepared them for pupils' return to school. Leaders report that planned professional learning opportunities this term have a strong focus on supporting staff and pupils to engage with blended learning approaches. In many special schools and PRUs, staff continue to adapt resources and develop blended learning approaches based on their evaluation of what worked well during the initial period of school closure. However, in a few cases, the use of online platforms is at a very early stage.

Supporting vulnerable pupils

Generally, across all settings, statutory reviews and assessments have continued since March 2020. This is because education staff and specialists across most external agencies have maintained communication through digital platforms. Many leaders report that more professionals attend planning and review meetings than ever before.

Leaders report that, in the majority of cases, parents are content with these virtual reviews and engage well in them. However, in a minority of cases, leaders note that parents have not accessed online meetings or dislike not being able to see the staff who work with their children face-to-face.

In a minority of cases, leaders of special schools report difficulties in providing the full range of interventions for pupils as set out in their statement of special educational needs. This is particularly so for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties who have not always been able to access provision delivered remotely. In addition, because of social distancing restrictions, therapeutic interventions such as hydro and rebound therapy cannot take place in many settings.

Specialist staff from many external agencies have now resumed face-to-face appointments and therapeutic interventions with pupils in special schools and PRUs. This positive development is helping to support vulnerable pupils to return to their setting, especially those pupils with significant medical and emotional difficulties.

However, many leaders state that a few services continue to offer only virtual consultations and have provided limited interventions to pupils since March. In special schools, for example, a few leaders report difficulties when staff from external agencies wear PPE that is unfamiliar to pupils or practise different ways of working to comply with their own social distancing measures. Similarly, many PRU leaders express concerns that psychologists and local authority counselling services are still not seeing pupils face-to-face as they did previously. They believe that this is hampering pupils' development in key areas and slowing progress against targets in their individual education plans (IEPs).

Across all settings where the recruit, recover and raise standards (RRRS) funding had been allocated, leaders note the wide variation in the amounts distributed across different sectors and schools in Wales. Many express concerns about the potential impact of the sum they had provisionally received. In a majority of special schools and PRUs, leaders report that they intend to use the funding to contribute to the appointment of an additional staff member to deliver bespoke intervention packages in areas such as literacy, numeracy, and wellbeing.

Detailed findings

Promoting wellbeing

Learner wellbeing

Leaders in nearly all maintained special schools and PRUs report that most pupils have returned successfully to school, are pleased to resume some degree of normality and are happy to be back with their peers and familiar school staff. Generally, leaders feel that pupils have re-engaged successfully in their learning and have adapted well to changes to the learning environment such as new entrances, movement around the building and social distancing measures.

Many leaders note that they are continuing with successful approaches that were in place to support pupils' wellbeing during the period of school closure. For example, in the initial stage, many settings worked collaboratively with specialist staff in the local authority and external agencies to profile pupils according to their level of vulnerability. Settings have continued to make use of this vulnerability profiling to prioritise the support for pupils' families from September.

Nearly all leaders across special schools and PRUs describe how they put in place arrangements for keeping in touch with pupils and families during the period of closure. Many emphasise the importance of building on this approach to retain regular and supportive communication with parents and carers. This is helping to alleviate pupils' and parental anxiety about the return to education. For example, one special school organised a parental survey to gather their views prior to pupils returning. The school then developed bespoke packages to support families who expressed anxiety about sending their children back to school. In one PRU, collaborative work between the home support officer and the education welfare officer has led to improved relationships with families, particularly those who were hard to reach previously. As a result, a few disengaged pupils who were refusing to return to school now attend regularly.

Leaders in one PRU attribute pupils' positive transition back to the PRU to the fact that they maintained close regular contact with all pupils and their families throughout the period of school closure. During this time, PRU staff conducted twice-weekly welfare checks on each pupil and their families. In addition, staff provided online nurture sessions for pupils and signposted links to wellbeing activities that promoted mindfulness and exercise on the PRU's website.

Most leaders affirm that they are addressing issues to do with pupils' attendance with sensitivity. Although rates of attendance for pupils at special schools were variable

at the start of the term, leaders report that they have improved consistently since then. In many PRUs, leaders report that attendance rates were high at the start of term but have declined since then. Where pupils had a history of poor attendance, this has not improved since the start of term.

Where parental anxiety is the barrier to attendance, settings work with other agencies to support families and agree a transition plan to support the pupil back to school. A very few settings report that they have made adjustments to their reward systems that have helped to improve attendance and engagement since September.

Many leaders in special schools and PRUs report that the expertise of staff members has been key in promoting pupils' safe and happy return. Leaders in a few special schools describe how staff have worked sensitively to support pupils with complex medical needs to return to school safely and appropriately. For example, one leader planned a phased return for the school's more vulnerable pupils so that they could gradually build up the time they spent in school.

