

---

# Insights into how independent schools and specialist colleges have responded during the COVID-19 pandemic

July 2020



**The purpose of Estyn is to inspect quality and standards in education and training in Wales. Estyn is responsible for inspecting:**

- ▲ Nursery schools and settings that are maintained by, or receive funding from, local authorities
- ▲ Primary schools
- ▲ Secondary schools
- ▲ Special schools
- ▲ Pupil referral units
- ▲ All-age schools
- ▲ Independent schools
- ▲ Further education
- ▲ Independent specialist colleges
- ▲ Adult community learning
- ▲ Local authority education services for children and young people
- ▲ Teacher education and training
- ▲ Welsh for adults
- ▲ Work-based learning
- ▲ Learning in the justice sector

**Estyn also:**

- ▲ Provides advice on quality and standards in education and training in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales and others
- ▲ Makes public good practice based on inspection evidence

Every possible care has been taken to ensure that the information in this document is accurate at the time of going to press. Any enquiries or comments regarding this document/publication should be addressed to:

Publication Section

Estyn

Anchor Court

Keen Road

Cardiff

CF24 5JW or by email to [publications@estyn.gov.wales](mailto:publications@estyn.gov.wales)

**© Crown Copyright 2020: This report may be re-used free of charge in any format or medium provided that it is re-used accurately and not used in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Crown copyright and the title of the document/publication specified.**

---

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Wellbeing</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Communication</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>On-site learning</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Distance learning</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Arrangements to support the transition of new pupils joining the school</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Professional learning</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Community-building</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Planning for the return to on-site learning for all learners</b>	<b>29</b>

---

## Introduction

---

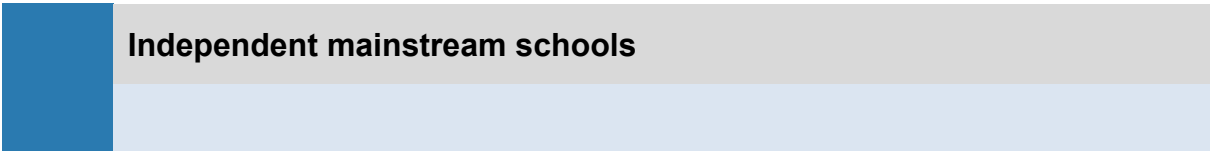
- 1 The response to COVID-19 has dramatically changed our lives. In this challenging context, the education system has been disrupted but remains of central importance.
- 2 The independent sector is very diverse. There are 75 independent schools in Wales and seven independent specialist colleges. These schools educate pupils from nursery-age to 19 years old and the colleges cater for learners aged 16 and over.
- 3 There are 38 independent mainstream schools in Wales. These schools educate about 8,500 pupils. This is around 2% of pupils in Wales. The schools vary greatly in size and are owned by either a single proprietor or a group.
- 4 There are 37 independent special schools in Wales educating pupils who have a wide range of special educational needs (SEN) including autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) and social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Many of the schools are small and pupils usually live in children's homes for children attached to the schools. A minority of these schools also educate day pupils or pupils who reside in children's homes not attached to the school. Nearly all placements at independent special schools are funded by local authorities.
- 5 Independent specialist colleges educate around 205 learners. The colleges provide for a diverse range of learners' needs, including ASD, SEBD and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). In four of the colleges, many learners live in residential homes attached to the college. Nearly all placements at independent specialist colleges are funded by the Welsh Government.
- 6 The Welsh Government must maintain a register of independent schools and ensure that provision is of sufficient quality to meet the independent school standards. Many independent schools have support through their membership of professional associations. There is not yet a similar registration system for independent specialist colleges, but as the funding body the Welsh Government seeks reassurance on the quality of provision from Estyn.
- 7 As the COVID-19 pandemic struck the proprietors of independent schools had to decide whether to close their schools. The Welsh Government contacted all independent schools to establish whether they had made the decision to close. Estyn then contacted all independent schools and colleges with the focus of the calls being on the wellbeing of learners and on capturing learning from school leaders about how they had adapted their provision.

