



June 2021

Engagement work

Non-maintained sector update

Summer term 2021

This report summarises the findings from engagement phone calls made to 161 non-maintained settings between mid-February 2021 and May 2021 and visits to 8 settings in the summer term. It is based on the information discussed during phone calls and on visits with setting leaders and staff. This report builds on the information we presented in the [Non-maintained sector update – spring 2021](#). The focus for each discussion was the wellbeing of children and staff, how settings supported learning and re-established provision following lockdown, and leadership and management throughout the pandemic. Proportions relate to the sample of settings with which we have had contact in this reporting period.

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Main findings

Wellbeing of children and staff

Most settings told us that children who were absent from the setting through lockdowns returned happy and excited to see their friends and staff.

Leaders reported that the impact of the pandemic on children has varied widely. In some cases, leaders felt that children had benefited from time at home and returned more confident, inquisitive and happy to learn. A majority of settings noted the adverse effects of being at home during lockdowns on the wellbeing of a minority of children.

Throughout Wales, different factors have had an adverse impact on staff wellbeing. During the spring term, many leaders reported the challenges of keeping up with changes to guidance, making changes to routines as well as managing furlough and staffing issues. During the summer term, leaders told us that staff wellbeing has generally improved. However, Early years advisory teachers and umbrella organisations told us that many leaders and practitioners are concerned about the added pressure in preparing for the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (ALNET) Act and Curriculum for Wales.



Re-establishing provision

A minority of settings did not reopen in January for a variety of reasons, including the high incidence of COVID-19 cases in their area and members of staff self-isolating or testing positive for the virus.

In a few instances, this was a direct result of schools being closed as settings often shared the same building or were located elsewhere on the school site. However, most settings had reopened fully by the second half of the spring term with a few remaining open throughout the spring lockdown.

In general, most settings reported that children's attendance returned to normal during the second half of the spring term.

Nearly all settings have continued to operate strict infection control and protective measures in accordance with national and local guidance. A majority of settings have slowly reintroduced equipment and furnishings during the second half of the spring term.



Nearly all settings have continued to operate strict infection control and protective measures in accordance with national and local guidance. A majority of settings have slowly reintroduced equipment and furnishings during the second half of the spring term. However, the overall situation continues to vary widely within and across local authorities and there has generally not been a strong focus on pedagogical development in settings during the past year.

In a majority of settings, leaders have often used grant funding to invest in equipment to clean the premises and resources thoroughly.

In most settings, the 'snack time' provision continues to be more adult led, which limits the role of the children in serving food and drinks. However, leaders in a minority of settings report that children are beginning to take more responsibility during these sessions, for example by cutting up their own fruit or buttering their toast.

Many practitioners have continued to base activities around the children's interests and ideas and use the outdoor areas more than they did previously. Following the changes to national guidelines during the first half of the summer term, a few practitioners have started taking children on visits to the local area. However, only a very few settings have welcomed visitors into the setting during the summer term.

In most settings, practitioners have continued to observe and record children's progress appropriately to plan the next steps in their learning and to share progress with parents. Increasingly, practitioners have made use of computer software and applications to record and share information with parents and carers in the absence of face-to-face meetings.

In general, most leaders are pleased with the support they have continued to receive from their local education authorities. Although in many cases Early Years Advisory Teachers have not resumed face to face visits to settings, they have engaged with leaders regularly by using virtual technology or telephone. Early Years Advisory Teachers told us that working virtually has sometimes made it difficult for them to identify the needs of practitioners, particularly in relation to the ALNET Act and Curriculum for Wales.

Nearly all settings who are affiliated with an umbrella organisation tell us that they have found their support beneficial.

In settings where many of the children speak Welsh at home, leaders tell us that there has been little or no difference to children's language skills. In Welsh-medium settings, where very few children speak Welsh at home, nearly all settings reported that with use of immersion techniques, songs, rhymes and repetition of sentences during activities, nearly all children have regained their confidence to speak in Welsh and are making steady progress in learning the language.

Throughout the pandemic, nearly all settings have enhanced and developed ways of communicating with parents and other stakeholders, including using messaging applications, email and by social media. This has helped settings share messages and information effectively.

During the spring lockdown, leaders reported a decrease in the number of children accessing out of school clubs or wraparound provision. For example, parents no longer required additional hours if their child was not accessing nursery provision in school. This had a negative financial impact on settings. Since schools have reopened, many settings have restarted their wraparound provision.

