

Dear Colin Everett

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 Flintshire 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



Meilyr Rowlands

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Leadership and collaboration

Very early in the spring of 2020, Flintshire established a vision for a strategic whole authority approach to working through the crisis. A series of tactical groups were established to co-ordinate and direct the Council's services in all key areas including education, each chaired by a Chief Officer. Frequent meetings ensured strategic decisions were discussed, understood and agreed by all senior managers and could then be disseminated to all services. This shaped their processes for identifying and meeting needs and ensured that all leaders understood their roles and responsibilities in relation to the situation. The portfolio's risk register and mitigations statements have been subject to review and challenge by the Education Scrutiny Committee. This shared, collaborative response has been a notable feature of the authority's work. It has enabled the education service to work more proactively with a broad range of council services, such as Health and Safety, Transport, Information Communication Technology (ICT), Free School Meals, Human Resources, Childcare, Safeguarding, Additional Learning Needs and Youth Services. This collaboration enabled senior education officers to work with teams of staff to shape key areas of support for provision in schools and PRUs, such as meeting the needs of vulnerable learners. The collaborative strategic leadership that the local authority established at the outset of the crisis has been and continues to be highly influential. It has supported schools and PRUs to focus on their core business of developing quality provision for the children and young people within their schools.

During the first week of lockdown, all schools were open to provide childcare for key workers. By the second week, childcare hubs were created to serve clusters of schools. The local authority provided transport for pupils and also used contracted school transport to distribute food to those eligible for free school meals. The most vulnerable pupils, including those with special educational needs, received support at home, upon request. For example, the Language and Speech Service (known as CLASS) provided remote support to parents to deliver interventions and supplied resources for use at home.

The local authority provided clear leadership and guidance for schools in relation to opening for the check-in, catch-up, recover session in July. Support was given to assess risks and develop models for opening in collaboration with headteachers. Schools and PRUs also received clear guidance about how to set up learning areas and guidance about important issues such as what to do in the event of an outbreak of COVID-19 in schools. On a practical level, schools and PRUs received additional support, for example from the council's 'Street Scene' department to set up one-way systems on their premises. This paved the way for schools and PRUs to open with increased confidence in September for all learners.

Local authority officers identify that they have developed a strong understanding of the difference that their work makes to the provision for learners. In particular, they reflect on the effectiveness of partnership working across agencies and identify clearly, the many benefits that this approach brings. This understanding of the benefits of collaboration across departments is a piece of key learning that the local

authority has drawn from its work throughout the crisis and it is something that it is keen to develop further.

Throughout the spring and summer, Flintshire officers worked well with the regional consortium (GwE). They have developed a shared understanding of roles, responsibilities and expectations in relation to achieving strategic goals in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, for example in developing distance learning resources and providing professional support to enable teachers to offer digital learning for pupils. Through our consultation with schools, it is apparent that they generally feel well-supported as a result of this collaboration. In addition, the local authority, in partnership with GwE continued to support schools causing concern, for example by working with them to produce post inspection action plans.

Promoting learning

In the initial stages of the pandemic, the local authority responded swiftly to provide childcare hubs for vulnerable learners and for children of key workers. They worked well with school leaders to develop and implement a vision for this provision, for example by identifying a lead school in a cluster as the location for the hub and establishing health, safety and staffing arrangements. This ensured that the authority offered a continuation of childcare and learning to those most in need of the service at that time. In addition, the local authority engaged with schools and GwE to support an offer of distance learning.

With regard to developing new approaches to teaching and learning, the local authority worked well in collaboration with GwE to identify the most appropriate ways to support schools and PRUs. This included pastoral engagement with school leaders by local authority and regional officers, the development of guidance to support distance learning, provision of professional learning, and ICT equipment and infrastructure for learners and staff. Feedback from schools indicates that this support was timely and helpful.

When thinking about distance learning in the context of school and PRU closures, the local authority was committed to supporting schools and PRUs to focus on learners' wellbeing. The local authority believed that schools were best placed to develop a wellbeing curriculum for learners so they did not provide detailed curriculum guidance. However, officers actively promoted wellbeing provision, such as regular outdoor and physical activity.

A strength of the collaboration between the local authority and GwE appears to have been the way they have facilitated school-to-school support.

Cameo: Promoting collaborative cluster work

The local authority has worked in partnership with GwE to promote school-to-school support by identifying opportunities to share practice across and between clusters of schools. This approach has enabled schools to broaden and adapt their provision for learners. For example, clusters of schools have collaborated to improve logistical arrangements such as the deployment of staff and shared the

learning experiences they offer for children, including when working in the outdoors. A very few have also collaborated to share a curriculum based on learners' wellbeing and to provide shared lessons via live streaming.

