

Dear Dr Caroline Turner,

During the early autumn term, the Welsh Government asked us to undertake a review of local authorities work in supporting their learning communities in schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) during the period from March to October 2020.

This letter outlines the outcome of this work in Powys local authority. The content of the letter is based on virtual meetings with officers, the cabinet lead member for education and a sample of schools and PRUs. We have also considered the supporting documentation provided by the local authority and the feedback from surveys of school/PRU leaders, governors, teachers and support staff, parents and pupils. We have referred to the outcomes of the surveys where relevant, although the surveys were mainly be used to inform the national report which was published on our website on 15 January. Here is a link to that report.

We would like to thank your staff for giving of their time to discuss their work with us and for providing additional information on request.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Meilyr Rowlands".

**Meilyr Rowlands**

**Her Majesty's Chief Inspector**

---

## **The local authority's work to support its schools and the PRU March- August 2020**

---

### **Leadership and collaboration**

Powys local authority was quick to respond to the challenges of COVID-19 and implemented operational changes swiftly to ensure schools, parents/carers and pupils had access to information and support. Senior officers from the Schools and Education Service participated actively with the Chief Executive and Corporate Directors in the local authority's 'Silver Command' group from the beginning of the pandemic.

Local authority officers arranged regular updates for cabinet members. The use of a digital media platform allowed for scheduled meetings to resume earlier than in many other local authorities and these included full council and scrutiny meetings. The regular meetings with cabinet and elected members has further strengthened working relationships and improved the information sharing processes across the local authority.

Powys local authority made good use of the central communications team to share the work that clusters developed during this time with parents/carers and the wider community. Schools and parents told us that they appreciated the clear information and guidance available to them. In particular the swift, personalised responses to individual queries meant leaders and parents felt supported and valued. Local authority officers also held weekly meetings with headteachers, governing bodies and management committees.

The extensive use of a digital media platform has been a positive development which officers consider is likely to change their ways of working in the longer term, especially as the large geographical area of Powys has been a barrier to effective communication and attendance at meetings in the past. Local authority officers worked closely across service areas and with external partners, and school leaders report positively on the greater degree of collaboration and joint working.

In June, in contrast to most local authorities across Wales, Powys schools welcomed pupils back for four weeks rather than three. The additional week was agreed after dialogue with school leaders, governing bodies, council members, and trade unions. In addition to helping pupils re-engage with their learning and reducing the summer holiday the extra week allowed local authority officers to trial and prepare for full re-opening in September. This strengthened the positive working relationships and facilitated preparations for the reopening of all schools and PRUs to all pupils in September.

### **Promoting learning**

The local authority provided guidance to schools and parents in their Continuity of Learning and Distance Learning Plan. Schools were supported to prepare for this new approach to teaching and learning. They were encouraged to consider the

training needs of their staff in order that they could deliver distance learning experiences. Senior challenge advisers shared helpful digests containing advice, guidance and useful links.

In Powys in week one and two of the Continuity of Learning and Distance Learning Plan, the Schools and Education Service was pro-active in providing schools with guidance, facilitating the sharing of good practice and addressing connectivity issues. The local authority established that nearly 900 families did not have a suitable device for learning and over 300 that had no internet access. In response to this, the local authority asked school clusters to identify spare digital equipment which could be repurposed for home use for those learners who did not have access to devices. In addition, the local authority ensured all staff in school had the equipment they needed to deliver distance learning. School leaders in our engagement calls and surveys reflect that the support from Powys' digital learning team for addressing hardware, access and training needs has been outstanding.

### **Cameo: Support from the digital learning team and putting it into practice**

The local authority asked all schools to prepare for the lockdown period by familiarising staff and pupils with Hwb and other ICT tools. In Ysgol Gynradd Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant, staff and pupils were confident in using most of the Hwb tools but other platforms were quite new to them. The local authority provided clear instructions on how to set up a platform for each class group. The headteacher reflects that officers were extremely helpful in ensuring that pupils had access to digital equipment and WiFi access. The cluster group worked effectively to share ICT resources between schools. This school loaned equipment to pupils in other schools, with the technicians at the secondary school changing the set-up of all laptops to meet the needs of the pupils and staff.