Leadership

Throughout the pandemic, leaders have worked diligently to ensure that their settings have remained safe for their children and staff. In general, most feel that the advice and guidance they have received from the Welsh Government, the local authority and umbrella organisations has enabled them to achieve this.

In addition, most have benefited from timely advice from their Early Years Advisory Teachers, especially in supporting them to provide continuity in learning during the lockdown periods and re-establishing provision following temporary closures.

Nearly all leaders have reported that managing the financial impact of the pandemic on their settings is challenging. Many have experienced considerable loss of revenue due to reduced numbers of children attending and/or temporary closure of settings.



However, most leaders have made use of the wide range of extra funding arrangements to support the sustainability of their setting. A few leaders told us that they have found the complexity of allocating grant money appropriately challenging.

Increased costs for Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) over the year also placed a strain on settings' finances. Leaders noted large increases in costs associated with the need to purchase cleaning materials, PPE and other safety equipment to maintain a safe environment for their children and staff.

Most settings decided not to accept college students or apprentices over the pandemic, as leaders were worried about transmission of the virus. As a result, many students have not had the practical experience that they need to complete their training. As a possible consequence of the reduced numbers of qualified practitioners entering the workforce over the past year or so, leaders are now finding it difficult to recruit suitably qualified and experienced people. Leaders of Welsh-medium settings also report that there is a shortage of suitable practitioners to work through the medium of Welsh at present.

Practitioners have accessed a wide range of professional learning activities during the pandemic. However, this provision has varied across local authorities and leaders report that although they have accessed training, there has not always been sufficient time to reflect on its implications and to embed new practices especially in relation to additional learning needs and Curriculum for Wales.

The virtual training offer has meant that staff do not have to travel to training, more staff can be involved, and it has helped practitioners access training at a time that suits them.

Detailed findings

Wellbeing

Children's wellbeing

Most settings told us that children who were absent from the setting through lockdowns returned happy and excited to see their friends and staff. Overall, many children settled well into the daily routines of the setting and adapted to new hygiene procedures. A few settings said that they had observed children replicating these hygiene procedures, such as washing hands and sanitising equipment, in their play in the role play corner. A few settings reported that a minority of children were anxious to return to the setting and it took them longer to settle than usual. Nearly all settings placed a strong emphasis on supporting children's wellbeing through their routines and daily activities.

Cameo – using a book to help children express their feelings

Cylch Meithrin Yr Eglwys Newydd, Cardiff used the book 'The Colour Monster' as a central theme to its activities when children returned to the setting. Practitioners used the story to encourage children to talk about any anxieties and confusion they had due to the pandemic and what was going on in the world around them. Using the story as a prompt they encouraged children to express themselves and their feelings using colours. Practitioners felt that this helped the children's wellbeing and made them more aware of their emotions and better able to express their feelings.

Leaders reported that the impact of the pandemic on children has varied widely from one child to another. In some cases, leaders felt that children had benefited from time at home and returned more confident, inquisitive and happy to learn. A majority of settings noted the adverse effects of being at home during lockdowns on the wellbeing of a minority of children. These settings told us that children often found socialising with their peers, sharing resources and concentrating on tasks more difficult. Children are more reliant on adults to do things for them than prior to lockdown, such as putting on coats and requiring assistance with toileting. A minority of settings also told us that children's behaviour has declined with children struggling to adhere to boundaries.

A minority of settings noticed there has been an increase in the number of children with speech and language difficulties with a greater number of referrals made for support. For a few children, settings are finding that the speech and language difficulties are adding to behaviour issues, particularly when children are frustrated about not being able to communicate their feelings successfully.

Staff wellbeing

During the second half of the spring term, leaders told us about their continued focus on supporting members of staff and their wellbeing. Throughout Wales, different factors have had an adverse impact on staff wellbeing, for example the number of

cases in a local area, personal circumstances relating to COVID-19 and staff perception of how well the community is adhering to Welsh Government regulations. In many settings, leaders tell us that staff have been anxious to return to work. In a minority of settings, leaders reported staff morale was low during the spring term. As in our previous report, a few leaders said that staff found it difficult to justify why schools were closed but settings remained open to all children. Leaders worked hard to support staff through this period with many using their supervision and appraisal processes to provide opportunities for staff to discuss their concerns and difficulties.

