



June 2021

Engagement work

Maintained special school and
pupil referral unit (PRU) update
Summer term 2021

This report summarises the findings from 39 engagement calls and a very few visits made to maintained special schools and PRUs between the beginning of February 2021 and the end of May 2021. Throughout this period, leaders confirm that their schools and PRUs have remained open, including through the most recent lockdown, to provide education for vulnerable learners and the children of critical workers, in line with relevant Welsh Government guidance.

As we noted in our previous report, there was significant variability across Wales regarding the proportion of pupils identified as eligible to attend the school or PRU for on-site provision. Due to the restrictions placed on capacity by health and safety guidelines, maintained special schools in particular were unable to respond fully to parental requests for education on the school site. In addition, local authorities interpreted Welsh Government guidance that these settings should remain open to support vulnerable learners differently across Wales. All schools and PRUs transitioned back to a full on-site provision offer by the start of the summer term.

The report is based on the information discussed with headteachers and senior leaders during engagement calls or visits. The main focus for discussion was how schools and PRUs continue to support and promote the wellbeing and learning of their pupils.

Proportions relate to the sample of 39 schools and PRUs with which we have had contact during this period.

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Key messages

Promoting wellbeing of pupils and staff

Leaders in nearly all special schools and PRUs confirm that they have continued to prioritise the wellbeing of pupils, families, and staff throughout this period. A few leaders emphasise that it is too early to say whether there have been any significant long-term impacts from the pandemic on pupil wellbeing. A minority of leaders across both sectors note a range of examples where they believe pupil wellbeing has suffered due to factors relating to the pandemic.

Nearly all leaders describe the pressure that staff have faced since the beginning of the pandemic and pay tribute to the continued hard work, resilience, and personal commitment of their staff during this period.

In PRUs and special schools that cater for pupils with social and emotional difficulties, leaders describe increased incidents of substance misuse, self-harm, eating disorders and disrupted sleeping patterns. A few leaders note an increase in pupils' anxiety and a deterioration in pupils' attitudes to their own confidence and self-esteem.

Promoting learning

Nearly all leaders report that over the past year they have strengthened arrangements for blended and distance learning through the provision of a combination of face-to-face teaching, online and live sessions, and resources delivered to the home.

Overall, most leaders of special schools and many leaders of PRUs confirm that pupils' engagement with learning remained strong during the spring term. A few leaders of PRUs and special schools that cater for social, emotional and mental health needs report that older pupils did not always engage in blended or distance learning consistently well.

Leaders continue to highlight the challenges faced by schools and PRUs because of the narrowing of the curriculum due to restrictions on off-site learning and the impact that this had on developing pupils' skills.

Leaders confirm that experiences such as vocational learning, access to leisure and other community facilities are beginning to resume. However, opportunities for work experience and attendance on courses at further education colleges remain limited.

Many leaders across both sectors continue to report how they are making increased use of their grounds for exercise and other outdoor learning activities as well as adapting their on-site provision to strengthen the teaching of vocational and practical skills.

Many leaders continue to express concerns about the disruption to arrangements to support the smooth and effective transition of older pupils into further education and other destinations. They report that many pupils' progress in areas such as their

communication, numeracy, independence, and social skills has suffered over the period of the pandemic.

Most leaders confirm that the philosophy, principles and four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales is well matched to the curriculum approach taken by schools and PRUs in meeting the needs of their pupils. Leaders identify that progress in its implementation is at various stages of development.

Provision and therapy

Leaders across both sectors confirm that statutory processes and annual reviews are continuing to take place within required timeframes.

Leaders across both settings identify that an increasing number of specialist therapeutic services have resumed the provision of face-to-face support on site. A few leaders across both sectors are frustrated by inconsistent approaches to on-site support and therapy across different specialist services and in different local authorities. In a few cases, leaders of PRUs describe how their difficulties accessing services has led them to strengthen their own therapeutic provision.

Professional learning

Most leaders across both sectors confirm they have continued to provide a wide range of professional learning opportunities during this period.

Many leaders report they have prioritised the development of staff's skills to support the immediate physical, mental health and social and emotional needs of pupils as they returned to school following the most recent lockdown.

Many school and PRU leaders describe how professional learning has also extended staff's understanding of teaching strategies to support pupils' return to school. There have also been opportunities for staff to develop their digital technology skills further to support the school's provision for online and blended learning.

Nearly all leaders confirm that professional learning opportunities have also supported their preparation for additional learning needs (ALN) reform and the Curriculum for Wales.

Leadership

Nearly all leaders describe the pressures they have faced in meeting the considerable and evolving day-to-day operational challenges during this period of the pandemic.

Many leaders identify that their major challenges link to ensuring pupil and staff safety while also providing a model of on-site, distance and blended learning that meets the wide range of individual pupils' needs.

Despite these challenges, many leaders describe in detail how they have continued to prepare their schools and PRUs for ALN and curriculum reform during this time, as well as addressing priorities specific to their own context.