The local authority identified challenges to supporting learners that attended Welsh medium primary schools, whose first language is English. They recognise that replicating immersion in a Welsh language rich environment is difficult. As a result of this experience, they are working to develop additional support materials for schools should the need for distance learning arise again.

In secondary schools, the local authority, via its partnership with GwE, has supported schools to develop their distance learning approaches. Regular meetings between officers and headteachers ensure a shared understanding of schools' approaches to distance learning and enabled schools to access support if needed. This has supported schools to offer continuity in their pupils' learning. Levels of learner engagement have generally been positive. However, it has been an ongoing challenge to engage with a core of disengaged pupils.

The local authority, in partnership with schools and GwE, made rapid progress in upskilling staff to use digital learning resources and strategies. This contributed significantly to the capacity of schools and initially this supported schools to stay in touch with learners to monitor their wellbeing. This partnership evolved quickly into a conduit for continuity of learning for pupils through a range of learning platforms. These enabled teachers to provide support and feedback for learners and facilitated interaction with parents. A very few schools used live streaming to provide lessons. They were reluctant to use this approach initially due to potential safeguarding concerns. Overtime, the authority ensured that schools received appropriate Welsh Government guidance.

Supporting vulnerable learners

From the outset of our engagement with the local authority and its schools, it was evident that supporting wellbeing for all learners, through unprecedented circumstances, was the top priority for all within the education service. The local authority was mindful of the impact that matters associated with the pandemic were beginning to have on learners' wellbeing and mental health and of the potential for a continued challenge in meeting learners' needs overtime. In response, the local authority provided guidance and support to schools and PRUs on how to support learners' wellbeing and mental health during the period of closure. In addition, the local authority's officers have been accessible to schools and PRUs to offer personalised support. The local authority also targeted training for its own teams such as the Young Person's Counselling Service to ensure that support to pupils could be delivered remotely. Overall, schools and PRUs have appreciated the local authority's support greatly.

The local authority worked with schools/PRUs to agree criteria and processes to identify vulnerable learners. This was important as it highlighted the broad range of

provision that the local authority would need to offer or facilitate. In turn, this helped officers to tackle issues strategically, for example by deploying teams of staff to specific tasks or through collaboration with agencies such as social services.

Cameo: Inclusion services for English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners and Traveller children

Senior leaders within the local authority identified the strategic importance of a collaborative approach to the provision of inclusion services. They established networks between key agencies such as the benefits agency and Flintshire county council education inclusion services. They also ensured that heads of service and strategic leads for inclusion understood their roles clearly and that more importantly, they felt empowered to work proactively to make sure that the strategic vision for support became a reality on the ground. This approach is exemplified in the local authority's work to support EAL learners and their families, and learners and families from the Traveller community.

Local authority inclusion services built on strong pre-existing relationships with schools to make sure that they knew where the EAL learners and learners from the Traveller community were and to identify specific needs. They ensured that learners had opportunities to continue to learn through the pandemic by supporting them to attend childcare hubs or by providing work at home. In a few instances, this meant home visits. Inclusion services staff supported schools to make this work accessible for learners and families for example by using staff able to communicate in the families' home language when necessary. They also provided a wider network of support by helping families to access benefits such as free school meals to support the health and wellbeing of learners at a challenging time.

Senior leaders have worked with leaders of the education service and strategic leads for inclusion to keep the effectiveness of their work to support inclusion under review.

The range of need is considerable and the authority's response extensive. It has included allocating vulnerable learners to an appropriate learning hub, providing specific support for groups of learners such as those from the Traveller community, continuing to support pupils with special educational needs and supporting those learners disadvantaged by poverty or other exceptional circumstances.

The local authority's educational welfare officers have provided valuable support to schools, for example by checking up on learners that were not engaging with the learning on offer. Strategies to provide learning tools such as laptops were well received by schools and PRUs although according to schools, levels of engagement with digital learning remained variable among disadvantaged learners. Schools and PRUs, with support from the local authority have also been able to provide support beyond education for disadvantaged learners, for example food vouchers, food parcels and help with housing issues. Schools and PRUs have been complementary about the support received to work with very hard to reach learners.

It is apparent that collaboration has developed as a strength in response to the pandemic. Local authority officers cite numerous examples of how renewed, refreshed or newly formed alliances have strengthened as a result of recent challenges. Examples of proactive collaboration include but are not exclusive to CAHMS, school nurses, Team around the Family and the inclusion and sensory teams. Individually and in combination, these agencies are supporting vulnerable children and those learners with special educational needs effectively in many ways.