Cameo – supporting staff wellbeing

Little Inspirations that run several settings in Rhondda Cynon Taff, set up ‘time to talk’ meetings across their nurseries. This provided staff with the opportunity to talk to each other, share concerns and to provide support for each other. Leaders provided all staff with a wellbeing bag which included items to encourage them to ‘take a break’ such as biscuits, a teabag, and a tea light. The bag also included helpful numbers that signposted staff to wellbeing support if needed.

During the spring term, many leaders reported the challenges of keeping up with changes to guidance, making changes to routines as well as managing furlough and staffing issues, referring to the negative impact of these on their wellbeing.

During the summer term, leaders told us that staff wellbeing has generally improved. Routines are well established and are no longer as onerous for staff. The access to lateral flow tests and the increase in the number of staff being vaccinated has also helped alleviate concerns for staff. A few settings report that staff have decided not to use the lateral flow tests.

Early years advisory teachers and umbrella organisations told us that many leaders and practitioners are concerned about the added pressure in preparing for the Additional Learning Needs and Educational Tribunal (ALNET) Act and Curriculum for Wales.

Vulnerable children

Around half of settings we contacted, told us that they have vulnerable children attending their settings. Throughout the pandemic, they have continued to work with families and external agencies such as the health visitor and educational psychology to support children. In most instances, this support has taken place virtually, for example in the case of speech and language therapy. In a very few examples, external agencies, such as educational psychologists, have been attending settings to observe children. Many leaders feel that the virtual support has not been as effective as the face-to-face support normally offered. A few leaders have reported that parents are not always as willing to engage with virtual speech and language therapy. This has had a detrimental impact on children’s progress.

A majority of settings have seen an increase in the number of children who are experiencing speech and language delay. Many have used diagnostic assessment tools to assess children’s specific skills and to plan appropriately. However, for more

complex needs requiring external support, a minority of settings have found the referrals for extra support taking longer than usual.

Most settings told us that they have continued to stay in close contact with parents and to offer help and support where they can, for example by arranging food parcels for families.

Cameo – support for families

Sparkles Day Nursery, Wrexham telephoned parents whose children were not attending during lockdown once a week to 'check in' on children's and parents' wellbeing. This included offering a wide range of advice and support to parents, such as how to access food parcels and how to obtain tenancy and debt advice. They signposted families to support from local supermarkets who were supplying food, nappies and sun cream free of charge. They provided activity packs for children to complete, asking parents to collect these from the setting on an appointment system. The setting also offered 'Holiday Hunger Club' meals for families in need. As the nursery was cooking meals anyway, they used surplus food to provide a few meals each day or made up a packed lunch for a family when needed.

Safeguarding

Most settings reported that they have not seen an increase in safeguarding referrals during the pandemic. In most settings where there are ongoing safeguarding cases or new referrals, leaders told us that they worked closely with social services on a remote basis to support children and their families. However, a very few leaders report that they have found it difficult to get updates on referrals made.

Re-establishing provision

Reopening and attendance

As we referred to in our previous report in March 2021, a minority of settings did not reopen in January for a variety of reasons, including the high incidence of COVID-19 cases in their area and members of staff self-isolating or testing positive for the virus. In a few instances, this was a direct result of schools being closed as settings often shared the same building or were located elsewhere on the school site. A very few settings reopened after February half term at a reduced capacity, often delaying the date for new starters especially in areas where there were high rates of COVID-19. However, most settings had reopened fully by the second half of the spring term with a few remaining open throughout the spring lockdown.

In general, most settings reported that children's attendance returned to normal during the second half of the spring term. In a few settings, leaders reported that more children are now attending as changes in families' personal circumstances have created additional demand for childcare. A few settings have altered their operating hours to better serve the needs of their families, which has also increased the numbers of children attending. In addition, a few settings reported that they have

a waiting list of children wishing to attend and the improvements that they have made, for example to the outdoor areas, has added to the demand for places.

Nearly all settings have continued to operate strict infection control and protective measures in accordance with national and local guidance. In these settings, parents are not allowed to enter the premises and are greeted at the door by staff. Nearly all leaders and practitioners continue to group children in bubbles where appropriate, especially in day-care settings where they are cared for in different rooms. In smaller settings, where children receive their care and early education entitlement in the same room, staff and children often form one large bubble. The use of face coverings by staff continues to vary but most wear them when moving around the setting or when meeting parents at the beginning or end of the session. A few settings reported that staff felt that the wearing of face coverings reduced the quality of interactions with the children. Nearly all settings continue with strict hand washing and cleaning regimes to minimise the risk of virus transmission. This has become part of the daily routine for staff and many settings report that staff have become very proficient at ensuring that surfaces and areas are cleaned as much as possible throughout the day. In general, most settings continue to operate a rota for the use of learning equipment and materials, for example books are quarantined for 72 hours before they are used again. In addition, practitioners prepare items such as playdough and sand for individuals or small groups to minimise the risk of transmission of COVID-19. Outdoor equipment is sanitised and wiped down continuously by staff throughout the day.