Most leaders of special schools and PRUs emphasise the value of collaboration and partnership working during this period.

Most leaders across both sectors expressed their appreciation for the strong support they had received from colleagues within the local authority, through practical advice and guidance and personal support from senior officers.

Detailed findings and cameos

Promoting wellbeing

Pupil wellbeing

Leaders in nearly all special schools and PRUs confirm that they have continued to prioritise the wellbeing of pupils, families, and staff throughout this period.

Nearly all describe how they have evolved and adapted approaches since the first national lockdown to support pupils on-site and at home, including arrangements to monitor and record pupils' wellbeing and keep in touch. Overall, leaders report that many pupils' general wellbeing remains good and that pupils have shown unanticipated levels of resilience during the pandemic, adapting readily to the different ways of working at their schools.

Many leaders report how part-time models of attendance and the phased return to on-site attendance during the spring term supported pupils to develop stronger working relationships with staff. This approach also helped staff to establish a richer understanding of individual pupils' needs and goals.



Many schools also used social stories, videos and other strategies to ensure that most pupils were confident and well prepared for their full-time reintegration following the Easter break.

Nearly all leaders describe how their staff have made use of a variety of tools and approaches to assess the emotional and social health and wellbeing of pupils. A few leaders emphasise that it is too early to say whether there have been any significant long-term impacts on pupil wellbeing.

A minority of leaders across both sectors note a range of examples where they believe pupil wellbeing has suffered due to the pandemic. In PRUs and special schools that cater for pupils with social and emotional difficulties, leaders describe how a few pupils have struggled due to the lack of structure and routine. For example, they describe how a few older pupils found it a challenge to abide by lockdown restrictions when in the community. They note increased incidents of substance misuse, self-harm, eating disorders and disrupted sleeping patterns. Leaders explain that it has been more difficult to re-engage these pupils since returning to school. A few leaders report an increase in child protection referrals and greater instances of pupils becoming looked after by the local authority.

A few leaders note that the results of wellbeing surveys highlight a clear increase in pupils' anxiety and a deterioration in pupils' attitudes to their own confidence and self-esteem. Leaders describe a range of interventions and approaches used to address these issues. For example, in one provider, the PRU identified relevant one-to-one and small group wellbeing interventions to support pupils' needs including anger management and anxiety workshops.

A few leaders of PRUs report that pupils in key stage 2 are struggling to re-establish daily routines and have regressed in skills such as sharing and being part of a group. These leaders speak of staff 'starting from scratch' with many pupils to establish familiar routines and boundaries.

At Tai Education Centre, staff supported the transition of pupils back to the PRU through a commercial scheme already used. The scheme aims to prevent and address younger learners' behaviour problems and promote their social, emotional, and academic progress. Staff planned bespoke approaches to meet the needs of those pupils with the greatest behavioural difficulties. Activities included opportunities to explore emotions, which are then followed-up by staff as part the PRU's weekly pastoral welfare calls to pupils and their families.

Many leaders describe how they continue to maintain infection control procedures to protect staff and pupil wellbeing. However, as noted in our previous report, leaders at special schools continue to express concerns about the impact of these measures on routine opportunities for social interaction, as well as opportunities for pupils to take part in celebratory events.

Supporting the wellbeing of parents and carers

Most leaders across both sectors report that relationships with families have continued to strengthen through this period of the pandemic. They describe how their arrangements for keeping in touch and supporting their pupils and families have evolved and strengthened since the first lockdown.

At **Maes-y-Coed Special School** the newly appointed family liaison officer has worked with other agencies and charities such as Save the Children to support families practically throughout the pandemic. This work has included providing families with food and hygiene packages which have been gratefully received. In recognition of this aspect of the school's work, the school has achieved formal accreditation for its work with families from an outside agency. **Greenhill Special School** has sustained its fortnightly virtual coffee morning for parents and carers. This forum is valued by the parents and allows for opportunities to catch up or to discuss concerns with each other or with staff.

Many leaders describe how staff continue to make far greater use of social media and communication platforms to keep in touch with pupils and their families. Leaders at these schools report how staff, pupil and parent confidence and proficiency in using these approaches has developed since the first lockdown.

Overall, leaders report that many parents and carers showed greater resilience and were better able to support school staff with distance learning and provision for wellbeing than during the period of the first national lockdown. Pupils and families were more confident with these arrangements which facilitated the work of staff. Leaders across both settings report how the positive working relationships between staff, pupils and their families have been key in promoting pupils' and families' emotional wellbeing throughout during a period of considerable strain on families.

Attendance

At the beginning of the summer term, leaders at most special schools confirm that attendance is good and has improved over time. Many leaders believe that maintaining rigorous health and safety arrangements and sharing risk assessments and practices with pupils and families has reassured stakeholders and improved attendance.