In one special school, many staff have received training to deliver social and emotional intervention programmes to support the school's commitment to trauma-informed practice. The local authority's autistic spectrum support team is co-located at the school and staff have made use of social stories and other strategies provided by the service to address the specific needs of pupils with autistic spectrum condition (ASC).

Leaders in many settings report how staff have implemented measures this term to establish an accurate baseline of each pupil's wellbeing. Staff use a variety of information, including behaviour logs, attendance data, social interactions and professional observations, to identify pupils' nurture needs. In addition, pupils in a few PRUs complete questionnaires to evaluate their emotional wellbeing. This helps leaders to identify areas for development and ease pupils slowly but successfully back into formal learning.

Many leaders describe how they have made changes to daily school routines and the physical learning environment to enhance the provision for pupils' physical and emotional health. Generally, classes work as established "bubbles" and there is no mixing of these bubbles at any point during the school day. However, in many special schools, leaders note how these adjustments have reduced opportunities for social interaction and affected routine access to specialist therapeutic activities such as hydrotherapy, sensory rooms and rebound therapy. A few leaders describe how teaching staff have responded creatively to these limitations. For example, one special school has purchased mini trampolines for each classroom to provide the opportunity for physical activity.

Many leaders of special schools and PRUs describe how they have made more use of their outdoor learning facilities to promote pupil wellbeing since September. A minority of PRUs have created areas such as outside seating in small gardens or have purchased additional outdoor sports equipment. Leaders in a few PRUs report that physical learning activities are developing as a strength of their on-site provision as pupils enjoy the opportunity to learn outside of the classroom. However, many

leaders noted that opportunities for learners to access outdoor learning off site had reduced as a result of the pandemic.

One PRU has made several changes to its curriculum and learning environment over the summer months. There has been substantial work on the outside area that now includes a football area and a trampoline. The PRU now offers photography lessons. There is a new art therapy zone and additional musical instruments and equipment to support pupils' creative development. A specially trained therapy dog works with pupils two days a week at the centre. The headteacher reports that pupils are very positive about the introduction of the therapy dog and enjoy caring for it and taking it on walks.

While many leaders of PRUs report that incidents of poor behaviour are lower than usual and that pupils are generally pleased to be back in familiar surroundings, they note concerns around pupils' emotional and mental health. Many describe how they are witnessing increasing evidence of the social and emotional trauma experienced by pupils during the period of school closure as the term has developed.

Leaders in many settings confirm that opportunities for staff and pupils to share their lockdown journeys appear to have been helpful in identifying and responding to common wellbeing concerns of both pupils and staff. Many settings now devote more time for social activities such as circle time so that pupils have regular opportunities to talk about their experiences and convey their feelings. In a few settings, staff have gained insights into their pupils' wellbeing through these activities and plan interventions based on their findings.

Staff wellbeing

Nearly all leaders across both sectors confirm that maintaining staff wellbeing is a key priority since the start of the period of school closure. These concerns have changed in nature since re-opening in September but continue to require vigilance and careful management on the part of senior leaders. Many leaders testify to the hard work and personal commitment of their staff during this period, and their willingness to respond positively to frequent changes in what was asked of them in their roles.

Most leaders report that most staff are well, with a few shielding due to their own underlying health conditions or of other members within their household. In all settings, most members of staff have returned to their normal roles since re-opening. However, the majority of leaders refer to the challenge in managing ongoing patterns of staff absence, for example finding cover for colleagues who have to take time off school in order to manage their own childcare requirements when they are sent home from school.

Although a few members of staff were apprehensive about returning to their settings initially, leaders report that most staff are now confident, reassured and 'happy to be back'. Leaders describe a range of strategies they have put in place to support staff wellbeing and manage anxieties, including the production of a 'protocol handbook', staff wellbeing surveys to ascertain levels of anxiety, sharing the same video outlining social distance spaces and sanitiser points with pupils and staff alike, and

individual back to work meetings with senior leaders to discuss any concerns. One special school has a staff wellbeing group, which has representation from staff, senior leaders and governors.

Wellbeing of leaders

Nearly all leaders of special schools and PRUs report the challenges they have faced since September in balancing the daily challenges of operating as normally as possible in extraordinary times while also preparing appropriate activities for self-isolating pupils and planning for a potential second period of school closure. Many leaders report that they have been on call seven days a week and throughout the school holidays. Throughout this period they have been required to react promptly to rapidly changing circumstances and guidance. Most recently, they have taken on responsibility for operating contact tracing systems for members of the school community who test positive. Many leaders feel that this has left senior leaders exhausted and ill-prepared for the start of a new academic year. Many leaders express significant concerns about the sustainability of provision and capacity of the school and wider staff group to continue working in this way indefinitely.