Cameo – making children aware of why adults use protective equipment to keep everyone safe

Throughout the pandemic, staff in Tudno Playschool, Conwy have used recommended equipment diligently as part of the setting's protective measures protocol. During the preparation of refreshments for snack time, children asked the staff if they could also wear this equipment. The staff used this opportunity to help children understand the importance of wearing protective equipment, as well as breaking down any barriers that wearing of items like face coverings may have presented. Staff now choose one child each day to help them prepare the snacks and lay the table.

A majority of settings have slowly reintroduced equipment and furnishings during the second half of the spring term. In these settings, leaders have often used grant funding to invest in equipment to clean the premises and resources thoroughly, including steam cleaning cushions in the reading corner as well as dressing up costumes in the role play area. Leaders told us that they felt that they needed to begin to reintroduce these areas when it was safe to do so as they are important for the children's learning experience and the development of their skills. In most settings, the 'snack time' provision continues to be more adult led, which limits the role of the children in serving food and drinks. However, leaders in a minority of settings report that children are beginning to resume responsibility during these sessions, for example by cutting up their own fruit or buttering their toast. In these settings, leaders feel that it is important to nurture children's independent and social skills as much as possible during these sessions. The overall situation continues to vary widely within and across local authorities.

Children's activities

Many practitioners have continued to base activities on the children's interests and ideas and use the outdoor areas more than they did previously. Following the changes to national guidelines during the first half of the summer term, a few practitioners have started taking children on visits to the local area, for example buying ingredients from the local shop or visiting the local woodland. However, only a very few settings have welcomed visitors into the setting during the summer term. Most settings believe that the lack of visits and visitors has had a considerable impact on the quality of their provision and the richness of their early education offer.

In most settings, practitioners continue to plan learning experiences that allow children to spend more time outdoors, for example by making good use of their forest area to teach children about nature and to develop other skills. In addition, practitioners in a few settings have adopted strategies for planning learning experiences that are very much 'in the moment' and respond quickly to children's interests. In these settings, practitioners continue to plan learning experiences around half termly themes but make use of special events such as World Bee Day and what they might find in the 'bug garden' to stimulate children's interests. A few settings have resumed singing activities although these are often held outside to reduce the risks of transmission. In general, practitioners have not had enough time to reflect on and develop their own professional practice during this period.

Cameo – making use of the local environment to promote outdoor learning

Due to the limited outdoor space at the village hall in Cylch Meithrin Beddgelert, Gwynedd, the leader and the registered person organised woodland activities for the children on the nearby primary school grounds and the local woodland. They provided a range of stimulating outdoor activities including digging in the muddy area, leaf blowing, navigating across a path of tree stumps as well as exploring and playing in the mud. Since September, and with many new children having started at the setting, the new arrangements have helped provide valuable outdoor learning activities for the children in an authentic environment.

In most settings, practitioners have continued to observe and record children's progress appropriately to plan the next steps in their learning and to share progress with parents. Increasingly, practitioners have made use of computer software and applications to record and share information with parents and carers in the absence of face-to-face meetings. More and more settings have made use of video conferencing technology to arrange virtual parents' evening to discuss the children's progress or to inform new parents about the setting. The continued use of social media has ensured that parents and carers are made aware of the work of the setting and receive important information.

Cameo – using digital equipment to report on children’s progress

Leaders at Plas Gogerddan Nursery, Ceredigion invested in digital software to improve the links with the home and to make record keeping and assessments as transparent and open as possible. The use of the app by all staff has provided parents and carers with up-to-date information about their child’s wellbeing, development and what they have been doing throughout the day. Parents and carers can also record information about the child’s activities at home to share with the staff. This ensures smooth transition between the home and the setting in the absence of face-to-face meetings. It has also aided staff when gathering information to plan the next steps in children’s learning and illustrates their progress to date.