In the few cases where individual pupils have not yet returned to schools due to pupils' or their families' underlying health concerns and anxieties, leaders of maintained special schools confirm they have a clear understanding of the reasons for this. Leaders confirm these pupils continue to be supported by a blended learning provision and regular wellbeing contact and provision.

Leaders of PRUs confirm that patterns of pupil attendance are variable. Around half of PRUs note that most pupils have returned and are re-engaging well with structures, routines, and learning. In these PRUs, leaders report that pupils are pleased to be back and are settling well, welcoming the opportunity to socialise with their friends.

However, around half of PRUs report that the attendance of a minority of key stage 4 pupils is variable, either because they are struggling to return to the regular routine of being ready for school or because they have been offered employment. A few leaders report that a few Year 11 pupils have not returned, and staff are visiting them at home to engage them in completing their assessments.

Promoting staff wellbeing

Nearly all leaders describe the pressure that staff have faced since the beginning of the pandemic and pay tribute to the continued hard work, resilience, and personal commitment of their staff during this period. Many leaders continue to report that members of staff are physically and emotionally drained due to the constant adjustments staff have had to make to accommodate self-isolation requirements and plan for simultaneous on-site and distance learning.

Nearly all leaders describe practical strategies that they have put in place to alleviate staff anxieties. These supportive approaches include informal wellbeing check-ins with staff as well as regular online staff meetings to share information and good practice and find solutions to current challenges. In response to staff apprehensions about the new variants of COVID-19 a few schools have relocated socially distanced staff meetings from large school spaces to virtual platforms. In a few schools, staff travel home on staff meeting days and access these meetings from their own home.

Many leaders describe how staff continue to be supported by mental health first-aiders, staff closed social media groups and weekly newsletters to motivate and keep them informed. One special school has a qualified psychotherapist and family therapist on the senior leadership team. Her therapeutic input has been important in supporting both staff and pupils. She provides supervision for staff at the school on an informal basis. At other settings, leaders have introduced mindfulness programmes to support staff wellbeing.

Many leaders across both settings note the importance of clear communication and staff involvement in implementing measures to support staff safety and wellbeing.

Leaders at **Trinity Fields School and Resource Centre** emphasise that the key approach to managing staff wellbeing has been the consultative approach adopted by the headteacher in working with the professional associations. Each week representatives of the professional associations meet with the chair of governors to discuss relevant health and safety measures and feedback on their consultation with members. This consultative approach has given the unions a leading role in the risk assessment process throughout the pandemic and has helped the school to ensure guidance and risk assessments meet staff needs and incorporate their concerns.

Many leaders across both sectors emphasise how staff confidence improved following access to regular lateral flow testing and the receipt of both doses of the vaccination. However, a few leaders of special schools describe the difficulties they have experienced in ensuring that staff received the vaccination promptly as arrangements for vaccinating staff varied considerably across local authorities.

Promoting learning

Teaching approaches during the spring term

Leaders report significant variation across Wales in the proportion of pupils identified as eligible to attend the school or PRU for on-site teaching during the spring term.

Generally, most leaders describe how staff continued to prioritise the most vulnerable pupils while ensuring a wider range of pupils had more frequent access to on-site teaching than during the first national lockdown. For example, groups of pupils attended on a part-time basis each week or on alternate weeks. In one PRU, all pupils were allocated a blended learning model of on-site provision of two or three days a week at the PRU, with online and distance learning provided for the rest of the week.

Most leaders explain how teaching during the spring term consisted of a range of approaches to reflect the model of attendance, the setting's understanding of pupils' needs and how individual parents could best support their child's learning at home.



Overall, nearly all leaders report that over the past year they have strengthened arrangements for blended and distance learning through the provision of a combination of face-to-face teaching, online and live sessions, and resources delivered to the home.

Many leaders report how the regular catchups they had with parents helped staff to tailor the model of home learning to the needs of the child and family. As relationships with parents have deepened, schools have adapted their approaches, as well as they can, to meet the changing needs of pupils and their families. Most headteachers report that there are robust arrangements in place to maintain learning at home should pupils need to self-isolate or in any future lockdown.

Teaching approaches since the full re-opening of schools and PRUs

Nearly all leaders confirm that their staff have planned carefully for the return of pupils following the full re-opening of the school or PRU after Easter. This includes arrangements to support the setting's infection control measures such as a phased return to school, part-time models of attendance and later start and finish times. They describe how consideration has been given to establishing routines for pupils that mitigate the risk of infection. These include measures to enable the safe movement around school, the wearing of face coverings, limitations on social mixing at break and lunchtimes and restrictions on communal activities and celebrations such as assemblies. Many leaders note that staff remain generally restricted to teaching in their classrooms, although the increased use of outdoor spaces is more widely reported, particularly to increase the mobility of pupils, for general exercise purposes and, weather permitting, for lessons.