---

## Background

---

- 8 Of the 82 schools and colleges contacted, 78 responded to the request for information relating to their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report is based on the information discussed during telephone conversations with the headteachers and senior leaders of the schools and colleges and reflects how they were adapting their practice at that point in time.
- 9 Nearly all schools and colleges have remained open during this time to provide support for learners' wellbeing and learning either on-site or through distance learning. Nearly all independent special schools and colleges have continued to have learners resident, and many have continued to provide education on-site for learners.
- 10 All phone calls were conducted prior to the Education Minister's announcement regarding the re-opening of schools and PRUs, and before the publication of the Welsh Government Guidance on 10 June 2020, Keep Education Safe: Operational guidance for schools and settings (COVID-19) [Link to guidance](#).
- 11 We have included brief insights (colour co-ordinated as shown below to indicate independent mainstream schools, independent special schools and independent specialist colleges) that illustrate interesting practice so that schools and colleges may consider a range of activities and approaches to meet the needs of their pupils during these challenging times. Although the insights have been anonymised, we have included a brief description of the context of each provision. They may not always be applicable across other settings because of the bespoke nature of many of the providers.



**Independent mainstream schools**

The legend consists of a blue square on the left, followed by a grey bar containing the text 'Independent mainstream schools', and a light blue bar below it.



**Independent special schools**

The legend consists of a red square on the left, followed by a grey bar containing the text 'Independent special schools', and a light blue bar below it.



**Independent specialist colleges**

The legend consists of a green square on the left, followed by a grey bar containing the text 'Independent specialist colleges', and a light blue bar below it.

---

## Summary

---

### Wellbeing

- 12 Nearly all schools and colleges report that they have maintained regular contact with their learners. In special schools that educate day pupils, most schools have put in place a range of measures to support the wellbeing of their pupils. These schools keep in touch regularly with pupils and their families, either through regular phone calls, social media and online platforms or visits to the family home.
- 13 Nearly all mainstream schools say they maintain regular contact with their pupils. Leaders talk of 'ensuring all pupils are visible' in these unique circumstances.
- 14 Nearly all schools and colleges described how they have made adaptations to their working practices on site to prioritise learners' safety and wellbeing.
- 15 Pupils and staff have received advice and guidance, in particular to reinforce online safety. Leaders report that they have shared established clear protocols on how to communicate safely with both staff and pupils.
- 16 In nearly all schools and colleges, leaders say that there is an increasing consideration of the impact of the current systems and teaching practices on staff and learner wellbeing.

### Communication

- 17 Nearly all schools and colleges report that they have put in place arrangements for keeping in touch with learners and their families or carers on a regular basis.
- 18 Nearly all schools understand the need for clear communication with staff, through either email or online meetings. The frequency of meetings and the number of guidance or information documents produced have varied between providers and over time.
- 19 Many mainstream schools described how they have maintained a community spirit through whole school and house assemblies, fun challenges for pupils and the continuation of 'weekly awards'.
- 20 A few schools that are either part of a larger organisation or who have personal contacts have gained advice and guidance from school leaders around the world. These overseas schools who were already addressing issues relating to educating pupils during the pandemic offered helpful advice.

### On-site and distance learning

- 21 Nearly all schools and colleges say they have made arrangements to ensure the continuity of learning since the general closure of schools in Wales.

- 22 Mainstream schools report that they have adopted a variety of approaches to learning depending upon the size and age profile of the school. Leaders express the view that they need to be flexible to meet the needs of both staff and pupils.
- 23 Both mainstream and special schools that educate day pupils, or a mix of day and residential pupils, describe how they have developed strategies that meet the different circumstances of these groups of learners. While this may include the delivery of lessons or the sharing of resources via online platforms, this is not always practical because of the challenges these pupils face to their learning or their family circumstances. In these cases, schools facilitate distance learning for these pupils by delivering hard copies of work or activity packs to the family home that either replace or supplement planned online activities.
- 24 A minority of mainstream schools remained open to provide education for the children of key workers who were on roll at the school. This decision was based upon demand for this service in each setting.

### **Transition**

- 25 Many providers of special education are facing challenges in facilitating transition processes for learners joining the school or college, as well as for those preparing to leave.
- 26 Where schools are attached to residential homes, induction procedures into the school are said to have occurred as usual, after the learner has first settled into the home.
- 27 In mainstream schools, leaders are aware that Year 6 pupils in particular will not have experienced the usual transition arrangements.