The local authority has maintained a strong focus on meeting special educational needs and the needs of other learners requiring extra support. It has adapted its work successfully, for example by using a virtual panel to support statutory assessment processes. This has ensured continuity of support, for example that all Year 7 transfers have been supported to access the specialist provision they required. The local authority has continued to work with schools, for example to facilitate cluster ALN meetings and to review the allocation of support. Officers have worked with schools and PRUs to support learners with statements of special educational needs and those that are likely to require a statement in the future.

It has been a challenge for the authority to ensure that educational provision for pupils with SEN complies with the needs outlined in their statements because these pupils have not been able to attend schools and PRUs each day to receive the specialist input that they normally would, either from teachers support staff or specialist agencies. However, they have provided a range of support material and online sessions for pupils with speech and language difficulties as well as for visual impaired children. In addition, they provided specialised ICT equipment and prepared digital lessons using sign language for learners with hearing impairments. This has been valuable in maintaining specialist skills and services, to support the wellbeing of pupils, their families and staff.

Leaders from Flintshire's PRUs are complementary about many aspects of the local authority's work. They have received helpful support to interpret and implement Welsh Government guidance. The local authority has supported pupils' transition into PRUs successfully through a digital process. The local authority ALN team guided the PRU on how to undertake online reviews. This enabled the PRU to carry out all annual reviews.

PRU leaders highlight the benefits of aspects of multi-agency work, for example with CAMHS and particularly about the role of the local authority Progression Team. The team, supported by Careers Wales, have worked well to successfully place nearly all leavers from key stage 4 into provision in the local further education college. This team has also worked proactively to monitor the progress of EOTAS pupils. PRU leaders were slightly less positive about requirements for duplication of risk assessments for the authority and the regional consortium. In one instance, the same information was requested twice but the PRU was asked to submit it in different ways for different audiences.

The local authority has also shared bereavement guidance for children, young adults, parents and staff.

Cameo: Bereavement Support

As part of its overall strategic vision to support school communities through the COVID-19 pandemic, Flintshire County Council education services drew heavily on its understanding of well-established strengths and partnerships.

Through effective collaboration between the authority's educational psychology service and its pupil referral unit provision, Flintshire provided guidance for all schools and offered training for staff to help them to work with children, families and communities that had encountered bereavement. This sensitive approach aligns with the authority's wider approach to supporting health and wellbeing. Many of the schools that have contributed to this thematic report speak positively about the availability of guidance and the value of training, which places them in a better position than they were in previously to cope with very challenging circumstances should they arise.

Overall, the local authority has worked strategically to support learners' wellbeing and meet the needs of vulnerable learners. It has been flexible and adapted its provision as required to ensure that families receive the support they need from schools and central services. Schools and PRUs have indicated consistently that they feel the support for vulnerable learners provided by the local authority has been available and beneficial in relation to most aspects of their work.

The local authority has been proactive in supporting young people through its youth work strategy.

Cameo: Youth outreach work during a pandemic

Flintshire's 'Estyn Llaw' or 'Reaching Out' team was set up as part of the authority's Integrated Youth Provision response to the COVID-19 pandemic and began its work immediately after Welsh Government announced the first lockdown. The team includes specialist youth workers and a sexual health nurse specialist and is able to provide a bilingual service.

The team has specialist workers based in the Youth Justice Service and Children's Services. The Participation Team's work is guided by the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC). Their priority is to focus on all areas of engagement and participation and they are committed to involve and have representation from all young people in Flintshire. The team works in partnership with the Flintshire Youth Council and the 'Young Voices Speak Out' group.

The team has supported these groups to identify key areas of need for young people during the COVID-19 restrictions including mental health and educational support. They have also worked with them on key tasks, for example, responding to local and national consultations about online safety.

The team has provided online school transition resources for young people who have missed the valuable work that normally takes place at school during the

spring and summer terms. This aims to prepare learners both emotionally and physically for the next stages of their education. They also provide advice and signpost young people to information relating to sexual health and relationships, online safety, debt, health and careers information/advice, for example about Flintshire County Council's Modern Apprenticeship Scheme. The team have also offered 'Forest School' experiences to support vulnerable learners to transition back in to education.

The local authority's work to support its schools and PRUs from September

Leadership and collaboration

Leaders across the local authority have benefitted from and built on the strong foundations laid through the spring and summer terms. They have, through collaboration with schools and partner agencies, such as GwE, put in place processes and procedures to support schools and PRUs to reopen successfully for pupils.

Since reopening, the local authority has worked with schools and PRUs to emphasise the importance of prioritising the wellbeing of pupils, families and staff. Officers have continued to liaise regularly with school and PRU leaders, for example through engagement with the headteacher federations, to gain an accurate picture of what is working well as well as an understanding of the challenges that schools face. They take good advantage of these opportunities to share strategy with school and PRU leaders and to provide them with information about new resources as they develop, for example, relevant professional learning resources that have been developed by GwE. They continue to provide schools and PRUs with clear and timely advice to support them to deal with issues that arise, for instance when they need to close specific classes or year groups.