In PRUs where pupils used to move around to subject specific teaching areas, several PRU leaders report having to adapt these arrangements to reflect the current restrictions and to implement bubbles. For example, in one PRU, teaching staff move to the pupils. In other cases, the use of digital technology enables subject-based teaching to continue without staff or pupils breaking bubbles. In the short-term, leaders report pupils are adapting to these changes well. In the longer term however, leaders confirm they are keen to re-establish their original model.

Nearly all leaders confirm that the primary focus for teachers' planning is on pupil wellbeing and ensuring pupils remain engaged in interesting and meaningful activities. For example, in one PRU, pupils who have complex mental health needs have additional opportunities to access one-to-one wellbeing sessions from the wellbeing staff team on-site in discrete, welcoming, and safe areas. Several leaders say they have added more personal and social education across the weekly timetable and increased access to outdoor practical activities.

In **Ty Gwyn PRU**, a new running track and basketball court has been installed. Additional seating is also available in the main outside area. The inner courtyard has a new seating area added which pupils can choose to use if they prefer to have quiet time. In addition, the PRU entrance has planters and bird boxes designed, made and maintained by pupils as part of their art and design technology lessons. In **Pembrokeshire Learning Centre**, staff are providing a range of wellbeing and team building activities, chosen in consultation with pupils. In the primary phase pupils have had a day lama trekking. In key stages 3 and 4 pupils are engaging in bush craft and water-based activities, such as surfing. Across these activities staff report pupils are calm and relaxed and are strengthening their communication and social interaction with staff and each other.

In a very few PRUs, leaders with primary provision report a very few pupils are exhibiting inappropriate behaviours particularly around turn-taking, social interaction and tolerance of their peers. In these cases, staff are adapting teaching activities providing additional access to outdoor learning and rebuilding pupils social skills through play-based learning.

In **Conwy Education Centre**, a play therapist has been recruited to deliver professional training to help staff develop the role of play in the curriculum. The therapist attends the PRU weekly to work with key stage 2 pupils. The headteacher described the importance and the success of these recently established structured play activities. He described the focus on developing pupils' social skills such as turn taking and sharing resources. As a result, the head teacher is considering developing the play curriculum into key stage 3.

In nearly all PRUs with key stage 4 pupils, leaders report a continued focus on the successful completion of assessments and course work. Generally, leaders report most Year 11 pupils have returned with positive levels of engagement. However, they note the additional pressure these pupils face in completing their qualifications and planning for their next steps when they leave the PRU.

In a very few PRUs, leaders report that the constraints of the building limit opportunities for paired or small group working, given the current infection control measures. In a very few PRUs, leaders note that a shortage of staff is impacting negatively on the quality of teaching and learning. In these PRUs, leaders are managing the issues using support staff and higher level teaching assistants to strengthen teaching across the PRU wherever possible.

Engagement in learning

Overall, most leaders of special schools and many leaders of PRUs confirm that pupils' engagement with learning remained strong during the spring term. Generally, this was because leaders had prioritised the return of older pupils to the PRU or implemented part-time timetables for pupils of all ages to maintain more regular on-site contact. Similarly, where Year 11 pupils were hard to engage, PRU staff have supported these pupils through a range of approaches, including regular telephone calls and doorstep visits. For example, in one PRU, staff have visited pupils in their gardens to complete assessments.

However, a few leaders of PRUs and special schools that cater for social, emotional and mental health needs report that older pupils did not always engage in blended or distance learning consistently well. They report a deterioration in behaviour as pupils lost their personal routines, including staying up late and refusing to engage in exercise. A few pupils displayed negative behaviours due to their perception of the unfairness of the situation, where they must attend the school or PRU while their peers are not attending mainstream provision.

Since the full return to on-site learning after Easter, most leaders report that most pupils have responded enthusiastically to the return to daily routines and the opportunity to re-establish friendship groups.

Monitoring pupil progress

Most leaders confirm that they have continued to monitor pupil progress since pupils' full return to school and identify any gaps or loss of learning. Leaders report how they have adopted a range of approaches to engage pupils and minimise anxiety in this process. These include Welsh Government personalised assessments, commercial and school-designed assessments, and first-hand observation.

In a majority of PRUs, leaders confirm that staff use the information from engagement tracking systems developed during the period of home learning to supplement more recent on-site pupil assessment outcomes and to adjust pupils' programmes of learning where appropriate.

In the **Bridge Achievement Centre**, senior leaders report staff have tracked pupils' engagement in English, mathematics and wellbeing at key stage 3 and in qualification programmes at key stage 4 throughout periods of distance and blended learning. They share the information provided with pupils and parents as part of the termly reporting process. Senior leaders state that where appropriate, individual development plans (IDPs) are updated to reflect the progress or address any regression in learning.

At one special school, staff have noted that pupils with poor literacy skills have found it easier to use a speech-to-text tool to express themselves in writing and demonstrate their understanding. As a result of the feedback they have received using this tool, they are engaging in lessons with greater self-esteem and confidence.