### **Professional learning**

- 28 Many leaders report that all staff have improved considerably their ability to use ICT and online platforms to support learning.
- 29 Many providers report that they have continued to provide professional development for staff during this period through access to online training. A few make use of the increased time available to develop and implement training programmes for staff that link to previously identified priorities for development such as the development of the curriculum or professional learning for learning support assistants (LSAs).

### **Planning for the return to on-site learning for all learners**

- 30 Nearly all schools and colleges are considering carefully what they need to do to prepare for the return of all learners.
- 31 Communications with parents and ensuring parental confidence about returning to school is key.
- 32 In most cases, schools and colleges have continued to operate during the period of lockdown, albeit for a reduced number of pupils. This has given leaders an insight into what is working well under the current restrictions and what they need to be refine or adapt to accommodate a full return to school.

- 33 Where there have been positive consequences from their current practice, for example the use of ICT to support learning or the benefits of allowing staff to work from home, providers are considering how these can be incorporated into their future practice to retain these benefits.

---

## Wellbeing

---

### How schools have adapted their practice

- 34 Nearly all schools and colleges say that they have maintained regular contact with their learners. Leaders talk of ‘ensuring that all pupils are visible’ in these unique circumstances.
- 35 Schools and colleges report on how they have made adaptations to their working practices on site to prioritise learners’ safety and wellbeing. They take account of the latest guidance from the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales when putting in place measures to support learners’ and staff’s health and safety and prevent the spread of infection. There has been a focus on carrying out risk assessments. In many cases, providers have re-organised what and how they teach to ensure that learners remain safe and that learning experiences prioritise learners’ physical and emotional wellbeing.
- 36 Many independent mainstream schools use online learning platforms for tutor group meetings where staff focus on pupils’ wellbeing. These schools say that they follow up both ‘non-attendance’ and ‘lack of work’.
- 37 In all independent special schools and colleges that educate day learners, leaders have put in place measures to support the wellbeing of their learners. In particular, they say that they maintain contact with learners, through regular phone calls, social media and online platforms or visits to the family home. This regular contact enables leaders to respond where they identify particular concerns, either through the provision of counselling or other therapeutic support, or through referral to relevant safeguarding agencies.
- 38 Many specialist schools and colleges report that multi-disciplinary teams and therapeutic staff continue to meet online to review and update learners’ support plans and strategies. They produce resources to support learners’ wellbeing and learning information and strategies normally shared primarily with teaching and support staff.
- 39 In nearly all schools and colleges, there is an increasing awareness of the impact of the current systems and teaching practices on staff and learner wellbeing, for example as a result of the move to online learning.



### Show me how you feel this morning

In one mainstream independent primary school, teachers 'test the pulse' of their pupils by asking them to give a number from 1-10 to show how they are feeling. Concerns are then followed up with families via the classroom teacher, headteacher or school counsellor as necessary.

### Establishing a protocol for video-conferencing lessons

In a large mainstream independent secondary school, one of the earliest tasks was to produce a protocol for video-conferencing lessons, which kept staff and pupils safe when conducting sessions. This approach was revised over the Easter holidays to include the requirement that sessions are recorded, unless they are for counselling. An online platform is used for these sessions, which means that they are recorded automatically and saved in a resource area, giving pupils who were not able to attend the live session the chance to listen to it later.



An addendum to the safeguarding policy was written and documents for parents and pupils regarding online safety were sent out and put on the online learning section of school's website.

To maintain regular pastoral contact with pupils, tutors and housemasters/heads of year agreed to hold twice-weekly tutor periods and at least weekly house/head of year meetings. These are conducted using a mixture of video-conferencing and live chat sessions. Various materials, including [thinkuknow](#) resources on e-safety, have been provided to tutors to help them run these sessions.

The school instigated a buddy system within each tutor group, where pupils

check up on each other regularly, and there has been much positive feedback about this from parents. In one case, it helped the school to identify a pupil who was struggling with low mood and to arrange counselling for that pupil.

A group of Year 12 peer mentors was assigned proactively to support Year 7 boarders early in the lockdown, to give them extra online support.

