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# Reflections on refining remote learning in maintained special schools and pupil referral units (PRUs)

June 2021

This report is also available in Welsh.



## Context

Special schools and PRUs have developed and refined their approaches to remote learning during the last year. Two maintained special schools and three PRUs shared their experiences in the following areas:

- **monitoring processes** used to reflect on their remote learning provision,
- the **challenges** they have faced
- the **changes** they have made

In sharing their approaches on how they have reflected on and refined remote learning, the pilot schools and PRUs considered elements of digital as well as non-digital activities. They reflected on their approaches to teaching and learning.

Below is a summary of the key messages, together with relevant cameos, to show the different approaches to teaching and learning adopted by these schools and PRU. We worked with the special schools and PRUs to develop sector specific prompts for other leaders to consider when reflecting on and refining their own remote learning (Annex 1).

## Teaching and learning

### Monitoring processes

Leaders report that monitoring processes are developing flexibly to reflect the changing contexts of the curriculum, teaching and learning. They explained that while the priority focus during the first national lockdown was wellbeing, for the national lockdown in Spring 2021 they used parent, pupil and staff surveys for feedback on the quality of provision for remote learning. This approach informed improvements and changes such as the introduction of more practical activities and re-structuring of sessions.

All leaders confirm that they have continued to monitor the quality of teaching and pupil engagement during remote learning using the same approaches as their usual self-evaluation process. However, they all reported that the open and honest discussions they had with teachers and learners to gather specific feedback and ideas about remote learning were extremely valuable. Leaders noted that asking teachers to try new approaches without fear of being judged allowed them to set their own goals. They confirmed that they encouraged their staff to reflect on these approaches and to respond to feedback from pupils, parents and their colleagues to improve the learning experience.

In one special school, leaders participate in online activities, view pupils' uploaded work and monitor the chat function of live lessons. The senior leadership team monitor and provide feedback on uploaded planning and the evidence from remote learning activities. Staff discuss and evaluate the school's remote learning provision through departmental meetings.

Leaders in one PRU monitored Google classrooms daily during the first national lockdown and concluded that the quality of learning was too variable. As a result, staff training was

undertaken regarding different on-line platforms to help ensure pupils could access learning.

Further training was required at the start of the spring 2021 term to model best practice. For example, teachers ensured that activities and task slides were accessible, structured and appealing to pupils. This meant including clear success criteria, which the pupils are accustomed to in their usual classroom.

Leaders in PRUs acknowledged that it can be particularly difficult to monitor their pupils' level of engagement, but that it forms part of the crucial intelligence for knowing how effective the remote learning offer is. The strategies that they have developed to do this include monitoring log-on rates to learning platforms and relevant web services, and scrutiny of the quality of pupils' work. One PRU used this information to identify that the youngest group of pupils had the lowest log-on and engagement figures online. However, this group of pupils were engaging in paper-based learning tasks well, which was confirmed through staff and family wellbeing calls.

Leaders in one PRU confirmed that pupils with learning difficulties such as selective mutism or social anxieties generally engage well with live lessons and learning through online platforms. Leaders at the PRU believe that this system reduces pupils' level of anxiety and helps them to engage in a way that they feel comfortable. Pupils told leaders that they are familiar and comfortable in using the chat function and so contribute more confidently using this method. Leaders reported that pupils engage confidently with the online forums as they are like the gaming platforms that they use to socialise with their peers. The PRU engages with pupils and their parents and carers regularly to monitor this provision. They also provide a balance of appropriate face-to-face activities to support these pupils to re-integrate successfully into the classroom.

## Changes

Leaders report that an important change between the first and later national lockdowns is the education and training that has taken place to develop and improve pupils' and staff digital competency skills. As a result, leaders confirm they have built on effective practice within and outside the school or PRU to make changes and improve the remote learning curriculum offer, the quality of teaching and learning, and the support for families.

Several leaders note that they experimented with different platforms for remote learning initially. Later, they either moved towards a single platform or web service to simplify access for pupils or retained different web services to meet pupils' individual learning needs better. They also explain how, for the national lockdown in spring 2021, the curriculum offer is the same on-site as it is for remote learning, with any paper copy learning packs mirroring and supporting on-line activities.

Across both sectors, leaders confirmed that the remote curriculum is needs led, with a strong focus on developing the skills identified in each pupil's individual education plan. Where appropriate, targets are amended to reflect the opportunity to develop additional skills at home.

Following feedback from the first national lockdown, staff at one special school developed a structure to the day to support pupils in developing a routine for working from home. Where suitable, differentiated expectations are set for teaching and learning outcomes in the different additional learning needs (ALN) groups and key stages. Reflection time is built into live teaching and learning sessions at all levels. This reflection time is an opportunity for pupils to provide feedback and for staff to monitor and refine the activities and their approaches to teaching.

