



September 2021

## **Engagement work**

Summary of engagement calls and visits to independent special schools

Spring and summer terms, 2021

This report summarises the findings from remote engagement meetings with senior leaders in nearly all 36 independent special schools between February and June 2021, and also from a very few engagement visits. Many changes took place in Wales during this period, including that a few providers were under site-specific lockdown measures as guided by Public Health Wales in response to clusters of cases of COVID-19.

Those leaders who were involved in engagement activities earlier in the spring shared their experiences during a period of national lockdown. In contrast, those leaders involved in engagement activities in the summer term were reflecting on a period of reduced restrictions.

The main focus for each discussion, or visit, was how schools have continued to support and promote pupils' wellbeing and learning. We also discussed leadership issues including professional learning and preparation for additional learning needs (ALN) reform.

Many independent special schools are small, and pupils often live in attached children's homes. A minority of these schools also educate day pupils or pupils who reside in children's homes not attached to the school. A smaller minority of all independent special schools educate day pupils only and these schools are the second largest group of providers for pupils educated other than at school (EOTAS) after pupil referral units. Nearly all placements at independent special schools are funded by local authorities in Wales or England.

## **Contents**

<b>Spring and summer term contexts for independent special schools</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Wellbeing</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Teaching and learning</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Professional learning</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Leadership</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>ALN Reform</b>	<b>9</b>

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

## **Spring and summer term contexts for independent special schools**

Due to the profile of pupils in independent special schools, many schools report that they have remained open throughout the pandemic, with a few schools having to close for short periods of time due to localised outbreaks of COVID-19.

Many leaders in schools who only provide education for day pupils reported a relatively smooth transition from virtual learning during the first part of the spring term to blended learning afterwards. Although almost all pupils in these settings had returned to face-to-face learning by the end of the spring term, a minority of schools plan to continue a blended approach to learning beyond this academic year. Leaders explained that the reason for this approach is to remain as flexible as possible going forward.

Following the Easter break, leaders of schools who only educate day pupils reported a return to 'normal' practice. Nearly all pupils from these schools were accessing education in school on a full-time basis at this time. A very few leaders of these schools confirm that the pandemic has had little significant impact on their education provision.

Leaders in a minority of schools who offer education to both day pupils and those from linked residential provision confirm that they had to close the school site for a fixed period due to an outbreak of COVID-19 at least once during this academic year. A minority of these school leaders report that the biggest impact of these closures was on day pupils, who received their education on-line or through paper-based home-learning packs during these lockdowns. A very few of these schools sent education staff to support day pupils to access education in their family homes, which reduced the impact of the lockdowns for these pupils.

Leaders in a majority of schools with pupils from linked residential provision only report that they remained open throughout the academic year with minimal disruption to the delivery of education. In these schools, leaders report that they have used varying strategies to reduce the risks posed by COVID-19. For example, staff taught pupils on-site in several residential settings, reduced the numbers of pupils in each class, or introduced part-time school access. To reduce the risk of the spread of infection, a few schools made changes to their provision by removing the usual support from residential staff within the education setting. Leaders in a very few of these settings reported that this approach improved pupils' engagement in learning and helped to draw clearer boundaries between school and the home.

In schools with pupils from linked residential homes, leaders report that attendance has largely improved across the academic year, and pupils have mostly been pleased to return to school. Across all schools, leaders report that a very few pupils have not returned to school. Where this is the case, it is largely due to pupil anxiety or shielding. A very few school leaders describe still using online or blended learning to offer education to those who cannot access the school or to limit the number of pupils on site at any given time.

A majority of leaders report that the number of pupils on their school roll has either remained the same or increased in 2020-2021. These schools have continued to

accept new pupils throughout the academic year. Those leaders who report an increase in the demand for placements describe how this might be due to the increased strain on families and services due to the pandemic. Examples cited include how the isolation enforced during lockdowns has caused social and emotional issues for pupils that, in a very few cases, has led to police involvement and a need for a more specialist setting.