The school has established a spreadsheet for monitoring pupils of concern. This database includes details of pastoral and academic concerns for each year group. Teachers pass concerns to tutors, who collate them and then follow up with families, copying the deputy headteacher in, so that they can update the spreadsheet and monitor the overall situation. Where there are persistent problems, action is escalated through housemasters and the deputy headteacher.

School counsellors do their counselling via video-conferencing. Overall, there has been a reduction in demand for counselling; some pupils appear more settled than when at school, although there is a small number of pupils who have become more anxious.

- 40 In a few schools, all members of staff have access to an employee assistance programme. Leaders felt that this has been highly valued by staff who have been able to access confidential support for a range of issues.

#### **A strategic approach to supporting the health and wellbeing of staff and pupils**

A school for pupils with PMLD, with both day and residential pupils, has taken a strategic approach to ensuring the health and wellbeing of staff and pupils currently attending daily, and to planning for all pupils to return to school. The school has ensured that staff have personal protective equipment (PPE). All staff and pupils attending daily have their temperature taken on arrival and if their temperature is above 37.8 they are asked to return home and access a test for COVID-19 before returning. There have been no issues about accessing the tests through Public Health Wales. A few staff have done so. The school nurse has carried out a detailed risk assessment for all pupils, which includes the measures that will need to be in place in order for each pupil to return to school safely. The school is very mindful of the need for parents to be confident that their child will be safe on return to school.

#### **Reviewing the use of space**

A school, which caters for pupils who live in the company's attached children's homes for children, has completed risk assessments that have enabled the school site to remain open throughout this period. Leaders have reviewed the use of space and made increased use of the school grounds to enable social distancing and extend learning opportunities. The

school has ensured that PPE has been available as required and has reviewed levels of staffing. This has enabled all pupils living in the homes to continue to attend school, including those who usually attend mainstream schools. These pupils complete learning set by the mainstream school with support from teachers at the school.

### **Using the school website to provide guidance and support for parents and carers**

A few independent special schools have used their websites to provide advice, guidance and support for parents and carers. One school, which provides day and residential placements for pupils with SEBD and ASD, has used its website to provide comprehensive guidance for parents and carers across a range of topics to enable them better to support their child's learning and wellbeing at home. The topics covered include:

- The benefits of ensuring that children have a defined structure and regular routine to their day
- Sources of easy to read information on COVID-19 to help children with learning difficulties understand the situation
- Tips to help families maintain personal wellbeing during this time
- Learning and sensory play activities
- Practical support to help manage challenging behaviour

This information is supporting parents and carers to continue with the effective approaches used by the school.

### **Managing pupils' anxieties**

This school offers residential and day placements for pupils with complex needs and ASD. School and care home staff work closely with the on-site therapy team to provide an integrated approach to meet pupils' individual needs. This has continued throughout the lockdown period and therapy staff have supported care and school staff to provide experiences to support pupils' wellbeing. They have developed role play opportunities for pupils to gain an understanding of how to wash their hands properly and regularly, and use social stories to help pupils understand changes in their routines. This collaborative working approach is providing pupils with practical and meaningful approaches to manage their anxieties and understand more fully the current situation.

### **Prioritising learners' safety and wellbeing**

A college, which provides day and residential placements to learners with learning disabilities and autism, has rearranged its timetable to prioritise learners' safety and wellbeing and to minimise the risk of cross contamination. Leaders have reorganised teaching groups so that learners

are taught together in groups based on their residential house, with day learners taught separately. In order to minimise the risk of infection, the college has suspended afternoon off-site options and tutors' planning focuses on designing activities to meet targets on learners' individual education plans (IEPs) or education, health and care plans (EHCPs) and not on the achievement of qualifications.

The college has implemented rigorous arrangements to monitor the health of staff with temperature testing twice a day overseen by senior staff and the provision of PPE to staff as required.

### **Children's homes have become the social and educational settings for pupils**

This independent special school provides placements for pupils who reside in the company's children's homes. During this period, following advice from the company, pupils have remained within their children's homes to avoid the risk of spread of infection. The homes have become the social and educational settings for pupils. Named staff are attached to each home to provide consistency and deliver a blended learning approach. The school uses an online platform as well as on-site activities from staff. For example, the sports tutor has been able to deliver a range of activities in the outside areas of the children's homes, and GCSE pupils have completed their learning.