External support

In general, most leaders are pleased with the support they have continued to receive from their local education authorities. Although in many cases Early Years Advisory Teachers have not resumed face to face visits to settings, they have engaged with leaders regularly by using virtual technology or telephone. This includes meetings with groups of local setting leaders which has helped them to share ideas and discuss issues such as the implementation of changes to the guidance from Welsh Government or the local authority. However, Early Years Advisory Teachers told us that working virtually has sometimes made it difficult for them to identify the needs of practitioners, particularly in relation to the ALNET Act and Curriculum for Wales.

Nearly all settings who are affiliated with an umbrella organisation tell us that they have found their support beneficial. They report that they receive useful updates to guidance as well as a range of policies and risk assessments that they can adapt for their own purposes.

Welsh-medium settings

In settings where many of the children speak Welsh at home, leaders tell us that there has been little or no difference to children’s language skills. In Welsh-medium settings, where very few children speak Welsh at home, practitioners found that during the time children were absent from the setting, their Welsh language speaking skills regressed. However, most reported that children still had a reasonable understanding of the language on return to the setting. Nearly all these settings reported that with use of immersion techniques, songs, rhymes and repetition of sentences during activities, nearly all children have regained their confidence to speak in Welsh and are making steady progress in learning the language. A few leaders told us that they are experiencing increased difficulties in recruiting appropriately qualified practitioners who can speak Welsh.

Communication

Throughout the pandemic, nearly all settings have enhanced and developed ways of communicating with parents and other stakeholders, including using messaging applications, email and by social media. This has helped settings share messages and information effectively. For example, most settings report that they now use technology to meet with advisory teachers.

Many settings tell us that they have tried to adapt their face-to-face meetings with parents as best they can under the circumstances. For example, one setting uses an outdoor canopy area to have socially distanced discussions with parents when needed. However, leaders report that they have not been able to build relationships with parents as well as they have previously, especially new parents to the setting. One leader says that they occasionally ask parents to remove their face coverings when collecting their children to ensure that the children are going home with the correct person.

Cameo – open days for parents and children

Staff at Cylch Meithrin Yr Eglwys Newydd, Cardiff were concerned that they were unable to offer any open days for current and prospective parents. To address this, the setting made many films of the setting and its practices and protocols to share with parents. They also filmed everyday activities that took place, such as singing and story time. To enhance the virtual visit and to address the lack of a physical visit to the setting, practitioners set up gazebos in the local park for a week to allow the parents to attend the 'setting' with their children. Practitioners and parents found this a beneficial way of getting to know each other and it provided parents with an opportunity to collect their registration packs. The setting gave children a teddy on a keyring, wearing the setting's T-shirt to help parents to talk about the setting with their child and to prepare them for attending.

Wraparound arrangements

Many settings who offer wraparound arrangements, such as breakfast clubs and lunchtime clubs, have adapted their provision in line with Welsh Government guidance.

During the spring lockdown, leaders reported a decrease in the number of children accessing out of school clubs or wraparound provision. For example, parents no longer required additional hours if their child was not accessing nursery provision in school. This had a negative financial impact on settings.

Since schools have reopened, many settings have restarted their wraparound provision. Leaders have added to their risk assessments to establish appropriate protocols for the drop off and collection of children. For example, all vehicles are sanitised before and after each use, staff wear face coverings and windows are open for ventilation. Most settings also try to keep the children in similar groups or 'bubbles' when they arrive at the settings, although a few have found this to be unmanageable. A minority of settings have limited their wraparound provision to only one school. Leaders report that this has had a negative impact on their financial position.

Many leaders tell us that there is variation in the support provided by schools for practitioners who are dropping off and collecting children. In the best examples, settings and schools have effective communication and arrange bespoke arrangements to assist with the smooth and safe transition of pupils, such as using dedicated areas for settings to drop off and collect children.

Leadership

Throughout the pandemic, leaders have worked diligently to ensure that their settings have remained safe for their children and staff. In general, most feel that the advice and guidance they have received from the Welsh Government, the local authority and umbrella organisations has enabled them to achieve this. Most are extremely grateful for the help they received, although they report that the frequency of changes to the advice and guidance, together with occasional conflicting messages, made it difficult for them to manage at times. In many instances, the increased use of virtual technology has allowed leaders to communicate more effectively with stakeholders as well as with other leaders in their area or local authority. Leaders appreciated having the opportunity to share their concerns and suggestions with colleagues, especially when new guidance or advice was issued, for example when trying to find out how to apply for financial grants or establishing infection control protocols at their setting.