## Wellbeing

Overall, leaders report that pupil and staff wellbeing has improved as the academic year progressed and restrictions lessened. Generally, those schools who remained open throughout the pandemic describe how pupils and staff have developed greater resilience and new skill sets to meet the many challenges that they have faced. However, leaders still report that both pupils and staff are tired after a long period of constant challenge and change.

### Pupil wellbeing

Many leaders from schools providing education for day pupils noted the negative impact of the pandemic on pupils' social skills and wellbeing. For example, they attributed a deterioration of pupils' wellbeing to a lack of engagement with their peers during periods of lockdown. Several leaders also report that a very few pupils have regressed in their behaviour during this period. In response, leaders confirmed that they strengthened home-school contact to monitor and support pupils' wellbeing better, which resulted in closer working relationships with parents. Leaders confirm that generally parents have developed a greater understanding of their child's education during this time.

In only a very few schools with linked residential provision, leaders noted a negative impact on the development of pupils' social skills due to the pandemic. They considered this was generally because pupils have continued to interact with their peers. However, a minority of leaders in schools with linked residential provision confirmed the negative impact of restricted family contact for those pupils in residential care. They report that this was particularly evident following the Christmas period and that the spring term was the hardest. Further, leaders in a very few of these schools commented that the anxiety levels of a few older pupils had risen because planning for transition when they leave school did not always enable access to new settings. In contrast, a minority of leaders noted an improvement in pupil behaviour, which they attributed largely to a reduction in visitors to the school resulting in a calmer learning environment.

During the summer term, leaders in around half of all schools report that attendance rates are back to normal or have improved, with pupils generally pleased to have returned to school. Leaders in a few schools describe attendance rates as 'exceptional', with one leader commenting that 'it is the best that it has ever been'. A very few school leaders report that attendance is still improving, but in a very few cases pupils are still not attending school largely because of shielding or anxiety issues.

While leaders in most schools report fewer than usual safeguarding concerns overall during this period, for the spring term many schools who only provide education for day pupils noted an increase. Where increases occurred, leaders often attributed this to contexts where parents reported exhaustion from supporting remote learning and managing their child's challenging behaviour, with many specialist support services being suspended or moving online at this time.

### **Therapeutic provision**

Leaders in those schools that support day pupils report that these pupils have largely not had consistent access to therapeutic provision throughout the pandemic. Notably, it is leaders from these schools who have reported the biggest negative impact on the development of pupils' social skills and the number of safeguarding concerns. In response to this situation, many leaders report introducing more school-based therapeutic provision to support pupils during this time, which includes:

- increased circle time
- integrated periods of calm following breaks
- the development of a 'sensory menu' of activities to support self-regulation
- the introduction of therapeutic non-contact boxing
- refining nurture sessions
- the development of in-school therapy rooms

Across most schools, leaders confirm that changes have been made to therapy provision to support pupils with the challenges of the last year. For many of these schools, a focus on wellbeing and therapeutic intervention is part of their usual wellbeing and curriculum offer to meet the specific needs of their pupils. For those schools with linked residential provision, a majority of leaders report that therapeutic services have continued this academic year. A very few of these leaders reported interruptions to this provision during outbreaks of COVID-19. During the spring term, leaders reported that much therapy was taking place online, whereas many leaders reporting during the summer term confirmed a return to face-to-face therapy.

### **Staff wellbeing**

Leaders report that throughout this academic year there has been a much stronger focus on the wellbeing of staff as well as for pupils. Leaders report a wide range of support systems to help staff wellbeing, including:

- counselling
- online staff quizzes or catch-ups
- the distribution of gift vouchers
- prayer time with school chaplains
- staff wellbeing surveys and follow-up action
- coffee with the headteacher
- increased flexible working

A few leaders note that access to testing and vaccines has had a positive impact on staff wellbeing. Leaders from a very few schools note that delays to vaccinations and managing staff anxiety have also been challenging. A very few school leaders report

that their proprietors were introducing a policy of COVID-19 vaccines becoming mandatory for all staff. For leaders in these settings, this approach had a negative impact on staff morale.