Despite these examples, leaders report that many pupils' progress in areas such as their communication, numeracy, independence, and social skills has suffered over the period of the pandemic. Many leaders confirm they are at the early stages of the assessment process and it is too soon to assess accurately the full impact of the pandemic on pupils' learning.

Learning experiences

Nearly all leaders acknowledge the need to take a flexible approach to the curriculum over this period to allow teaching to reflect the individual needs of pupils as a consequence of their experiences during the pandemic. Leaders refer to the

potential long-term effects the pandemic may have on pupils' emotional, behavioural and learning needs, as well as to the immediate impact of restrictions on the usual curriculum model.

During the engagement calls conducted in the latter part of the spring term, leaders continued to highlight the challenges faced by schools and PRUs because of the narrowing of the curriculum and the impact that this had on developing pupils' skills. This was particularly true for those learning experiences that generally take place away from the school site. In calls and visits after Easter, leaders confirm that experiences such as vocational learning and access to leisure and other community facilities are beginning to resume. In general, however, opportunities for work experience and attendance on courses at further education colleges remain limited.

Many leaders across both sectors continue to report how they are making increased use of the external environment to make use of their grounds for exercise and other outdoor learning activities.

At the **Tai Education Centre**, the headteacher describes how the PRU is developing its outdoor environment to provide improved opportunities for pupils to engage in outdoor learning. For example, pupils are re-designing the garden to place the hedgehog houses that they have built in a suitable habitat; a 'lodge' has been built in the grounds where pupils can engage in storytelling and reading; and trees are being planted.

At **Denbighshire PRU**, the headteacher describes how one of the biggest challenges was offering pupils alternatives for the practical activities that take place at an outdoor centre that has been closed. In response to feedback from pupil voice, the PRU bought several outdoor table tennis tables to ensure that they had opportunities for regular exercise as well as social interaction with their peers.

At **Maes Derw Special School**, key stage 2 pupils enjoy the increased outdoor learning areas for a wider range of practical activities. Pupils have been finding their way around a trail blindfolded and carrying a cup of water, using a rope as a guide. The trail has a series of tasks along the way such as moving through a tunnel, weaving between obstacles and climbing over small logs. Pupils are supported by staff to develop their listening, questioning and perseverance skills to complete the course as well as they can.

Leaders across both sectors describe how they have adapted on-site provision in response to the continued disrupted access for pupils to off-site learning. This has particularly affected key stage 4 pupils accessing off-site providers such as further education institutions and work experience providers as part of their vocational pathways.

As a result of losing important learning experiences at the local further education college and work placement providers, **Ysgol Pendalar** worked with its local university to develop the 'wild elements' project. This promotes gardening in the outdoors. In addition, it has worked with its local adult disability team to create a new healthy living project. In **the Bridge Alternative Provision Portfolio PRU**, the headteacher reports the restrictions preventing pupils accessing offsite Forest Schools where they would normally gain Agored Cymru qualifications was a concern. As a result, staff and pupils have adapted the on-site provision using their allotment area, to be able to deliver the course requirements.

In **Wrexham Pupil Referral Services**, the headteacher reports how the vocational activities have been expanded on-site. Pupils and staff have turfed an open space at the PRU and refurbished it with planters built by the pupils. Similarly, the PRU has been providing opportunities for pupils to complete qualifications through an online provider including in health and safety, food hygiene and fire safety.

In a few PRUs, leaders state they are encouraging external providers to deliver activities safely on-site to increase pupils' access to physical exercise. In one PRU, the headteacher explained how instructors from a football academy attend the PRU site to provide football coaching for the pupils.

A few PRU leaders report that pupils' access to placements at further education colleges has continued remotely throughout the pandemic through online learning platforms. This has been a challenge for many pupils who selected college courses based on the opportunity to engage with practical vocational experiences. Overall, there has been limited access to attend college for practical elements of the course work and many leaders report the reopening of on-site college placements is inconsistent across local authorities.

In the majority of schools and PRUs, leaders continue to express concerns about the impact of restricted access to offsite activities on the development of pupils' independence and social skills. As restrictions are eased, leaders are keen to re-establish this important aspect of the curriculum delivery. In the interim, they describe how staff have continued to adapt the curriculum to provide opportunities to develop these skills.

Ysgol Rhydygors has implemented a play-based curriculum for its younger pupils. Staff provide structure and guide pupils' in engaging with their interests. Pupils are learning to re-connect with their peers and regulate their emotions. Older pupils are engaged in practical activities such as gardening and maintaining the greenhouse. In addition, older pupils are using a range of skills in planning a new common room for their use.

Qualifications

Most leaders report that, where relevant, pupils remain on track to complete their assessments and coursework for a range of accredited outcomes, including GCSE and BTEC qualifications. They confirm that there are appropriate systems in place

regarding the awarding of centre determined grades, including liaising with other special and mainstream schools. Leaders report that staff have been flexible and encouraging in supporting pupils to manage the workload and assessment regime as part of this process. However, several leaders note the challenges of the centre determined grades process, and additional pressure it has placed on staff.