Health and safety

Most leaders in special schools and PRUs state that they have benefitted significantly from the support of their local authority in dealing with health and safety matters. They value highly the practical support and clear guidance they have received. For example, local authorities have provided guidance on risk assessments, social distancing signage and necessary personal protection equipment. In one special school, the headteacher describes how this included a supply of face coverings for staff who work with pupils who require aerosol or suctioning procedures. A few leaders feel that strict adherence to risk assessments and the availability of PPE are boosting staff confidence and easing their anxieties. Generally, across all settings, pupils are responding well to staff wearing PPE.

Nearly all leaders describe how staff are working extremely hard to comply with social distancing measures and how staff teams have been creative and innovative in the way they have prepared pupils for these changes. This is a particularly challenging area for special schools and PRUs that have pupils with significant physical or emotional difficulties, including those with personal care needs or who present with high-risk behaviour such as spitting or hitting.

Many leaders across both settings express disappointment and sometimes frustration that Welsh Government guidance to schools around health and safety measures is not always suitable or helpful for special schools and PRUs. They note that classrooms in some pupil referral units are too small to enable all pupils to be present and adhere to social distancing guidelines and this may result in pupils not receiving full-time education. Similarly, in special schools, it may be difficult for staff to maintain a safe distance from pupils who do not understand social distancing rules or the reasons for them.

A few leaders note that it has been particularly challenging for schools where they are having to take account of two sets of guidance from both Public Health Wales

(relating to care) and the Welsh Government (relating to education). Resolving the conflict between them has been a challenge, particularly where the precise circumstances relating to a child do not reflect the guidance. While local authority officers can help with the discussion, ultimately it is the headteacher and senior leaders who have to make the final decisions. Leaders confirm that the high stakes nature of some of these decisions that relate to pupils with high levels of medical needs has been a source of much anxiety and pressure for them.

Promoting learning

Distance/blended learning

Nearly all leaders of special schools and PRUs confirm that their main priority at the start of the period of school closure had been to implement a strategy for distance learning that would accommodate the widely differing abilities and needs of all pupils in the school. In addition, many leaders made reference to the challenges faced by many parents and carers in supporting their children's learning at home, either because of the complexity of their children's needs, a lack of skills to support learning, including digital skills, or restricted access to ICT equipment.

In a few cases, leaders of special schools and PRUs describe how they had pre-empted the official period of school closure to consider their approaches to distance learning. For example, leaders of PRUs describe how they had started to prepare parents and pupils for the move to distance learning. This work included ensuring that pupils knew how to use online learning platforms, and developing staff skills in planning online learning activities and lessons.

Where settings already had well-developed provision for ICT, leaders note how the main challenge has been to adapt resources that were already in place and to communicate clearly about the home learning offer. In these settings, pupils were familiar with online learning platforms, and the skill set and confidence of staff were high.

In one PRU, the headteacher identified the following elements which she feels have positively contributed to pupils' engagement with learning during the period of school closure:

- Pupils were well prepared prior to the period of school closure in the use of online learning and the digital platform was already established and operational.
- Staff were digitally skilled and used this knowledge and skill set proactively to engage with pupils.
- The daily online check-in with pupils supported pupil wellbeing and reinforced their engagement with learning and staff working relationships.
- The staff developed online learning activities to engage pupils and parents. They targeted activities around topics parents had experience of, so that they would feel better able to support their child's learning. For example, topics included local castles and Harry Potter.
- The PRU provided hard packs of learning activities to supplement pupils' learning.

Many leaders across special schools and PRUs noted that a crucial part of their preparatory work had been to ensure pupils had access to appropriate ICT equipment and connectivity so that they were able to access learning from home. Staff in these settings often worked closely with the local authority to identify pupils that didn't have access to equipment and to distribute devices to pupils and their families. Headteachers in a few special schools explain how this has included the loan of communication assistive technology such as switches and eye tracking technology to facilitate the achievement of their communication and learning goals at home.

Where settings' use of ICT as an approach to learning was less well developed, many leaders emphasised the difficulties in identifying at short notice a single platform that met the wide range of needs of all their pupils. Generally, settings adopted a mix of platforms that best reflected the ability of pupils and their families to engage with them. For example, staff communicated planned activities and learning outcomes with parents and carers through online communication platforms, or uploaded pre-recorded videos of learning activities to the school website or other online platforms. In many cases, leaders described how the priority had been to provide a routine and structure for parents to follow in the home setting. In many special schools and PRUs, staff provided support for parents on how to use online learning platforms, for example in the form of direct personal support, or information booklets.