All teachers provided tasks through 'Assignments' section of the platform including reading materials and numeracy tasks. They moved to synchronous and asynchronous methods early on in order to keep in touch with pupils. Powys provided useful guidance regarding safeguarding concerns which had earlier prevented schools from undertaking such activities.

In the non-maintained sector, the local authority Early Years Advisory Teachers (EYATs) supported settings via email, telephone, and social and digital learning platforms. Guidance, resources, and examples of distance learning from across the authority were shared with all practitioners. The Athrawon Bro and advisory teachers also provided well-received support materials suitable for first and second Welsh language learners.

At the beginning of June, the local authority established a group of officers, headteachers and teachers to help schools prepare for distance learning. The Teaching and Learning group were responsible for looking at different models of distance learning, sharing practical solutions to issues, and identifying approaches with the most positive impact on learning. The group identified that the best approach included a mixture of online and personalised classroom learning. Local

authority officers worked with the school improvement consortium (ERW) to share knowledge and good practice regarding approaches to distance learning. The group produced models, which could be adapted to reflect the context of each individual school. The group reported to senior officers in the Education Cell Group twice per week and shared information on distance learning with schools weekly.

Clusters of schools met at least weekly, with the cluster leader of learning meeting fortnightly with the Interim Chief Education Officer and senior challenge advisers to discuss progress, issues and to share practice and resources. The frequency of meetings developed consistency and strengthened the working relationships. Some schools embraced the change to distance learning with confidence whilst others needed further training and support. The local authority produced examples of remote and digital learning and shared these with schools on a weekly basis. The focus was on approaches to digital learning, resources, and networks.

### **Supporting vulnerable learners.**

The themes of 'Wellbeing', 'Connectivity', 'Learning and learners' and 'Remote teaching and Provision' in the local authority Continuity of Learning and Distance Learning Plan were mirrored in the operational Distance Learning Plan. The local authority put in place a fortnightly publication of actions to support schools to implement the plan.

The local authority established an emotional health and wellbeing work-stream comprising colleagues from education, the educational psychology team, youth services, health, children's services and from commissioned services, such as counselling organisations. The work was informed by the 'Powys Emotional Health and Wellbeing Strategy', which was circulated to all schools and early years' settings in March 2020. The main purpose of the work-stream was for colleagues to share concerns, identify ever-changing areas of need and to provide support, guidance, and training. The work-stream co-ordinated closely with the emergency childcare hubs to provide a 'team around the hub' and with challenge advisers to share resources in support of the continuity of learning. Weekly Emotional Health meetings were in place between services where the level and type of service being offered to children and young people was shared and any gaps and cross-working opportunities identified and actioned.

The local authority's provision for childcare hubs has been agile and responsive to the changing circumstances. Initially 15 schools across the county were established to provide Emergency Childcare Hubs (ECHs) and Emergency Childcare Specialist Hubs (ECSHs). As time progressed an increasing number of vulnerable learners attended hubs due in part to the focused work between Education and Children's Services to promote pupil attendance at hubs. As a result, an additional hub was opened in Brecon to support the increase in numbers.

Local authority officers held daily virtual meetings with leaders of all the hubs to provide support and guidance and amend practice where necessary. Officers also held weekly multi-agency meetings with social services, health, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to a co-ordinated approach to supporting vulnerable learners. Numbers attending the hubs increased over time

partly because the joint work between schools and Children's Services helped to ensure that learners who were more vulnerable accessed the hubs.

The Youth Intervention Service (YIS) were in contact with pastoral and safeguarding leads in secondary schools to identify which additional young people could benefit from the extra support available from their service. The YIS and Detached Youth Work Team worked together with schools to identify those young people in Year 11 who would struggle to make a successful transition into employment, education or training, including those for which the current circumstances had a negative impact on their transition plans. The Detached Youth Work team and partners including Careers Wales offered support to these young people. In our phone calls, many headteachers singled out the Youth Intervention Service for praise. They welcomed the opening up of provision to all who needed it without a lengthy referral process.