In a few PRUs, leaders report how they have had to amend the accreditation options available to pupils because of the lack of access to external providers. In these cases, leaders describe how qualifications are now delivered on site with minimal disruption or modifications to buildings. For example, in one PRU, photography and media studies have been introduced along with the Welsh Baccalaureate to provide pupils with viable qualification pathways.

Destinations for older pupils and transition

Many leaders continue to express concerns about the disruption to arrangements to support the smooth and effective transition of older pupils into further education and other destinations. Headteachers report that they continue to work with providers to secure appropriate onward destinations for pupils. However, pupils have missed out on the vital experiences that pupils would ordinarily have had to familiarise themselves with travel, people, courses, and buildings. Leaders are concerned that overall, there is no clear national picture on whether transitions for older pupils into further education and other providers for summer 2020 have proved successful and whether those pupils remain suitably engaged with them.

Several leaders note for dual-registered pupils, the PRU has continued throughout the pandemic to be the sole education provider for these pupils. In addition, the pandemic has restricted opportunities for the reintegration of pupils back into mainstream schools. Leaders report particular concerns for older key stage 3 pupils whose chances of reintegration to full time mainstream school diminish without regular exposure to these experiences.

Curriculum for Wales

Most leaders confirm that the philosophy, principles and four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales is well matched to the curriculum approach taken by schools and PRUs in meeting the needs of their pupils. However, many confirm progress in its implementation is at various stages of development.

Many leaders continue to refer explicitly to the concept of person-centred planning as a critical component of their curriculum model. They note the correlation between the person-centred planning approach and the principles of the curriculum and refer to the influence that this is having on their curriculum planning. As a result, a minority of leaders describe how they are reviewing the curriculum to ensure this facilitates more clearly the progression of pupils' skills for life after school.

In a few schools and PRUs, leaders confirm the setting has already aligned its curriculum with the Areas of Learning Experience (AOLEs), staff are organised within AOLE teams, and are starting to track progress against the progression steps.

In **Carmarthenshire Secondary Teaching and Learning Centre**, the headteacher explained the PRU has been working for some time to embed aspects of the Curriculum for Wales across its schemes of work and teaching. It has organised its curriculum and leadership responsibilities to align with AOLEs and to incorporate the four core purposes across teacher planning. The headteacher welcomes the opportunities for thematic planning as these represent a natural progression from the approach the PRU has always taken.

A few headteachers have noted that their ability to deliver an appropriate curriculum is likely to be compromised if plans to increase the number of pupils in their schools goes ahead. Leaders in these schools report that valuable spaces currently used for teaching across the curriculum as well as the school library, the gym and other important areas are likely to be sacrificed to make space for new pupils.

A few headteachers report that planning for Curriculum for Wales has not been a priority during this period. Despite this, they are confident that this will not affect their overall plans and that they are still well placed to implement the reforms.

Provision and therapy

Statutory processes

Leaders across both sectors confirm that statutory processes and annual reviews are continuing to take place within required timeframes.

Annual reviews continue to take place largely online. However, a few leaders express concerns that annual reviews undertaken remotely do not support the same person-centred approaches and benefits as face-to-face meetings. They note that pupils find it difficult to engage online in the same way as they would in a face-to-face review.

Most leaders of special schools confirm that regular multi-disciplinary collaboration between representatives from the school, education welfare services, social care and health services continues to provide support for pupils' identified needs. Overall, leaders are confident that this approach has resulted in a co-ordinated provision for pupils and their families.



Provision of therapy

During the spring term, schools continued to support pupils and their families at home to access therapeutic support both remotely and face-to-face, for example, by visits to the school or from school staff to the home. Overall, leaders report that this support has been greatly appreciated by families. School staff provided parents and carers with advice and practical support on a wide range of therapeutic issues. These activities included taking pupils on walks and engaging pupils in music and art activities. Another special school routinely uploaded therapeutic activities for families to access at home, including sessions by the school's music therapist.

Since Easter, leaders across both settings confirm that an increasing number of specialist therapeutic services have resumed the provision of face-to-face support on site. These professionals have been supported by access to lateral flow testing for external staff and detailed risk assessments. In around half of PRUs, leaders report that agencies such as the Youth Justice Team, school counselling, play therapy and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) have returned to the PRU and are now working face-to-face with pupils.

At Heronsbridge School all on-site face-to-face therapy sessions have been available to all pupils since the start of the summer term, including those who continue to shield. The school provides an outside base room for parents to bring their child to and thus avoid having to enter the school building if they need to access therapy services.

Many leaders report that agencies that have not been able to attend sites in person are continuing to support pupils and schools remotely. For example, at one special school, the occupational therapist and physiotherapist employed by the regional health board continues to support pupils online and by telephone. At another special school, the school's pet therapist uploads interactive videos to stimulate and motivate pupils. In addition, many leaders describe how therapists have been proactive in contacting parents to suggest therapeutic activities to support pupils during the spring and summer term. A few leaders note that parents and carers have benefitted from this direct support from therapists by developing their own understanding of how to support their child's needs.