Many leaders comment on the impact the pandemic has had on teacher workload. One leader commented that their staff were 'required to work twice as hard' due to constant changes, either to meet the demands of government guidance, or outbreaks of COVID-19.

### **Support for parents**

#### **Catch 22**

At this day school for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, staff have continued to strengthen engagement with parents and families through the introduction of parental sessions outside of school hours. Parents have the opportunity to come into school with their children and discuss any concerns they may have, and staff share the strategies that the school uses to support their child. The headteacher reports that the focus of these meetings is not usually academic, but on behaviour management approaches. The headteacher confirmed that the school is monitoring the impact of this approach in terms of pupils' improved engagement in learning. For example, one pupil's attendance has increased significantly from one hour a day to almost full days since the improved parent-school engagement provided through these sessions.

In those settings with linked residential provision, leaders generally report improved working relationships across the educational and residential teams. This includes strengthened relationships and dialogue, and improved continuity for pupils. Leaders from schools with day and linked residential provision note that a very few pupils have struggled to re-engage with education following disruption to routines or needing to access education in different settings.

### **Teaching and learning**

Nearly all leaders describe how they have modified the school's operational arrangements for teaching and learning to mitigate against the risk of infection from COVID-19. Leaders report how they adjust these on an ongoing basis to take account of changing circumstances. In nearly all cases, leaders have re-configured teaching space within the school to reduce numbers in each class and maximise social distancing. Leaders in a very few schools confirm that teaching groups have changed to minimise the impact of a case of COVID-19.

### **Changes to curriculum provision**

Generally, leaders comment favourably on improving their use of outdoor space to support pupil wellbeing and learning, and also meet infection control demands. Around half of schools with linked residential provision, and a few with day provision only, report relying more on outdoor education or further developing existing

provision. Examples given include gardening activities, animal care, bushcraft, sporting activities, vocational activities, pottery, construction, and the use of outdoor relaxation spaces.

To meet the needs of many pupils placed in independent special schools, community access is often a core part of the curriculum offer. However, leaders in around half of all independent special schools report the negative impact of the pandemic restrictions to community access and offsite provision. This was particularly evident in the engagement calls which took place during the spring term.

Despite these challenges, a very few providers have continued to offer work experience placements to all pupils. They have also extended their curriculum offer, sourced internships, or provided pupils more opportunities to practise life skills. During the summer term, a very few leaders report that these restrictions are now starting to lift, and more community access is becoming available for pupils.

### **Outdoor education and enterprise**

#### **Marlowe St David's**

In this school for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and autistic spectrum disorder, leaders report that pupils enjoy participating in a range of community-based projects. For one of these projects pupils have been fundraising to have their own poly tunnel on the school site. Pupils grew their own vegetables to sell at the local community shop, which is linked to accredited learning courses the school has in place. Pupils are already working with the local community shop and this school development was created as a result of pupil requests.

A minority of leaders report that they continue to reflect on the effectiveness of their curriculum provision throughout the pandemic. Although the Curriculum for Wales changes are not mandatory for independent special schools, a few leaders report amending their curriculum in preparation for this. These leaders report that Curriculum for Wales matches much of their existing provision and resources shared for these reforms help with teachers' planning.

A few school leaders report investing in information technology (IT) equipment and new software to help the continuation of teaching and learning throughout the pandemic. A minority of schools purchased a laptop for every pupil to provide them with access to learning throughout the lockdown periods.

Generally, leaders confirm they have refined assessment methods used in their setting. A minority of schools are continuing with established assessment methods used before the pandemic. A very few leaders have changed their assessment methods, with some citing the need to strengthen the assessment of wellbeing and emotional needs of pupils in addition to academic achievement.