### **Cameo: Effective work of the local authority youth service**

The Youth Intervention Service (YIS) continued to deliver one-to-one support to some of the most vulnerable young people in Powys who were open to the service. These young people had a variety of support needs, some of which were exacerbated due to the impact of schools closing. The individually tailored support was initially offered by phone and digitally and was reviewed regularly by the team and managers, adapting to changes in young people's emotional health as the lockdown period continued. Support was also offered to the parents of young people open to YIS, to help them to deal with issues around behaviour, boundaries, loss of routine and the effect of being in closer proximity as a family. The Detached Youth Work Team also continued to offer one-to-one support to the vulnerable young people aged 16-25, including learners in post-16 education. The team also worked with Housing to offer essential support to the increasing number of young people presenting as homeless during this time.

As a result of increased anxiety and a range of other mental health issues in children and young people, demand for counselling significantly increased. The local authority reported in June 2020 that they had 190 active cases, with an increase of 60 referrals during the lockdown period. Of the 60 new referrals, 30 were from Year 6 pupils, which would usually be the annual total. The local authority used additional funds from Welsh Government to reduce the waiting list for counselling. The local authority also accessed grant funding to implement play therapy and counselling support for younger pupils in early years' settings and schools. The pre-school team work closely with Health Visitors and Flying Start providers to support children and families. This approach was part of the 'team around the cluster' approach.

In addition, the local authority rolled out a training programme to all school staff on trauma-informed approaches. They have highlighted pupil's mental health and wellbeing as a concern from discussions with school leaders. The trauma-informed approach will continue during the autumn term.

The local authority developed bespoke safeguarding policies for both Emergency Childcare Hubs (ECHs) and Emergency Childcare Specialist Hubs (ECSHs). Children's Services and the Schools and Education Service were aware of the learners who were children looked after (CLA) and those who were on the child

protection register. Each hub was provided with the list of these children who attended their hub's catchment. This was checked and updated on a weekly basis by the Schools and Education Service and re-distributed to hub leaders.

The local authority focused on the additional engagement of vulnerable learners especially pupils on the child protection register. The Schools and Education Service worked closely with Children's Services and health professionals to identify vulnerable learners, and to ensure that these learners were tracked and supported. In addition, officers identified and supported those learners from their rolls who they considered vulnerable, but who did not fall within the official definition given by Welsh Government.

By the middle of April, the PRU provisions were opened to pupils as the staff and local authority officers recognised that many of the PRU pupils experienced difficulty engaging with special school hubs.

---

## **The local authority's work to support its schools and the PRU from September**

---

### **Leadership and collaboration**

Since September, local authority leaders have continued to reflect and refine their focus and activities to support schools and PRUs. They have been able to establish clear protocols and procedures that can be put into place quickly when needed, for example when a positive case of COVID-19 is identified. School leaders report they are confident about the support they receive from the local authority for either routine matters or urgent cases such as when a pupil or member of staff reports a positive case of COVID-19. Services across the authority work closely together and schools consider there to be a coherent response to any query or issue.

Leaders have endeavoured to ensure regular, timely and clear communication with schools, partners and stakeholders. School leaders value the regular contact with the interim Chief Education Officer and other officers. They express the view that officers in the local authority, particularly the interim Chief Education Officer, have made it a priority to support their wellbeing and ensure they are not managing difficult situations alone.

Effective channels of communication have been put in place in order to disseminate information quickly along with the thinking behind any decisions. Headteachers are involved in decision-making groups regarding all aspects of the local authority's responses. The feedback from all stakeholders is considered very carefully and headteachers are positive about how agile and responsive the local authority and its officers has been throughout the pandemic.