At one PRU, a parental survey acknowledged that long periods of onscreen activities could be detrimental to their children's wellbeing. This was a particular issue for younger learners. The PRU therefore introduced by email or hard copy, tasks that are more practical to provide a balance. For example, as part of the PRU's plan for promoting excitement, engagement and participation in all areas of learning, each child received a phone call from the head of centre passing on a message from the class teacher that a 'special delivery' was on its way. The pupils were asked to look on the PRU's learning platform daily and wait for the post, as nobody knew what it was or how it was going to arrive. This approach created instant intrigue and excitement for both pupils and parents. The 'special' envelope containing a variety of challenges arrived in the post. Pupils had to solve the puzzles to work out their next topic, which learners and their families responded to well.

One special school worked collaboratively with other providers to develop their remote learning provision for its 14 –19-year-old learners. Learners participate in an inclusion project to study GCSEs and A-levels with a local mainstream school and follow vocational qualifications at the local further education college with learners from a number of mainstream schools.

A remote learning approach has enabled this provision to continue to work well. Each pupil has a remote learning plan. Key to this has been the use of suitable digital learning platforms and coaching pupils to use them confidently. Additional support includes the loan of devices for home learning, assigned mentors, individual and group online video tutorials and bringing learners into school for intensive catch-ups. This approach has provided continuity in learning for pupils. Leaders at this special school report that this has resulted in good outcomes, including better than predicted grades in GCSE controlled assessments during this period.

Since the first lockdown, one federation of special schools has concentrated much more on support for parents. Staff provide videos and support documents to parents to support their children's wellbeing and learning better. The school has created digital guides for parents on aspects such as how to access various websites and sessions and there is a new digital support and information site on the website. In addition, parents can contact the school for digital support at any time via a new direct email. Support is provided for parents to access a suitable platform for their child's statement of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) annual review.

## **Challenges**

Leaders in all settings confirm that supporting pupils' wellbeing has been their main priority during local and national lockdowns. They describe how they have striven to remain open to as many pupils as possible throughout this period to offer face-to-face provision, within Welsh Government and health and safety guidelines. They describe how staff have developed remote learning online including digital platforms for synchronous and asynchronous learning activities, as well as bespoke paper copy learning packs for specific pupils. Staff have achieved this at the same time as providing ongoing on-site teaching. In all cases, leaders note that during this period the provision of teaching in different forms, with a range of strategies to address the needs of all pupils, has been demanding.

Leaders in all settings confirm the challenges that remain with remote learning to address the needs of specific groups of vulnerable pupils such as those with profound and multiple learning difficulties who need access to assistive technology devices. Other groups include pupils who do not have access to digital devices because of safeguarding concerns, those who struggle to differentiate between home and school, and younger pupils or those without suitable learning and behavioural skills.

Across both sectors, leaders report they continually face the challenge of allocating staff and additional time and resources to facilitate the role of parents in supporting their children's specific ALN during remote learning. They confirm they face similar challenges to co-ordinate the range of multi-agency team meetings and ensure access to specialist services, which in a few cases are now being delivered by their own staff.

## Annex 1

### Prompts for the maintained special and PRU sectors to consider when reflecting on and refining remote learning

#### Teaching and learning

1. What are our biggest challenges and how are we overcoming these?	2. How do we know our pupils are safe online and what measures are in place to keep pupils' devices safe?	3. What arrangements and support do we provide to help sustain parental engagement with their child's learning?
4. How do we provide quality learning and teaching for all groups of pupils during periods of remote learning? ( <i>The curriculum offer - strengths /limitations</i> )	5. How has our approach to remote learning changed over time? ( <i>Reasons for and change process</i> )	6. What are the particular challenges within our setting to deliver live lessons safely and effectively? Where we do offer live lessons, how are we delivering feedback for pupils and ourselves?

#### Monitoring processes

7. How well do we monitor the provision for teaching and learning including pupils' engagement during remote learning? How has this monitoring process changed over time?	8. How do we develop and monitor pupils' independent and learning to learn skills when engaged in remote learning?	9. How do we ensure that pupils engage with peers during remote learning experiences?	10. How do we seek the views of stakeholders, (parents, pupils, multi-agency teams and placing authorities) about the provision made for learning? What do we learn from this and how do we use this information?
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## Supporting professional practice

<p>11. How do we support teaching staff in managing their workload for delivering multi-mode and increased remote learning provision – including on-site, on-line and non-digital activities?</p>	<p>12. How are our teaching and wellbeing support staff deployed to maximise the impact of their work?</p>	<p>13. How well do our teaching staff collaborate to provide remote learning experiences? How do we know?</p>	<p>14. Have we benefited from the sharing of effective practice with other providers? Do we have practice we have shared or believe would be beneficial to other providers?</p>	<p>15. How have we adapted professional learning during this time? Have we identified specific requirements for professional learning and remote learning provision? If so, what are they and how have we addressed this need?</p>
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