Many leaders confirm that a major concern from the outset had been to ensure that the presentation and content of online learning platforms are both accessible and engaging. A few leaders across both settings further described how they had introduced rewards systems to promote pupil engagement.

Initially, the main challenge for one PRU was to ensure that pupils had the equipment to access online learning. The next priority was to ensure that pupils had access to an online learning platform that was user-friendly and accessible, given the reluctance many pupils faced in engaging independently with learning. To achieve this, the PRU reviewed its website to enable it to host its distance learning hub. Throughout the period of school closure, teachers used the hub to ensure that all pupils had sight of the overview for each half-term. They set learning activities for their pupils each Monday and uploaded video tutorials to explain the work. Each teacher wrote a regular blog under their own personalised emoji-identities to maintain contact, encourage, and to 'keep things light and accessible'. In addition, the PRU provided a distance learning guide for parents and step by step instructions to inform pupils how to log on and access the work. Leaders confirmed that these steps had helped to ensure a greater level of engagement with online learning than they had anticipated at the start of the period of PRU closure.

Only a few leaders refer to their development of a consistent approach to live-streaming. Where they had done so, the focus of these sessions was mainly to provide an opportunity for pupils to make contact with their teachers, or to support pupils' specialist or therapeutic needs. For example, one special school provided live sensory interactive stories and language symbol sessions delivered by speech and language assistants, while a PRU provided online nurture sessions.

In one special school, a sensory communication session was given by a parent to a child who was absent from school. The school's home support worker had delivered resources to the parent at home prior to the session with the class. The parent followed online and joined in with her child, following the actions of the teacher and LSAs as the session was delivered to the rest of the class.

In practice, most leaders confirm that they provided a combination of online learning and 'hard packs' of resources and learning activities to pupils who struggled or were unable to engage with online learning. In many cases, these activities included practical tasks, or had a strong emphasis on pupils' wellbeing, for example to promote physical exercise, movement or independence skills. In a few instances, settings initially identified offline learning as its preferred strategy for all pupils, gradually developing elements of online provision to meet the needs of individuals or discrete groups of pupils over time.

A few leaders maintained strongly that online provision was not appropriate to meet the needs of their pupils. These settings retained an offline approach throughout the period of school or PRU closure.

Many leaders report that they continued to adapt and refine approaches to distance learning in response to pupil and parental feedback throughout the period of school and PRU closure. Generally, parents and pupils provided this feedback verbally during the frequent conversations staff held with families during this period. A very few leaders describe how they had used surveys to gather parental feedback in order to evaluate what was working well and identify areas of improvement.

In one PRU, the headteacher stated that surveys were sent to parents to identify how staff could improve the support offered and what the main barriers to online learning were for pupils and families. Outcomes of the survey showed the main barrier to be parental lack of confidence in accessing the technology. In response, staff produced a series of fact sheets on using the online platform, which were available on the school website and delivered in hard copy to all families. The headteacher confirmed that over time this work helped to improve parental confidence and levels of engagement with online learning.

Learning from September

In nearly all cases, leaders report that their focus since pupils' return in September has been on re-integrating pupils safely, re-establishing relationships and helping them adjust to new routines and arrangements to promote their health and safety, as well as the safety of staff working with them. Generally, leaders report that most pupils have reacted positively to these new arrangements and have made a successful start to the new term.

Many leaders of special schools and PRUs describe how they are using this time to re-assess pupils' current levels of achievement and identify any regression in pupils' learning or wellbeing. In many settings, staff are taking a gradual approach to re-introducing previously established approaches to learning, focusing instead on activities that promote wellbeing and engagement. This provision includes allocating

additional curriculum time for activities such as gardening, exercise and creative activities, as well as one-to-one wellbeing sessions where required.

In many special schools in particular, leaders describe a shift of emphasis within the curriculum to learning experiences that encourage exploration, social interaction and physical movement, for example through structured play, team building exercises and outdoor learning. A few special school leaders state that they do not envisage that their schools will return to formal learning for some time, or at least not until there is a reduction in present uncertainties, particularly in relation to issues around consistency of staffing.

At one special school for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, the headteacher confirmed that the primary focus for the school at this stage is to provide learning experiences that promote pupils' wellbeing and build resilience and self-esteem, rather than reinstating the curriculum as it was prior to the period of school closure. Timetables now include less classroom teaching, and more physical and practical activities, including outdoor learning, cookery, cycling, and motor vehicle maintenance. The school continues to provide discrete lessons on literacy and numeracy. However, staff also endeavour to integrate and develop these through practical activities wherever possible, for example using weights and measures when cooking. The school is holding a series of whole-school activity days to build team working through opportunities such as a climbing wall, the 'leap of faith', and archery. The school aims to encourage pupils across the school to work together to develop their engagement and communication skills, and to build a sense of community that encompasses pupils and staff.