The local authority has adapted quickly to using online meeting tools and digital communications and understands the advantages they bring. They reflect regularly on how beneficial changes they have made in response to the pandemic will become established in practice going forward. A good example of this is how challenge

advisers have been reallocated to work across clusters of schools. The benefits of this were recognised quickly during hub working in the summer term and this has become an established and well-regarded way of working.

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, officers and elected members have continued to address the recommendations from the most recent inspection report. For example, the local authority has recently published details of its 10-year Strategy for Transforming Education in Powys. As far as possible, it has maintained the schedule in its post-inspection action plan and has recognised the benefits of the enhanced communication and trust developed through cluster and hub working since March 2020.

### **Promoting learning**

Local authority officers in Powys continue to gather and share beneficial ideas to promote learning in their schools and PRUs during the autumn term. They do this through regular online authority-wide meetings, digital newsletters and cluster meetings that are attended by challenge advisers. Officers have regularly distributed helpful Powys specific guidance on a range of useful learning topics, for example how to adapt assessment when work is online. The guidance includes links to further reading and research associated with each topic to prompt dialogue and discussion in cluster meetings.

In our conversations with schools, headteachers were very positive and grateful for the ideas and resources that challenge advisers are sharing. They tell us that their challenge advisers have helped them to filter the large volume of information that was being shared by a range of partners, and to decide on the most relevant approaches for their schools. In particular, they value the stronger links and joint working across clusters that began to flourish when the hubs were established at the start of the pandemic. Challenge advisers have nurtured a focus on improved relationships between sectors, curriculum continuity and shared pedagogical approaches.

Challenge advisers are encouraging schools to explore the pedagogical principles outlined in Successful Futures and adopted for a Curriculum for Wales and focus on one or two at a time to enrich learning. They are also prompting school leaders to adopt the 'Schools as Learning Organisations' tools for self-evaluation and to pinpoint areas for development. Although challenge advisers are mindful of the extra challenges posed to school leaders by the ongoing pandemic, they have continued to support schools to consider carefully priorities for improvement and to develop their school development plans. Headteachers we spoke to felt that the authority had managed this balance well and agreed it was important to maintain a focus on school improvement as well as managing urgent issues linked to COVID-19.

To support schools who have had to manage COVID-19 cases and pupils and staff self-isolating, officers also communicate practical advice on managing distance learning. This compliments the guidance shared by ERW. Officers have shared questions for governing bodies to use to help them understand new digital ways of



working. The local authority has also continued to support schools to manage provision of services and access to the internet, including providing laptops for all Year 12 pupils. Although there is some confusion in a few schools about the difference between blended learning and distance learning, headteachers tell us that the support from the digital learning teams has been extremely helpful. Advice and guidance from the local authority has enabled teachers to try new approaches with confidence, including live streaming of lessons. This guidance has also enabled a number of schools to monitor access and engagement with the available digital tools and hold follow up conversations with learners who are self-isolating.

**Cameo: Putting professional learning into practice and monitoring engagement with distance learning during the firebreak**

In Ysgol Calon Cymru, at the beginning of the pandemic both learners and teachers were provided with laptops and the means to access the internet where necessary by the local authority. An intensive period of professional learning was put in place, and as result the digital skills of teachers improved significantly. During the firebreak in November, the school was able to provide a full online timetable with over 60% of lessons being live streamed for pupils in Year 9 and above. As a result of the earlier professional learning, the school was able to analyse pupils' access and engagement with digital tools promptly and pastoral staff were able to contact pupils swiftly if they did not log on to learning and follow up on any issues arising.

Officers engaged with all post-16 learners through the Powys Learning Pathways website during the summer holidays. This helped learners to feel supported and engaged after a period of disruption to their learning. At the same time, local authority officers made helpful bridging units available to learners about to start post-16 courses. These units, together with the contact, have helped learners transition to their post-16 studies. At present, pupils have to remain at their own school for all learning as it is not possible to visit other campuses, even if their subject teachers are based elsewhere. Supported by officers in the local authority, subject teachers have live streamed lessons so that all pupils can access them. As the local authority had already used remote learning through their 'e-sgol' programme, the transition to online learning was comparatively seamless and schools and learners are familiar with how to make the best use of it.