Nearly all leaders have reported that managing the financial impact of the pandemic on their settings is challenging. Many have experienced considerable loss of revenue due to reduced numbers of children attending and/or temporary closure of settings. However, many leaders have made use of the wide range of extra funding arrangements to support the sustainability of their setting. Nearly all told us that the Furlough Scheme and the range of Welsh Government grants that were made available to them during the pandemic, helped them to manage the financial pressures they experienced. Many leaders used the flexibility of the furlough funding to manage their staffing in line with the number of children attending. Leaders also used other grants like the Welsh Government Capital Grant, local authority support grants and funding from national companies and charities to help support the setting as well as making necessary improvements to the premises. A few leaders told us that they have found the complexity of allocating grant money appropriately challenging.

Cameo – using grant funding to make adaptations to the premises during the pandemic

Overton Playcentre, Wrexham used grant funding to provide an outdoor shelter for parents when they were dropping off and collecting their children. They also used this as a space for practitioners to talk to parents at the end of the day as they were unable to meet them indoors. The leader felt that face-to-face interaction with parents was important and they wanted to carry on with normal procedures as much as possible.

Most leaders told us that their fundraising campaigns had been badly affected by the pandemic. Many rely on this income to subsidise their work, especially smaller settings that provide early education entitlement to a small number of children. However, in a few settings, local companies and charities provided financial donations to help support their work. In many cases, leaders purchased outdoor equipment, including canopies, to help support outdoor learning and to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus. In addition, local authorities provided equipment or grants to help leaders establish purposeful outdoor provision and extra space for learning.

The increased costs for Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) over the year also placed a strain on settings' finances. Leaders noted large increases in the cost of cleaning materials, PPE and other safety equipment to maintain a safe environment for their children and staff. Leaders occasionally received direct funding or hygiene products, including PPE, from their local authorities to help with their running costs.

Nearly all settings report that transition arrangements have been greatly affected as visitors and visits were stopped. Leaders had to utilise alternative ways of meeting prospective parents and carers as well as making alternative arrangements for children to familiarise themselves with their new school. Often, leaders, practitioners, teachers, parents and carers made use of virtual technology and videos to facilitate this, for example to experience a virtual tour of the setting or to meet virtually with practitioners or the nursery teacher at the school. More and more settings have used this technology for their termly parents' meeting to inform parents and carers about the progress of their child.

Cameo – transition arrangements

Caban Kingsland, Anglesey has developed strong transition links with the local school. Normally Year 6 pupils visit the children every Friday during the term before they transfer, to read stories and to socialise with them. As the COVID-19 restrictions have prevented this well-established practice from taking place, the pupils at the school have adapted their practice and now send videos of themselves reading stories. This helps the children at the setting to become familiar with the school and some of the pupils that attend there.

Most settings decided not to accept college students or apprentices over the pandemic, as leaders were worried about transmission of the virus. As a result, many students have not had the practical experience that they need to complete their training. However, a few leaders have considered allowing students, advisory teachers and visitors into the setting during the summer term as the rate of transmission of the virus decreases and the number of people being vaccinated increases. As a possible consequence of the reduced numbers of qualified practitioners entering the workforce over the past year or so, leaders are now finding it difficult to recruit suitably qualified and experienced people. Leaders of Welsh-medium settings also report that there is a shortage of suitable practitioners to work through the medium of Welsh at present. As the demand for early education and childcare appears to be increasing again this term, the lack of suitably trained and qualified workers is becoming a concern for leaders. A minority of leaders reported that experienced staff have decided to move to more stable and/or better paid employment. A very few leaders who were themselves studying for higher qualifications, such as NVQ Level 5, encountered issues with presenting evidence for assessment due to the disruption caused by the lockdown periods and the revised practices at their settings.

Professional learning

Practitioners have accessed a wide range of professional learning activities during the pandemic including training on developing outdoor provision, moving towards a new curriculum, the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act and

mental health training. However, this provision has varied across local authorities and leaders report that although they have accessed training, there has not always been sufficient time to reflect on its implications and to embed new practices especially in relation to additional learning needs and Curriculum for Wales.

Nearly all the training opportunities moved to a virtual platform. Nearly all settings say that they have found the virtual training to be more accessible and that they would like to see a more balanced offer of virtual and face-to-face training in future. The virtual training offer has meant that staff do not have to travel to training, more staff can be involved, and it has helped practitioners access training at a time that suits them.