In many PRUs, leaders report that, although the initial emphasis was on re-connecting with pupils, many pupils are now re-engaging with learning, which has enabled staff to resume established approaches to the curriculum.

The headteacher of one PRU confirmed that plans for this term's learning were strongly influenced by the lessons learnt in the 'check in and catch up' sessions held at the end of the period of school closure in July. At this time, around one-quarter of pupils returned to the PRU, with most of these pupils attending regularly. The headteacher described pupils' response to returning as 'almost like it hasn't happened'. They welcomed the return to the PRU's routines and embraced the opportunity to do familiar tasks and subjects such as literacy and mathematics as a return to their 'normal' and an escape from the COVID-19 'new normal'. The headteacher explained that staff learnt from this experience and therefore planned restoring a sense of routine and purpose for pupils and staff. As a result, the PRU has taken its usual approach to curriculum planning for this term, with the full curriculum taking place including accessing risk-assessed off-site outdoor education activities wherever possible.

In many special schools and PRUs, leaders report that COVID-19 related health and safety considerations have restricted access to important aspects of the setting's curriculum. For example, special schools have curtailed opportunities for pupils to practise independence skills in the community. Similarly, measures to promote the safe movement of pupils around the building have resulted in fewer opportunities for

pupils to access lessons outside their normal classroom, such as physical education and music. In many PRUs, leaders noted that further education colleges or training providers have been slow to re-open or reinstate pupils' access to placements, limiting qualification routes for older pupils, particularly those in Year 11 and in post-16 departments.

In a few cases, leaders describe how staff are working with external providers to help them replicate these experiences on site as best they can. For example, at one special school, leaders and staff have extended access to on-site practical activities to extend the opportunities for pupils to fulfil qualification requirements. These activities include gardening, the school shop, and providing work experience in school offices.

In many special schools and PRUs, staff continue to adapt resources and develop blended learning approaches based on their evaluation of what worked well during the initial period of school closure. In these settings, leaders describe how staff prepare banks of learning materials and plan to ensure lessons have the capacity to be delivered online. For example, staff incorporate the use of online learning platforms during lessons. They continue to develop pupils' skills and confidence in the use of this approach by ensuring that pupils know how to log in, and how to access pre-recorded lessons. Many leaders report staff skills are increasing in planning and delivering online learning.

Leaders in the majority of the special schools contacted describe in detail how they have built on this evaluation to develop blended learning approaches to meet the needs of pupils having to self-isolate, those who have not returned to school, or to meet the needs of all pupils in the event of a potential future period of school closure. In addition, a few PRUs are exploring how they might provide a blended learning approach to support pupils receiving home tuition or who are attending on a part-time basis.

Since pupils returned to one PRU, there has been an increased focus on upskilling all pupils in the use of ICT and online platforms. All pupils receive at least one online lesson a week on site so staff can support any concerns and challenges. The headteacher reports that all pupils log in to their account and are beginning to gain confidence in online learning. Staff have developed resources to support pupils in using the ICT equipment, which they can share with parents. Where pupils have been unable to access work-based activities and qualifications, providers are beginning to share resources with PRU staff who are supporting pupils to complete this work online.

At one special school, leaders have provided guidance for staff on structuring distancing learning for pupils learning at home. This includes having a calendar of events, challenges and activities that can be used at home. In addition, the school has drafted an exemplar timetable for parents to use. The intention is that this both supports parents and provides a degree of structure to the day and includes suggestions for the timing of activities that align with the termly focus on wellbeing.

Since the re-opening of one special school, staff continue to develop the use of an educational communication platform across the full pupil cohort. The school has reviewed its planning documents with the aim of simplifying these so that they can meet the needs of multiple audiences, including teaching staff in school, and parents at home. Where pupils are not able to attend school, session plans are uploaded to the app, so they can be used by parents at home, and to enable learning outcomes to be evidenced and assessed according to clear, shared criteria. This development has meant that teachers are now planning once only, and not producing lessons and materials for pupils at home as well as planning for pupils in school.

Many leaders of special schools confirm how they have strengthened the use of educational communication platforms to communicate with parents about activities and pupil progress. A few schools note that, where parents have used these platforms to upload and share the outcomes of learning activities, this has helped the school to monitor pupils' learning and achievements and to provide pupils and families with feedback. In a few cases, these approaches have replaced previously established processes such as the home-school book.