### **Using the outdoor environment to promote safe learning**

This college is a residential specialist college for young people with a range of learning difficulties, including ASD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and SEBD. The college is situated on a farm and offers a curriculum that gives learners the opportunity to learn through real-life activities. The outdoor context means that the college has found it relatively straightforward to adapt social distancing guidelines within its existing curriculum model and has been providing a reduced programme for up to eight learners on alternate days. The provision and arrangements for each learner have been individually risk assessed in conjunction with the placing authority, parents and the young person.

The college has benefited from a high degree of support, both internally within the wider organisation, as well as from external agencies such as Social Care Wales. The latter organisation provides guidance for care home settings, which the college has adapted to inform its arrangements for education.

### **Maintaining familiar routines to reduce anxieties**

The school, which provides education and therapy for pupils who live in the children's home that shares its site, has remained open for all of its pupils at this time. The continuation of school routines has enabled vulnerable pupils to maintain a sense of normality and reduce anxieties. Focused teaching and learning provide useful opportunities to discuss issues and concerns regarding COVID-19 and to develop pupils' understanding about the importance of personal hygiene in reducing risks. The school meets as a community every day to explore pupils' anxieties and support them to understand the reasons for these changes to their daily lives at this time.

Education staff have prioritised the continuation of pupils' individualised timetables, maintaining the structure of familiar routines, which benefits pupils' wellbeing. The school maintains high levels of supervision to ensure pupils are taught by familiar members of staff who understand the risks and respond to pupils' needs accordingly. All off-site learning, educational visits and work experience have ceased, but otherwise the curriculum remains broadly the same.



All pupils and staff are temperature checked before coming into the school environment. Pupils have personal packs of stationery labelled with their name, which do not leave the school site to reduce the sharing of resources. The school uses online platforms for meetings to reduce virus transmission. It has implemented rigorous hygiene procedures that ensure the regular cleaning of shared materials, surfaces, equipment and the whole school environment. Posters prompt reminders to practise regular handwashing, and alcohol gel dispensers are situated at various points around the school.

The school pays equal attention to the emotional wellbeing of the staff team through regular supervision sessions with individual staff, morning meetings, and newsletters. This ensures that staff communicate key guidance and changes in working practices promptly. Flexible working hours and opportunities to work from home are available, where possible, in particular where staff have had personal childcare issues with their own children.

### **Strengthening work on pupils' personal and social development**

An independent special school that offers residential and day placements for pupils with complex needs and ASD has used this opportunity to strengthen its work on pupils' personal and social development, with a particular focus on healthy eating and staying safe. Pupils are often inflexible in their thought and behaviours and rely heavily on routines and structures to manage their understanding of the world around them and develop

strategies to cope with situations they perceive to be challenging. Staff have responded creatively to managing the needs of pupils during this period. For example, a pupil with a fixation on only eating food from a particular high street restaurant has been supported through this time by staff introducing new foods to this pupil using empty containers from this restaurant to extend his food choices.

### **Creating a social media platform for pupils and staff to communicate**

The school, for day pupils with SEBD, has created a social media platform for pupils and staff to communicate with each other during the period of school closure. The leadership team monitor this carefully to ensure safe use. This forum has enabled pupils to express themselves in a positive way and to encourage and support each other.

The school has also created opportunities for individual face-to-face advice and counselling to continue. By working closely with the local youth health team, they have been able to deliver wellbeing packs and facilitate specific sessions about wellbeing. These meetings take place on the school site as required and staff observe social distancing carefully.

### **Daily phone calls to all families**

The school, which provides education for primary-aged day pupils with SEBD, has made daily phone calls to all families in order to offer support and check on the wellbeing within the household. Every Tuesday, a member of staff delivers a food pack and hard copies of school work to each house. This work is marked and returned the following week. This has allowed face-to-face and socially distanced contact and given parents the opportunity to share their experiences with their child present.