For the most part, the local authority and ERW have aligned their strategic plans to provide a programme of professional learning opportunities for schools and PRUs. This has been particularly successful regarding training for online and digital learning. Many schools and PRUs feel that these opportunities are easy to access online and less teaching time is lost for training. Local authority network meetings for senior leaders are very much valued by schools. Generally, subject leaders appreciate opportunities to meet but a few express the view that there is too much duplication when both the local authority and ERW run meetings. Support for pupils'



Welsh language skills has been particularly valuable to schools. Local authority officers in the early years team have provided helpful guidance to non-maintained settings and schools. The material outlines how to develop pupils' skills in the outdoor learning environment as well as how to organise classroom practice to meet foundation phase principles.

The local authority has provided detailed guidance for schools and PRUs to support their use of the 'Recruit, recover, raise standards: the accelerating learning programme' grant funding. This includes a consideration of baseline assessment to ensure learners' needs are identified and addressed, and links to how to identify evidence-informed practice. Challenge advisers have worked alongside senior leaders to plan schools' approaches and have ensured the plans build in opportunities for monitoring and evaluation. The local authority has also issued helpful guidance for governing bodies on how to evaluate schools' use of the grant funding.

### **Supporting vulnerable learners**

The local authority continues to place the wellbeing of their pupils at the centre of their re-establishing learning strategies since schools reopened fully this term. The establishment of the 'Team around the hub' approach during the lockdown period helped to ensure that learners received the appropriate support when they needed it most. This has evolved further to encompass a localised support network based on clusters of schools across the local authority. The 'Team around the cluster' approach makes good use of the positive working relationships between local authority education officers and challenge advisers, with that of other partners such as social services, healthcare services and counselling providers. The use of virtual meetings has meant that key personnel are more readily available to discuss individual needs of vulnerable pupils and provide bespoke advice when required. Such regular meetings have also provided a better understanding of the issues affecting Powys as a whole, for example the increase in pupils eligible for free school meals as a result of increasing unemployment. In addition, most school leaders identified that the 'team around the cluster' approach allowed them to access specialist support far easier than before. The improved lines of communication has helped them to better understand which specialist services are available to support vulnerable learners and whom they need to contact to access them.

Headteachers appreciate the work of Education Welfare Officers (EWO) and describe their dedication in supporting vulnerable learners again since September. They, along with the Educational Psychologists Team, have maintained contact with children looked after (CLA), those on the child protection register and adopted children, in order to ensure that their needs are being met. In addition, headteachers received beneficial support from Powys' behavioural support team who worked alongside other professionals such as EWOs to support learners who found it difficult to return to school. In such cases, beneficial plans were put in place to support individual learners and their families and to help reassure them that it was safe to

return, often through a phased return approach. For example, an educational psychologist engaged proactively with a school and the family of a child who was fearful about returning to school, providing useful advice and coping strategies to help the child re-engage successfully with their learning.

**Cameo: Beneficial support to help welcome pupils back to school from the educational psychology team**

The local authority educational psychology team facilitate a network to support schools and continued to do so during lockdown. They have prioritised topics to avoid schools being overwhelmed by information overload. They also identified useful online training opportunities. Headteachers felt that the materials and the training offered to all staff on trauma and how to cope and deal with it was particularly useful. They described how it had enriched staff discussions afterwards as well as equipping them to deal with anxious pupils on return to school. They also benefitted from the information on how to prepare the building and their welcome to pupils returning based on the SWAN approach - the need to offer a Safe, Welcoming, Accepting and Nurturing environment for all.

Many secondary school leaders and staff were positive about the involvement of the local authority's youth service, which has been very proactive in supporting vulnerable learners as they return to school. During the autumn term, youth workers visited the key market towns between 5pm and 7pm to engage with learners in an informal way. This provided useful opportunities to check on their wellbeing and to help direct them to support if required.