In one special school, the headteacher described how the school is now using an online communication platform and texting to communicate with parents about pupil progress rather than using home-school diaries. Staff are finding this approach is generating higher levels of parental engagement. He attributes this to the fact that this approach enables the information school sends home to be more engaging and relevant to parents. In addition, parents are familiar with the use of communication via social media, and are more confident to respond and contribute intuitively through this medium.

Overall, many leaders across special schools and PRUs say that they are confident that the lessons learned from the previous period of school and PRU closure have prepared them well in the event of any future period of closure. In addition, leaders in many settings report that they are continuing their planning and preparation for the delivery of the Curriculum for Wales.

In a few cases, the use of online platforms is at a very early stage. Equally, in a few settings, leaders reiterate strongly their view that a blended learning approach is not appropriate for at least some of their pupils due to the complexity of pupils' needs, or because families lack access to technology or the skills to use this or are not sufficiently supportive of their child's learning. In particular, leaders report that distance learning approaches are far more challenging for pupils with profound and multiple complex needs or for pupils with ASC, many of whom have struggled to adjust to new routines of learning at home.

Planning for progress

Nearly all leaders of special schools and PRUs confirm they use a range of approaches to assess the extent to which gaps or regression in pupils' learning and wellbeing may have increased over the period of school closure. In addition to informal pupil observations, many special schools and PRUs are conducting

baseline assessments in literacy and numeracy, as well as in key areas such as behaviour, social interaction, and independence. Many leaders describe how staff are managing these assessment processes sensitively over extended periods to reduce pupils' anxieties and support their return to daily routines.

Most leaders across both sectors describe how staff use this information to adjust pupils' individual learning programmes to allow for additional interventions and support for pupils. For example, leaders in most PRUs confirm that the results of baseline assessments indicate that most pupils' literacy and numeracy levels have declined. As a result, in most settings the intensity and frequency of literacy and numeracy sessions for targeted pupils have been increased.

Many leaders confirm that nearly all pupils require adjustment in the targets on their IEPs since their return to on-site education. In many cases, leaders identify these targets include a greater emphasis on outcomes to support pupils' wellbeing.

In many special schools, leaders report pupils' levels of independence skills have regressed, particularly in regard to their personal care skills. In these schools, staff have adjusted learning activities to include an increased emphasis on developing independence skills.

In a minority of special schools, leaders note that the impact on pupils' learning was less than it might have been due to their preparations prior to the period of school closure. In these cases, leaders pre-empted the likelihood of school closures and ensured that extra support was available for pupils to access online learning, where this was required. These measures, together with the close contact maintained with pupils and families during the period of school closure, meant that overall there were few surprises when pupils returned to school in September.

Professional learning

All special school and PRU leaders describe how staff have engaged in relevant professional learning activities throughout the period of school closure and since the return in September. Leaders say that, in most cases, local authorities have provided beneficial updates on mandatory training such as safeguarding, physical intervention, manual handling, first aid and other health and safety matters. Staff at all levels have attended virtual training courses, completed modules in further qualifications and have engaged in individual research.

During the period of school closure, all staff in one special school have been undertaking research and training courses through the Open University. They have gained knowledge and skills in a wide range of areas relevant to their work, such as resilience and parenting adolescents. Staff have provided feedback to the senior leadership team on their research including how this will influence their practice and help them to plan purposefully for the new curriculum.

Overall, leaders confirm that professional learning for staff has focused largely on developing their understanding of supporting pupils' emotional health, including important issues such as adverse childhood experiences, attachment, anxiety, suicide and self-harm awareness. In addition, there have been opportunities for

support staff to gain further skills in working with pupils who have specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia and neurological and developmental disorders such as autistic spectrum condition.

Many leaders of special schools and PRUs confirm that they have evaluated their experiences of the challenges and successes of using blended learning during the period of school and PRU closure to inform their priorities for professional learning this term. This has focused particularly on addressing the challenges of using blended learning approaches to meet the needs of specific groups of pupils such as those with profound and multiple needs, as well as building parental confidence, and addressing the safeguarding concerns of staff in relation to providing synchronous online learning.

In particular, leaders recognise the need to extend staff's ICT skills to implement blended learning approaches in ways that best suit the varied needs of their pupils. This includes training in the use of ICT programmes, practice in delivering lessons online, providing opportunities to ensure pupils have the relevant skill set to use online learning and extending the range of available resources to support pupils' learning.