A few leaders across both sectors are frustrated by inconsistent approaches to on-site support and therapy across different specialist services and in different local authorities. In around half of PRUs, leaders confirm that support from counsellors, CAMHS and the Youth Service and Youth Justice teams was continuing to take place online.

In a few cases, leaders of PRUs report how this frustration and difficulties accessing services has led them to strengthen their own provision in this area. For example, a few PRUs have strengthened their own wellbeing offer including provision for mindfulness, sleep therapy and trauma-informed therapy provided by the PRU's own staff. In one PRU, leaders have contracted a consultant educational psychologist to pilot a programme of individual therapeutic interventions with their pupils.

Many leaders note that therapeutic provision such as hydrotherapy and rebound therapy remains restricted at most schools due to health and safety guidance. A few leaders now report they are beginning to reopen such provision, subject to stringent risk assessments and careful review.

Professional learning

Many leaders report they have prioritised the development of staff's skills to support the immediate physical, mental health and social and emotional needs of pupils as they returned to school following the most recent lockdown. In a minority of cases, leaders report how this training has also helped to strengthen staff's own emotional resilience.

In a few cases, leaders confirm that this emphasis reflects the setting's longer-term development priorities. For example, in a few cases, leaders note how staff have received useful training by external therapists. They describe how this learning has helped to upskill key staff and improved the co-ordination of support across the setting. In turn, this has enabled the setting to compensate for difficulties in pupils' access to therapeutic and specialised support they receive from external providers, now and in the future.

In addition, in many schools and PRUs, leaders describe how professional learning has supported staff to extend their understanding of teaching strategies to support pupils' return to school, particularly where the school has reviewed its approaches to the curriculum during the pandemic. At Ysgol Rhydygors, for example, recent professional learning has focused on enquiry-based learning, developing play skills and outdoor learning.

In contrast to our earlier reports, many leaders across both sectors emphasise that they have had more opportunity recently to focus on professional learning to support the wider strategic priorities identified their development plans.

At **Ysgol Pen Coch**, the school's recent professional learning programme has focussed on identified priorities within the school's strategic improvement plan. These priorities include the school's ambition to become an accredited provider for autistic pupils and developing pupils' sensory profiles. It has also addressed the school's specialist curriculum development in the context of the Curriculum for Wales. Professional learning packages have been offered to staff in a wide range of areas, both on site and online, based on staff's self-evaluation against teacher and learning support assistants' professional standards. These include topics such as IDP development, mental and emotional health, mandatory safeguarding modules, behaviour management, signing and health and safety.

At **Conwy Education Centre**, leaders have prioritised a professional learning programme to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The recent focus for professional learning and staff collaboration has included the impact of teaching assistants, metacognition, and differentiation. The headteacher noted that increased opportunities to develop staff's professional learning during the days that they did not attend the PRU site have been particularly beneficial.

Nearly all leaders confirm that professional learning opportunities have continued to support the school's preparation for ALN reform and the Curriculum for Wales. Many leaders across both sectors described how staff have continued to develop school approaches to person-centred practice, individual development plans and one-page

profiles, for example. Similarly, across both sectors, leaders confirm staff are continuing to develop curriculum planning and assessment in advance of curriculum reform. At one special school, for example, the school has received a grant from the regional consortium to collaborate with other schools in a peer-to-peer review project looking at assessment strategies for the new curriculum. This has included looking at personalised assessments, the use of IDP targets and an online commercial assessment framework.

At **Brynlliwarch Hall School**, the headteacher noted that professional learning groups had been working across the school on a QR code enquiry project, how to provide better feedback online, how to scrutinise and evaluate the quality of work stored online and how to use surveys with pupils to help them evaluate their perceptions of themselves as learners. The headteacher noted how the rapid development of online training had enabled staff to access this at a time that was convenient to them with less travel and general disruption.

Leadership

Nearly all leaders confirm the pressures they have faced during this period in endeavouring to meet the considerable and evolving day-to-day operational challenges. Many leaders testify to the commitment, flexibility and resilience shown by their staff throughout this period. In many cases, this has led to an increase in team and community spirit, with many leaders noting that relationships have strengthened over the year. In the words of one leader, 'random acts of kindness have become the norm.'

Many leaders in both sectors confirm that the major challenges they have faced this year are linked to the need to ensure pupil and staff safety while providing a model of on-site, distance and blended learning that meets the wide range of pupils' needs that attend special schools and PRUs. In addition, many leaders refer to pressure caused by the constant need to adjust provision due to pupils and staff having to self-isolate. They also refer to the overwhelming amount of guidance leaders have had to process at very short notice and the frustration caused when this does not always cover the specific circumstances faced in PRUs and special schools.