The local authority reported a significant rise in the number of families opting to educate their children at home since schools reopened. At the beginning of November, around 200 pupils were being taught at home, which is considerably higher than the 130 pupils who had registered for 'Elective home education' prior to the closing of schools in March 2020. Again, local authority support services such as education welfare officers, youth workers, challenge advisers and the educational psychologist team worked with families to provide help and support.

In line with the local authority's key message on focussing on pupils' wellbeing and their readiness to learn on their return to school in September, nearly all schools adapted their curriculum to prioritise these key aims. This was particularly true for vulnerable learners, including those with English as an Additional Language and those who may have recently arrived in Powys as refugees having already witnessed severe trauma in their lives. In addition to the commissioned counselling services which re-established face-to-face support during the autumn term, the local authority appointed a teacher to lead on support for these vulnerable pupils. As a result, case workers worked with schools and families to establish bespoke support through a range of agencies and local government services.

Nearly all headteachers who took part in our engagement phone calls praised highly the support they had received with regards to health and safety issues. Headteachers valued the guidance from the local authority health and safety

specialists when they had to prepare for the reopening of their schools in September. They commended the effectiveness and clarity of advice provided by the local authority, especially around issues relating to the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable pupils such as those requiring specialist support. They ensured that the advice and guidance was issued in a timely manner so that school leaders were not overwhelmed. As a result, headteachers felt confident that they were well prepared for the reopening of schools and to make important decisions on health and safety issues at a local level when the need arose. They particularly appreciated the weekly headteachers' virtual meetings which helped to disseminate and discuss important health and safety guidance. The fortnightly virtual meetings with Chairs of Governors also helped to reinforce key messages and guidance which could then be discussed with school leaders at a local level, to ensure the health and safety of pupils including vulnerable learners.

The use of virtual meetings and the 'Team around the Cluster' approach continues to encourage effective multi-agency working. This has been very beneficial for schools across Powys which covers such a large geographical area. For example, representatives from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services have been present at headteacher and 'Team around the cluster' meetings to warn of issues that are affecting parts of Powys during the pandemic, such as the possible increased risk of suicide amongst teenagers. Since September, most specialist services have returned to face-to-face work wherever possible, working closely with schools and families to provide support safely. Clear guidelines and appropriate risk assessments has given schools and specialist services the confidence to re-engage as much as possible in face-to-face support.

The improved communication at directorate level has also helped to improve multi-agency working and has brought about a more integrated approach to support schools and learners. For example, better communication between the Schools and Education Directorate and the Children Services Directorate has helped provide better-targeted support to the most vulnerable pupils who are on the Child Protection Register. In addition, the local authority has ensured that most statutory processes and referrals for pupils with special educational needs has continued through effective partnership working. When this hasn't been possible, the local authority has put purposeful temporary arrangements in place to support learners as much as possible. For example, schools have been able to refer pupils to support through the Youth Intervention Service without having to go through the usual lengthy referral process.

As was the case during the lockdown period, the local authority has continued to support school and PRU staff with a range of online professional learning opportunities including on attachment difficulties and relationship-based play. Much of this training has focussed on supporting pupils' health and wellbeing, particularly those who are most vulnerable. School leaders commented positively on the quality and relevance on the training available by the local authority and ERW, particularly around supporting vulnerable pupils. For example, the training and support materials for all staff on dealing with trauma-related issues have been very valuable

this term as pupils returned to school. In particular, headteachers commented on how such training could be easily accessed by all staff.

In addition, challenge advisers have also organised bespoke cluster-based training and projects to meet the needs of schools in different areas of Powys, for example they organised 'mindfulness' projects to support pupils' wellbeing this term. A notable feature of the support network in Powys this term is the continuation of school-to-school collaboration and the willingness of leaders and staff to provide bespoke training and guidance to colleagues across the local authority. A good example of this is the training provided by staff of the pupil referral unit on supporting pupils' behaviour and their readiness to learn on their return to school. Such collaboration has increased the resources available to schools as well as providing facilitators with valuable professional development and leadership opportunities.