Leaders of schools who offer GCSE qualifications share concerns about the exam process this academic year. Leaders feel that there has been a lack of timely guidance and information sharing concerning exams. In addition, a very few leaders

describe concerns about all staff having the ability to assess GCSE work accurately in the required way, with one commenting that centre assessed grades are the “greatest challenge for their school at this time”.

### **Preparing for transition**

A few leaders shared concerns about the challenges of pupil transition during this period. Nearly all of these leaders report frustrations about finding future placements for pupils leaving their setting. A very few note difficulty with planned transitions to further education. Leaders in a few schools report a significant impact on the development of pupils’ skills and readiness for transition to adulthood. Leaders report that, due to the impact on education, community access and transition opportunities from the pandemic, learners will be less prepared for moves to future placements. A very few leaders note that this has also increased the anxiety of several pupils.

Furthermore, a very few schools who continued to accept new placements report the challenges of transitioning new pupils into a service. One leader also shared frustrations about the timing of transitions and felt that the timing was often based on funding rather than pupil preparedness. They described how much transition work is out of the control of schools and that they are limited in how they can prepare and support pupils appropriately.

### **Professional learning**

Generally, leaders feel positive that access to professional learning has not been disrupted by the pandemic. They report a wide variety of training topics, with the highest proportions being on trauma-informed practice, phonics, using online education delivery platforms and meeting individual pupil needs. One leader reflected on staff’s improved ability to meet the individual learning styles of pupils due to changes made to curriculum delivery during lockdowns, the school’s professional learning reflects and supports these improvements. Leaders in very few schools report providing training on upcoming ALN reforms.

#### **Support for parents**

##### **Headlands School**

This school provides day or residential placements for pupils with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties and autistic spectrum disorders. This school has a focus on supporting families as well as staff through ongoing training. The headteacher reports that all staff are engaging with training aimed at supporting those with attachment difficulties or experience of trauma, but the school has extended this to develop a similar course for families. This approach involved members of the teaching staff continuing with their learning over the February half-term and Easter holidays. The school is preparing two pilot parent courses, focusing initially on foster and adoptive carers.



## Leadership

Overall, leaders report an improvement in engagement and communication with external stakeholders due to the introduction of online meetings, as well as improvements in efficiency and parental engagement. In a few instances, leaders confirm their intention to continue with this model of holding meetings in the future due to its positive impact. A very few leaders note that this model makes person-centred planning meetings challenging. Across the schools contacted, a few continue to use online platforms for regular staff meetings.

A very few leaders note that they felt required to change their leadership style during the pandemic to support their staff team to feel more secure and confident.

Generally, leaders commented that membership of wider organisations or professional communities was helpful for understanding guidance and making appropriate changes.

### Provision of IT equipment

#### The Branas School

This school provides specialist education and therapy for boys who have complex social, emotional, and behavioural needs. Initially, leaders found it particularly challenging to ensure that pupils accessed their learning safely online. During previous lockdowns, the school had not provided online learning due to restrictions on internet access within the residential setting. This was due to a policy which aims to minimise online access for residents. To address this issue, the school provided the pupils with personal computers and purchased mobile hubs for each home. Now that all pupils have returned to onsite activities on a full-time basis it enables the pupils to have monitored internet access to complete their homework. The school continues to monitor the sites and searches accessed by the pupils robustly. The level of security when monitoring internet activity enables the headteacher to receive an alert if a pupil attempts to access inappropriate material at which point the pupil is placed in a 'penalty box' and their account is frozen. Each pupil is considered individually when setting up alert levels and key words that may be entered into internet search engines.

A few leaders from schools with linked residential settings confirm their experiences of communications with several local authority representatives during this period has been inconsistent. These leaders report a lack of support for key issues, such as transition or family contact. In addition, these leaders report it has been challenging to contact local authority representatives during this time to discuss their concerns. Leaders also report that very few face-to-face meetings between pupils, staff and social workers took place this academic year due to restrictions in place.