The local authority continues to keep the effectiveness of its work under review. Arrangements to share information across the authority and opportunities to provide additional support or challenge are in place, for example through the work of the education scrutiny committee who have kept aspects of the authority's provision, such as the impact of youth work under regular review. These processes ensure that leaders at all levels are empowered to act in the best interests of learners and that there are appropriate arrangements to seek assurances that their work is making a difference.

Promoting learning

The local authority's schools and PRUs have received useful support to ensure continuity of learning throughout the COVID-19 crisis. The local authority has drawn upon strong, established relationships with school leaders, communities and service

providers to ensure that a learner's experience is as normal as it can possibly be against the backdrop of current challenges and restrictions.

The local authority has supported schools and PRUs to think about solutions that enable them to provide a learning offer that builds on prior experiences. It has also provided schools with the confidence to adapt learning experiences, for example by offering more learning in the outdoor environments or by supporting the use of online resources. Overall, schools and PRUs indicate that the return to school-based teaching has been relatively smooth and very positive for learners.

Across the local authority, the capacity of schools to provide distance learning has developed at an impressive pace. The local authority, in partnership with GwE, has played a pivotal role in supporting schools to develop this provision, for example through beneficial exemplar materials. This has supported schools, to provide continuity of learning for pupils at times when they cannot physically be at school. A consistent message from schools is that the development of these approaches and the considerable improvement in staff skills are positive outcomes from a challenging time. However, local authority officers and school leaders have raised some concern about the limitations of band width in some schools where the infrastructure is unable to cope with the volume of digital traffic, for example during the 'firebreak' lockdown when large proportions of pupils were accessing lessons from home.

Through its partnership with GwE, the local authority has provided a flexible professional learning offer that helps schools respond to the challenges of the current situation. For example, useful 'how to' videos and webinars have supported foundation phase staff to adapt their pedagogy and provision.

All of the schools that we engaged with feel supported by the local authority in their plans for using the additional funding through Welsh Government's 'Recruit, recover, raise standards: the accelerated learning programme'. This support has given them confidence that most schools are using the funding appropriately, for example to appoint additional staff to develop learners' basic skills. In a few instances, schools have indicated that they have used this money to cover financial shortfalls while others have expressed concerns about a perceived requirement to spend the money quickly without really thinking through their strategy.

Through our engagement with schools, we have received consistent messages about the valuable support provided by the local authority's human resources department. This support has helped schools to respond to issues appropriately, as and when they arise. A few schools have indicated that they have found it challenging to maintain staffing levels at times, for instance when members of staff have been in isolation. They also identify difficulties with covering teachers' planning preparation and assessment time.

Supporting vulnerable learners

The local authority's inclusion team has continued to work diligently to support schools and PRUs to meet the needs of vulnerable learners. Through continuous liaison with agencies within and beyond the authority, they have supported

vulnerable learners to re-engage with learning at their school or PRU, for example by providing transport services.

Since returning to school in September, to a large extent, meeting the basic needs of vulnerable learners has been easier than it was through the lockdown period. This is largely due to the fact that learners are at school and are therefore able to access services such as free school meals, directly. The authority has also drawn on its experience through lockdown to respond quickly to the need to provide funding for free school meals to pupils that cannot attend school due to COVID-19 related reasons.

The inclusion team has continued to provide valuable support for EAL pupils to enable them to access learning. It has also been proactive in supporting families from the Traveller community to re-engage with education after the summer break. Through discussions with schools, it is evident that schools feel well supported to meet the needs of looked after children.

The local authority is in regular contact with schools and PRUs regarding pupils with SEN. It has appropriate arrangements to monitor the progress and wellbeing of learners that moved to a new school or PRU in September. Arrangements to hold review meetings with schools and parents follow the same procedure that was established in the spring and summer terms as this proved effective at that time. A few schools have had difficulties in accessing the educational psychologists when they need them due to a lack of current capacity in this part of the authority's service. The local authority is aware of this issue and is taking steps to address it.

PRU leaders have found the services of the North Wales TRAC team beneficial. They identify instances where this support has made a positive difference to learners. They also point out that this team provides a once-only support package meaning that if a learner has received support from this agency at an early point in their education that they become ineligible for further support. PRU leaders find this a little frustrating.

In a few instances, PRUs have found that classroom sizes have limited the amount of time that learners can spend at the PRU because the rooms are too small to cope with social distancing measures.

The inclusion team has developed new ways of working in partnership with agencies, to support learners. For example, speech and language specialists undertake assessments online to identify learners' needs. This approach in combination with the associated professional support for school staff prevents delays to learners receiving the support they need.