

20.07.21

Dear Colin Everett

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with an overview of the progress you have made in relation to recommendations from the overarching thematic report we published in January. The narrative reflects the information and views you shared with our link inspectors during their engagements with you throughout the term,

The thematic identified five recommendations for the Welsh Government and recognised that a whole system approach was needed to address these. The first three recommendations were more immediate and urgent in nature, whilst the last two recommendations will take longer to address. From our discussions with you, feedback from learners and our engagement work with schools, it is clear that, through collaboration, progress was made across Wales in equipping schools and learners to provide better remote learning experiences during the second lockdown.

In line with our new approach for thematic reports, we will be writing to the Welsh Government in early 2022 to seek feedback on the work they have done to address the recommendations we made to them.

We hope you will find this summary a helpful affirmation of the work that you have done to support your learners and learning communities during the last six months.

R1 Urgently address barriers to learning at home, particularly where this is due to a lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity

The local authority has continued to work with schools and partners to address barriers to digital learning. It has formalised its response to digital disadvantage through work with the Hwb Programme Board to ensure that there is a long-term focus on providing distance learning for all. This work has included the procurement and distribution of around seven thousand devices to learners in Flintshire. The local authority has also mapped out connectivity needs in response to phase one of a national strategy to improve digital provision in schools. This has enabled the authority to prioritise and address needs. For example, in one high school where there were connectivity issues, the bandwidth has been increased so that the school can now meet user demand. In addition, the Hwb Programme Board have agreed to continue to use funding from the Welsh Government grant for licenses for WI-FI dongles for disadvantaged learners for an extended period.

Flintshire staff continue to provide bespoke and flexible support for vulnerable learners in a variety of ways. For example, they have developed videos to support families of learners that are new to the English language to engage with digital learning. They have also worked with schools to ensure that onsite education is accessible to those for whom digital learning is not the most appropriate mode of delivery.

In partnership with GwE, the local authority has provided a package of training and support for schools to strengthen their capacity to provide distance learning through the use of digital technology. This contributed positively to a rapid and sustainable upskilling of the workforce. The local authority has provided funding for schools to collaborate to develop and share digital learning practice. Both the local authority and GwE believe that this strategy has been successful in reducing variability in the range and quality of provision.

The local authority has supported learners to engage in learning both in and out of schools through its youth work provision. For example, the authority's youth work immersion strategy which includes the deployment of trained youth workers within schools has enabled vulnerable learners to receive support both at schools and via its open access youth provision. This enables these learners to access support that they would not otherwise receive.

In partnership with school staff, the local authority identified the importance of the 'community' aspect of the immersion youth worker role. There is an appreciation that what happens in the community affects relationships and behaviours within the school environment. The knowledge that the immersion youth worker has of the needs of young people and wider contextual issues enables them to make connections to wider community resources and pro-social activities.

Generally, the local authority feels that levels of learner engagement have been positive in Flintshire throughout the pandemic. They also identify that variability in engagement levels span all types of schools and families from all types of socio-economic backgrounds. Estyn's engagement with schools suggests that, on balance, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds have found engagement with learning more challenging than their peers.

R2 Improve the quality of the distance and blended learning experiences for pupils by supporting more effective teaching across and within schools and PRUs

The local authority, in partnership with GwE, has provided useful strategic and practical support to help schools to offer distance and blended learning experiences. This includes a regional learning hub that hosts resources developed and quality assured by schools and regional officers.

Local authority and GwE officers liaise with schools about their processes to monitor provision and planning. In a few instances, officers have been able to sit in on digital lessons to get first-hand experience of the learning offer. In these instances, they have spoken positively about schools' work.

Over time, and particularly in the secondary sector, distance learning has moved increasingly towards live lessons delivered digitally. Local authority and regional officers feel that this has enabled teachers to monitor learners' progress more

effectively than at other points in the pandemic where monitoring tended to focus on levels of engagement. A few schools have engaged in shared, supportive observations through a 'chaperone' system. They have shared the outcomes of their work with school improvement advisers. There is a strong sense that education professionals have shown a commitment to sharing things that work well within and beyond their schools, for example through the development of agreed protocols for live lessons.

Overall, arrangements to monitor the provision of teaching and learning experiences have enabled the local authority to have a sound understanding of the blended learning offer provided by its schools. It remains a challenge to evaluate comprehensively the impact that distance learning has had on learners' progress. However, since Easter, school improvement advisers and other local authority service providers have begun to re-engage in face-to-face activities with schools. This engagement is beginning to support schools to evaluate the impact of their provision on learners' progress, for example a few schools have discussed the outcomes of their activities to monitor standards in pupils' books. During their face-to-face engagement with schools, improvement advisers and local authority staff also discuss arrangements to support learners that are reluctant to reengage in education.

R3 Develop a coherent approach to improve progress in literacy, numeracy and personal and social skills of vulnerable pupils disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example pupils eligible for free school meals

Many aspects of the local authority's response to recommendations one and two are part of their joined-up approach to the progress of pupils disproportionately affected by the pandemic. For example, the provision of suitable digital technology that ensures access to appropriate distance learning experiences. In addition, the local authority, in partnership with GwE, has focussed on providing a balance of bespoke support for schools and facilitating the dissemination of effective practice to support improved literacy, numeracy and personal and social skills of vulnerable pupils. It has also drawn upon the full breadth of its services to support learners to develop these skills, for example through its youth work provision.