Despite these challenges, many leaders describe in detail how they have continued to prepare their schools and PRUs for ALN and curriculum reform during this time. Generally, most leaders report that they welcome the individualised approaches of the ALN reforms. They confirm they are well placed in terms of developing IDPs and one-page profiles, and that person-centred planning is well established across their provision, including in annual review processes.

Many leaders testify to the strong support they have received from the local authority and regional consortium in preparing for ALN reform. However, a few leaders express disappointment that this support is directed largely at mainstream schools and does not always focus well enough on developing relevant targets for pupils within the specialist sector. In addition, at the time of these engagement calls, a few leaders of PRUs expressed concerns at the ongoing lack of clarity regarding the question of short-term placements and in particular, whether the mainstream school, PRU or local authority should be responsible for maintaining the IDP and resourcing the additional learning provision identified within it.

In addition to addressing national reform priorities, many leaders describe how they have continued with improvements specific to their own context to support the long-term development of the school or PRU. A few leaders note that it is becoming easier to do this now that pupils and staff are back in school. In a few cases, the scale of change and development that has taken place during this period has been considerable.

At **Maes Derw PRU**, staff and pupils from the three sites that had made up the former Swansea PRU moved to a new purpose-built building in January 2021. The new building has been carefully designed to cater specifically for the various needs of pupils who attend the PRU. The headteacher has worked closely with the local authority throughout the pandemic to ensure the building offers flexibility and security for the different cohorts of pupils who attend the PRU. As well as spacious class teaching areas, there are additional specialist subject based areas and two halls which are also used for lunchtimes. Each of the three sections of the school have access to their own sensory areas, equipped according to the needs and ages of the pupils. Each area has designated spaces suitable for counselling or wellbeing sessions, as well as a number of small intervention areas for additional literacy or numeracy work.

Monitoring provision and quality assurance

Most leaders in both sectors describe approaches to monitor the level of pupil engagement for pupils learning at home as part of the school's provision for distance or blended learning. In addition, a few leaders outline systems for monitoring the quality of teaching and assessment of distance and blended learning, as well as pupils' progress in learning.

At the **Tai Education Centre**, the headteacher described how the PRU's leaders monitored online teaching daily during the first lockdown, identifying ways in which teaching could support pupils' online learning more effectively. In response, staff training took place on different tools to improve the quality of online interaction. Further training took place during the spring and summer terms to reduce variability in the quality of online teaching. For example, training has taken place on aspects such as ensuring activities and resources are well matched to pupils' abilities and the clarity of instruction.

Following the return of all pupils to on-site education, many leaders describe how they have adapted processes for monitoring the quality of teaching and learning to take account of infection control measures. This includes regular discussions with staff, reviewing planning and visiting online lessons.

At **Ysgol Tir Morfa**, the school's processes of monitoring teaching and learning have evolved to respond to COVID-19 requirements. Senior leaders have undertaken learning walks focusing on pupils' IEP targets without entering class bubbles. Teaching and learning observations have also been completed by observing practice on video. This process included teacher accounts and evaluations of their practice and the outcomes for their pupils. Teaching assistants have also been observing, reporting on pupils' engagement in lessons.

Collaboration and partnership working

Most leaders of special schools and PRUs emphasise the value of collaboration and partnership working during this period. Leaders refer specifically to the beneficial support they have received from regular meetings of professional networks such as the South and North Wales associations of special school headteachers and the ADEW (Association of Directors of Education Wales) PRU headteachers network.

In addition, despite the limitations on staff visiting other schools, a few leaders of special schools described how their staff have worked remotely with the staff from other schools to share learning and trial new approaches.

At **Brynlliwarch Hall School**, the headteacher described the growing collaboration between his own school and another special school, where staff across the schools were working together to develop a new reporting template based on the AOLEs and to share good practice in terms of blended learning. Similarly, staff from **Ysgol Tir Morfa** have been collaborating with other schools within the consortium to develop a bank of shared resources to support blended learning approaches and teaching pupils with autism.

Most leaders across both sectors expressed their appreciation for the support they had received from colleagues within the local authority throughout the period of the pandemic, both in terms of the practical advice and guidance they have received as well as personal support from senior officers within the authority. Many spoke of how working relationships with local authority officers had continued to strengthen during this period. Many spoke of how the local authority has held regular meetings to share information and allow headteachers to raise questions.

A few leaders of schools and PRUs refer to the beneficial support they have received from regional consortium challenge advisers particularly where these officers had strong knowledge and understanding of the specialist needs of pupils attending the school or PRU.

In a minority of schools, leaders emphasise the highly supportive role played by the governing body throughout the pandemic.

At **Trinity Fields School**, the chair of governors has met weekly with representatives of the professional associations to discuss relevant health and safety measures and any feedback from consultation with members. At **Ysgol Pen Coch**, school governors have continued in their role as a critical friend to the school, monitoring the school's blended learning provision by looking at pupils' work uploaded to the online learning app.