### **School staff make weekly visits to all pupils' homes**

The school provides day and residential provision for pupils with a range of needs, including SEBD and ASD. School staff make weekly visits to all pupils' homes. They take hard copies of learning tasks, exercise books, and cookery materials to the families, and pick up completed work. Staff follow protocols for home visits in line with Welsh Government guidance on social distancing, and keep a record of all home visits and discussions with parents, carers and pupils on its management information system. In addition, the school has initiated a mobile safeguarding team to enable staff to respond promptly to any safeguarding concerns identified. The team regularly reviews all pupils' risk assessments and intervention plans to prioritise more frequent visits to the most vulnerable.

This regular contact with families is helping to establish strong relationships with parents, which has hitherto proved challenging for the school because of the school's location and transport arrangements. In turn, the high degree of parental engagement with the school means that their children are engaging with the work set.

### Challenges identified by school leaders

- 41 In many cases, these adaptations have been possible because there is a reduced number of learners on site at any one time, particularly for schools and colleges that cater for day learners. In these schools and colleges, the majority of learners access education and support remotely. Leaders have concerns about how these measures could be implemented on a larger scale given the current guidance on social distancing and infection control.
- 42 Many leaders report challenges in providing therapy where therapeutic interventions require face-to-face contact, either to assess learners' needs, or to provide ongoing therapy. This can be either because it is too dangerous for therapists to attend the home setting, or because learners refuse to engage online, or because the nature of the intervention is itself not suited to online delivery.
- 43 A few learners and their families do not respond to the school's or college's efforts to keep in contact.
- 44 Many leaders spoke of their concerns that vulnerable learners do not experience the range of social contacts they need, and that the period of lockdown will have been damaging to learners' physical and emotional wellbeing. In addition, many leaders express concerns about the challenges learners will face on re-integration to school or college in terms of adjusting to school routines and expectations, particularly where they have SEBD. This is likely to exacerbate further the negative impact on their learning and progress, as schools and colleges will need to focus first on these issues, as well as processing their experiences during lockdown, before they can start to concentrate again on academic learning.

---

## Communication

---

### How schools have adapted their practice

- 45 All schools and colleges understand the need for clear communication with staff. Leaders report that they do this through either direct contact, email or online meetings. The frequency of meetings varies between providers and over time.
- 46 In independent mainstream schools, communication with parents started mainly with the aim of providing information. More recently, leaders have conducted parental surveys to assess levels of satisfaction with current arrangements and levels of support for different proposals for ways forward.
- 47 A few mainstream independent schools that are either part of a larger organisation or who have personal contacts have gained advice and guidance from school leaders around the world. These overseas schools were already addressing issues relating to educating pupils during the pandemic and could offer helpful advice.
- 48 Several mainstream independent schools report that coping with the pandemic has brought the school community closer together. Many schools feel that it is important to maintain informal contact with staff through quiz nights for example.
- 49 Nearly all independent special schools and specialist colleges describe how they have implemented arrangements for keeping in touch with learners and their families or carers on a regular basis. Where schools and colleges are attached to children's or residential homes, the close liaison between teachers and care home staff because of this working model has been further strengthened by adaptations to the curriculum and changes to staffing models caused by the need to minimise the risk of cross contamination.
- 50 Specialist schools and colleges that educate day learners use a variety of approaches to maintain contact with parents, including regular phone calls, garden gate conversations and online meetings. In most cases, leaders report that these arrangements are working well and are appreciated by most parents and carers.
- 51 In many cases, leaders report that the enhanced contact with families is proving a positive and unintended consequence of the lockdown. Typically, many pupils who have day placements at independent special schools come to school by taxi and, as a consequence, parents and carers do not have regular contact with the school. Leaders are considering carefully how they can maintain this enhanced contact when normal transport arrangements resume.
- 52 Most schools and colleges report that they have been in regular contact with placing authorities since the lockdown began to advise and update them of the measures they have put in place to support the continuation of learning. Most have strengthened their use of online platforms to hold regular meetings, as well as to communicate with external stakeholders. A minority of the providers contacted have continued to hold calendared meetings to review pupils' progress, including statutory reviews of statements or EHCPs.



### **Developing a distance learning curriculum programme**

One independent mainstream all-age school, which is part of an international group, was able to use the knowledge and experience of other schools that had experienced the pandemic. Leaders very swiftly produce a detailed distance learning curriculum programme that was shared with all parents.