The local authority has taken extensive measures to ensure that learning is accessible to those most disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example by supporting vulnerable learners to attend school during lockdown. Through its monitoring activity, the local authority has identified the need to support early entitlement settings, particularly to provide help for learners with additional learning needs. It has introduced a commercial training package with twelve selected schools to support the development of learners' speaking skills. Plans are in place to expand this programme across a greater number of schools. The authority's Welsh in Education Team have produced additional resources to support oracy development to help learners reengage with the Welsh language. Additional plans are in place to

support crucial aspects of learners' wellbeing. These include work with resources from the School Health Research Network and plans for a school holiday enrichment programme.

Recently, officers from the local authority and GwE have restarted visits to schools. These engagements now include discussions about learners that did not engage well with schooling during periods of lockdown. They are working with schools to identify the best way forward for these learners. The local authority is also broadening its provision for education other than at school to support those key stage 2 pupils that are reluctant to return to school.

Local authority officers are keen to avoid terminology that emphasises a deficit model in pupils' learning and progress, for example 'catch-up' or 'lost learning'. Instead, they are promoting the positive learning that has occurred during the pandemic and looking to help schools to support all learners to move forward from their current position as well as they can.

R4 Establish strategies to monitor and address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of pupils

Throughout the period of the pandemic, the local authority has worked strategically to support collaboration between education services and other departments and external services. This collaboration has been beneficial in many ways including helping local authority officers to keep all aspects of its provision for learners under regular review. For example, partnership work with GwE to map out local and regional interventions is helping the local authority to consider the impact that its work is having on supporting the mental health of pupils and to identify gaps in its current offer.

The local authority has established an 'Emotional Wellbeing Steering Group' to guide its work. This group draws on a range of evidence to inform decisions and practice. This evidence includes pupil, school and local authority level data. The authority is continuing to refine its data collection procedures in relation to pupils' physical and mental health. Through the development of its data management system, the authority is planning to identify emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) cases. It is organising training for the educational welfare team to help them to meet the needs of identified learners. In addition, arrangements are in place to monitor referrals for counselling, nurture provision and to gauge the impact of training that has been offered to schools for programmes such as those that support the development of pupils' emotional literacy.

The local authority is engaging positively with Welsh Government's framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental wellbeing. This includes early exploration of an assessment tool that is being developed by Public Health Wales and investment in the National Nurturing School Programme which has an element of built in monitoring. Local authority officers are planning to work

with schools to trial a nurture screening tool that will provide them with an additional source of data. They continue to promote the use of the School Health Research Network across Flintshire's schools. There are firm partnership arrangements in place with AURA, the independent leisure provider for Flintshire, to support active learning through the provision of school-based lessons and out of school programmes.

Provision to meet the physical and mental health need of pupils appears to be central to the authority's strategic approach moving forward.

R5 Create opportunities to take stock and evaluate the impact of policies and practices developed since the start of the pandemic to inform future ways of working and curriculum design

The local authority has adapted its arrangements to evaluate its own work. It has undertaken an evaluation for each service area within the education portfolio, to identify what has worked well and opportunities for improvement. Each service has produced a report that identifies how it has responded and changed as a result of the pandemic. In turn, these service reports have been summarised in a composite document that has gone to the local authority's cabinet and education scrutiny committee for consideration and has informed the overall council plan as Flintshire moves forward. There is also a specific short-term recovery plan for the education portfolio. This suggests that there is an overall strategic approach to support the authority to evaluate policies and practices.

Specific evaluation work that is beginning to have an impact includes that of key policies and practices such as EOTAS (education other than at school) provision. As a result of this evaluation, the authority has identified the need to broaden its provision for education other than at school across key stage 2. It is taking steps to address this identified gap. As a result of a pupil behaviour review, the authority identified the negative connotations of referring to pupils as needing behaviour support. They have refined the tone of this provision by referring to it as 'nurture' provision which will be delivered under the guidance of the pupil referral unit.

The local authority plans to further develop arrangements to support staff wellbeing, particularly that of school leaders. The recent, regular digital interaction has been well received by school leaders overall. The local authority is planning for an autumn conference for school leaders as things return to more of a normal footing.

Both the local authority and GwE are very positive about gains made in relation to curriculum design, especially the general development in the capacity of schools and learners to work digitally. They are also very positive about increased levels of collaboration between schools and this is something they will continue to facilitate.

All schools are being asked to complete a written evaluation of the teaching and learning that has taken place through the pandemic period. The intention is to learn

and share lessons about strengths and areas for development that have emerged during the period of the pandemic.

Officers from the local authority and GwE feel that the use of stakeholder feedback has developed as an influential strength during recent times. It has enabled schools to make adaptations to their learning offer, for example to the organisation of the school day. Local arrangements provide a platform for school leaders to share this information with other schools.

Thank you for your work and for your ongoing professional dialogue with our inspectors.

Regards,



Jassa Scott
Strategic Director