In one special school, the headteacher explained that the main focus of recent professional learning has been to develop the use of ICT to support distance and blended learning approaches. He explained that, although staff are practised in the use of ICT as a teaching strategy, the current situation requires different approaches. Equally, because of the widely differing needs of pupils across the school and within each class, he confirmed that his approach has been to provide individual teachers with the time to explore the strategies and resources that meet the needs of their pupils. For example, he has suspended weekly after-school training sessions to give staff time to conduct their own personal research into blended learning approaches and to build the outcomes of this into their planning. He described how staff have begun to collect their own resources and share these with colleagues. To support this learning further, the school has provided staff with additional equipment where this is required.

In a few special schools and PRUs, leaders confirm that they have awarded teaching and learning responsibility (TLR) payments for staff members to facilitate the sharing of good practice and to develop blended learning across the setting. These leaders believe this approach supports the development of blended approaches that are bespoke to the needs of pupils in the setting.

In one special school, the headteacher has created a TLR post to explore the potential for developing models of blended learning that meet the needs of pupils in the school. He explained how the post holder is developing the school's thinking and practice in this area, and sharing good practice and leading discussions on blended learning in staff meetings. In this, the school has been supported by the local authority, which has shared its guidance on blended learning with the school through the school's challenge adviser.

In many special schools and PRUs, the local authority and regional consortium provided training opportunities, webinars and resources for blended learning during the closure period. A few PRU leaders note how the regional consortium has continued to broker digital bespoke training packages to supplement these this term.

In one PRU, leaders confirmed that well-established professional relationships with the regional consortium have led to readily available access to timely and bespoke support. New direct relationships with consortium digital trainers are brokered by the PRU's challenge adviser. For example, all staff received three sessions of bespoke training to supplement the many regional online sessions and playlist activities. Leaders report that staff are secure in their abilities to lead blended learning and crucially now have the experience to use tools with confidence.

Welsh language

Caution should be taken in seeking to generalise the findings below because of the sample size. However, across the very few Welsh medium settings involved in this thematic review, leaders note that the period of school closure has not had an adverse effect on pupils' oracy skills. This is because, as leaders confirm, most parents requesting Welsh medium education for their child in this sector are Welsh speakers themselves and as such pupils remained immersed in the language at home during this period.

Although, there are generally fewer resources available in the medium of Welsh than in English for pupils attending special schools, leaders confirm that staff are experienced in adapting resources to meet the needs of pupils and that access to online learning across these settings has continued to be delivered through the medium of Welsh. For example, one school provided stories and songs online through the medium of Welsh.

Supporting vulnerable learners

Statutory process and referrals

Nearly all special school and PRU leaders confirm that statutory processes for annual reviews have continued during the period of school closure and that these have been completed for most pupils in a timely fashion. Leaders report that the use of online platforms to facilitate meetings has been highly beneficial in enabling a broader range of professionals from external agencies than usual to attend meetings, discuss pupils' needs and plan interventions. While the majority of leaders report that parents like virtual reviews and engage well in them, a minority state that parents have found it difficult to access online meetings and have missed seeing teaching and external agency staff face-to-face.

Throughout the period of school closure and during the current period, leaders of special schools describe how staff have worked creatively with local authority staff to enable some of the most vulnerable pupils to access therapeutic interventions remotely in partnership with parents. In these cases, leaders work closely with the

local authority to ensure that ongoing virtual support is maintained for pupils from services such as occupational therapy. This allows pupils to access physical exercise programmes and maintain specialist equipment in the home setting. In these schools, leaders provide access to specific technology such as switches for pupils in their homes.

However, in a minority of cases, leaders of special schools report that they have not been able to provide the full range of interventions for pupils as set out in their statement of special educational needs. This is particularly so for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties who have not always been able to access provision delivered remotely. Similarly, although most PRU leaders stated that there have not been any significant compromises to provision, it is generally not clear if pupils have received the learning and support hours to which they would have been entitled if they had been attending the PRU.

In one special school, leaders described the school's initial concerns at the start of the period of school closure that pupils who required particular interventions from external agencies and specialist staff would not receive the ongoing support they needed. To mitigate against this, the school worked with the local authority prior to school closure to enable pupils' equipment to be taken home, and implement procedures to provide remote support for pupils and families and to review support programmes as required. The school held weekly multi-disciplinary team meetings with the physiotherapist, occupational therapist and speech and language therapist. These professionals used an app to conduct remote assessments and provide direct and instant feedback and information to parents and pupils. It enabled them to have sight of families, and review interventions and equipment, while they continued to provide targeted support for pupils attending the childcare provision.

Overall, most leaders report that transition arrangements for pupils joining the special school or PRU have been successful, with many induction and familiarisation activities conducted online at the end of last term, or re-arranged to take place at the end of the school day, for example. In a few PRUs, leaders report that they have accepted larger numbers of new key stage 4 pupils than usual in September due to the postponement of moderation panel meetings in the latter part of the last academic year.