Generally, leaders have made changes to the school's usual quality assurance arrangements such as the lesson observation cycle. Leaders in a few schools report they have not had any formal approaches to the evaluation of teaching and learning, whereas a smaller proportion report that they have continued with their usual lesson

observation cycle with varying approaches within different phases of their school. For example, some leaders report completing face-to-face lesson observations, whereas others observed online learning or completed lesson observations by using IT to observe face-to-face learning without entering the classroom. Generally, leaders report continuing with staff appraisal and professional development meetings throughout the year, which has often been used to support staff during a time of great challenge.

A very few leaders express concern that it had been difficult to address recommendations from previous Estyn inspections in the light of the restrictions. For example, a very few school leaders found that linking with other providers to share best practice was not possible due to restrictions and challenges during this period.

### **Behaviour support training**

#### **Gwenllian Education Centre**

This school for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder has developed its appraisal and professional development provision so that these two processes relate better to the school's expectations, objectives and requirements. All school staff now access a 'Registered Behavioural Technician' training course. On completion of the training the school's behaviour analyst provides ongoing supervision to staff. This approach involves direct training and support to staff in relation to specific pupils and ongoing monitoring of their performance. The monitoring is undertaken against an assessment tool that is specific to behavioural technicians, and direct feedback and support is linked to this. Staff have targets which are personalised to support their professional development as well as priority areas that are highlighted through the school's self-evaluation process. Senior managers access key information to evaluate the performance of staff, which is considered during staff annual appraisals.

Leaders vary in how they describe their approach to long-term planning during this time. For example, there are those who state that their school is simply 'trying to get through' this year and those who continue to have a strategic approach to leadership and school improvement planning. One headteacher who reports having returned to a strategic approach in the summer term, reflected that this would not have been possible previously as there was a constant need to read new guidance and make changes accordingly. However, in the main, leaders report their response has strengthened over time, with their schools showing increasing confidence and resilience towards the constant changes and demands over the last 15 months.

### **Responding to guidance**

While leaders have generally found national guidance useful during the pandemic, a very few report that they have found the large amount of new or amended local and national guidance throughout this time to be challenging. This is particularly the case where schools have placements from more than one local authority and from Wales and England. These leaders felt that their approach needed to be more reactive and less strategic as a result of constant changes and the need to consider large amounts of information from multiple sources. Further, a very few leaders expressed

frustration that the guidance did not consider their settings well enough. In a very few cases, leaders report variable support from local authorities, with discrepancies in engagement in mandatory meetings and clinical support provided.

Leaders report varying health and safety measures being used in their settings, depending on their individual site risk assessments. Many leaders confirm that they separated different classes or residential groups into 'bubbles' to reduce the risk of, and minimise the possible impact of, an outbreak of COVID-19. A few school leaders report using lateral flow tests, personal protective equipment (PPE) and face coverings for staff. A very few leaders also report using anti-bacterial steam cleaning devices, and many report stringent handwashing protocols. In the main, leaders note that pupils were adhering to social distancing and infection control guidelines suitably. However, a very few leaders report that an inability to follow these guidelines is preventing a very few pupils from returning to school.

## **ALN reforms**

While leaders demonstrate an awareness of the upcoming ALN reforms, overall, they are largely in the early stages of understanding the full implications for their context. Only a very few leaders feel confident and prepared for these changes, and a very few schools have planned training to support staff understanding of these reforms. Generally, there is some confusion amongst leaders as to how these changes will impact on independent special schools. For example, a very few school leaders feel that these changes will not impact on their setting at all, as they only have pupils placed from England. A majority of leaders report that they are waiting for further support or guidance from the Welsh Government, but they are unclear about any further support such as from the regional transformational lead or their placing local authorities in Wales.