Generally, leaders across both settings report that they have not noticed any significant increase in referrals to children's services at this stage. They attribute this to the success of arrangements to remain in touch with pupils and their families throughout the period of school closure and to maintain the provision of essential services.

Specialist services and multi-agency working

In nearly all settings, leaders confirm that collaborative work with specialist services and external agencies to support pupils' health and wellbeing has continued since the period of school closure and during this term. Many leaders affirm that working relationships with external partners, particularly those within the local authority, including the education welfare service, the educational psychology service and the

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children with disabilities team, for example, have strengthened during this period. They attribute this to a strong sense of shared purpose to support vulnerable pupils and their families.

Nearly all leaders across both settings report how this collaboration has been particularly helpful in supporting engagement with hard to reach families. In many instances, key workers from school or PRU and children's services worked together to plan garden gate visits to drop off learning resources and small toys or food gifts which enabled them to also check on children's welfare. In particular, many PRU leaders state that the work of the youth justice service and youth service has been invaluable during the period of school closure and has continued into this term. For example, in one PRU, youth justice service staff now work on site with individual pupils. The service has also arranged workshops for other pupils on car crime and anti-social behaviour.

In one special school that caters for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural needs, staff worked closely with external partners to develop personalised transition plans to meet the complex needs of Year 11 pupils leaving the school. Staff maintained weekly contact with all leavers throughout the summer holidays, recording information on the school's management information system. This enabled leaders to follow up on any issues raised during these calls and involve the local authority EOTAS team, Careers Wales or social services when necessary. This has helped to ensure that nearly all leavers make a successful transition to their planned destination.

Overall, leaders in special schools report they have welcomed the support they have received from health colleagues in planning and monitoring the care of pupils with highly complex medical needs. They describe, for example, how local medical teams have supported schools by preparing enhanced clinical risk assessments for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties. Leaders say that this collaboration is particularly effective when services are co-located on the site of the special school.

At one special school, a multi-agency team has operated from the site since the outbreak of the pandemic. The team is made up of staff from school, as well as representatives from occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, psychology, social and health care, dieticians and paediatric nurses and doctors. Parents and pupils access the services on an appointment basis. The team has been involved in developing much of the risk assessments required in order for the school to return to full-time provision for all pupils, for example risk assessments for working with pupils with complex medical needs. This team was initially established to cater for pupils of the school but now includes all special schools and specialist units in the local authority.

Many leaders in special schools note that staff from specialist services are returning to school to deliver specific programmes face-to-face. For example, school nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and other medical staff have resumed school visits to work directly with pupils. However, a few leaders raise concerns about the pace and extent of this. They attribute this to differences between services

such as speech and language, occupational and physiotherapy in their policies on working directly with children and young people. Similarly, many PRU leaders express concerns that psychologists and local authority counselling services are still not seeing pupils face-to-face as they did previously.

Many leaders express concern about the variation in how the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) delivers its service across health boards nationally. While a very few leaders note that mental health specialists continue to support pupils, many express concern that assessments and direct work have not resumed. In many cases, it would seem that PRU staff, themselves, are going above and beyond expectation to support their pupils' mental health as well as providing valuable support to parents.

Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards (RRRS)

At the time of our engagement calls, many leaders of special schools and PRUs confirmed they had only recently received notice of the amount they would receive under the RRRS grant funding scheme. Across all settings where the RRRS funding has been allocated, leaders note the wide variation in the amounts distributed across different sectors and schools in Wales. Many expressed concerns about the potential impact of the sum they had provisionally received. Only a very few leaders identified that they had discussed their plans with local authority officers.

In a majority of special schools and PRUs, leaders report they intend to use the funding to contribute to the appointment of an additional staff member to deliver bespoke intervention packages in areas such as literacy, numeracy, and wellbeing. Leaders cite specific programmes including staffing to develop play-based skills and behaviour support for ASC pupils who present as highly complex and challenging, or to fund activities to build pupils' self-esteem and develop their teamwork and communication skills.

In one special school, the headteacher confirmed the school has clear plans for the use of the RRRS grant. It has increased the hours allocated to a higher level teaching assistant to extend the provision for relationship-based play. The headteacher noted that the school has noticed that a few pupils have lost their play-based skills during the period of school closure and have become less tolerant of others.

In another special school, leaders are using the RRRS funding to invest in behaviour analysts. This programme will allow the behaviour analysts to support the classroom teachers working with the most challenging pupils and their families. The behaviour analysts will monitor the impact of this work.