This booklet contained a message from the headteacher as well as relevant information regarding:

#### **Academic systems**

- The structure of a distance learning week
- Timetables for each stage of the school
- Information about the technology platforms being used
- Guidance relating to screen time
- Expectations for registration, marking and assessment and homework

#### **Pastoral systems**

- Reward systems
- The school counsellor
- The broader curriculum

#### **Communication procedures**

- How to keep in touch
- Expectations – of the school, pupils and families
- Safeguarding guidance for working online

### **Creating an informative weekly newsletter for staff, pupils and parents**

An all-age boarding school produces an engaging and informative weekly newsletter for staff, pupils and parents. This newsletter promotes and strengthens the school's community spirit and includes a broad range of relevant and helpful information and guidance, for example to assist parents in supporting their children's learning. Among the items included are examples of work secondary and primary pupils have completed, guidance for sixth form pupils in relation to university entry, reports of specific activities carried out by pupils in the local community and accounts of the work of the ecoschool team. The headteacher offers a weekly message to complement the school's personal and social education (PSE) programme and, in particular, the 'theme of the week'. This reinforces the headteacher's virtual assemblies and the chaplain's messages and videos. It is also an opportunity to encourage pupils to support the work of specific charities and to promote a range of activities to support pupils' physical health and wellbeing.

### **Weekly virtual assemblies**

In a small independent mainstream primary school with a number of international pupils, the weekly virtual assembly is held later in the school day to facilitate the attendance of international pupils in the Middle East. The headteacher also holds a weekly cookery class, which many pupils participate in and others watch.

### **Regular small bite-size messages for parents**

A headteacher in an independent mainstream school visits all virtual classrooms each day to maintain contact with pupils and parents. This approach gives the headteacher the opportunity to respond to queries, and to hear about a child's progress and any changes in the family context. The school has been proactive in responding to issues raised. For example, in response to queries raised by parents about supporting distance and online working, the school has set-up a weekly 'parent clinic'. Relevant staff provide advice on topics such as, for younger children, how to access documents and upload their child's work. Each evening, the school sends parents details of the activities and the tasks their child will aim to complete the next day so that parents have a clear understanding about what their child will be doing and, if they want, opportunity to research the area themselves. The school has lent equipment to parents such as laptops or tablets where there are large sibling groups, and given additional one-to-one support to children in contexts where parents cannot provide this, for example parents who are key workers or single parents trying to work from home.

### **Reassuring the whole household through daily community meetings**

A school for pupils with SEBD, ASD, and associated learning difficulties has worked closely with staff in its attached children's home to enable pupils to continue with their learning. Teachers provide lessons using a range of electronic and paper resources and the care home staff support the pupils with their tasks. There is regular communication between teaching and care staff through a daily handover to discuss what has been done by pupils and how best to support them. This communication has been strengthened further by redeploying learning support assistants to work in the care home. As a result, residential and education staff have developed close working relationships. In addition, staff and pupils have a daily community meeting, which helps to reassure the whole household, alleviate anxiety and give all members a chance to talk about how they are feeling and share their progress.

### Developing a better understanding of the total communication system used at the college

The close contact between staff at a residential specialist college and parents and carers of learners who have returned home during this period is helping to develop better understanding of the total communication system used at the college. As a result of the efforts to use the system at home, and the online therapeutic support provided by college staff, learners are experiencing greater consistency in the approach.

### Supporting families and staff via live streaming platforms

An independent special school that provides day placements for pupils who have moderate to severe learning difficulties and social and emotional difficulties has made useful arrangements to support the wellbeing of its pupils as well as promote continuity in learning. Staff plan activities using a range of electronic and paper resources and deliver personalised learning packs to pupils' homes. Tasks are set without the pressure of time limits for completion. The school has also made suggestions for online learning and activities.



The school is supporting its pupils, their families and its staff via live streaming platforms. The school adheres to guidelines published by the Welsh Government for the safe use of live streaming. In addition, the school sent pupils, parents and carers NSPCC guidelines for staying safe online at the beginning of lockdown.

The school provides a timetable of activities for pupils and staff on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. All sessions are delivered within tutor groups which have no more than six students in each. Activities include an opportunity for pupils to catch-up with tutors, games, story-telling and quizzes. If a pupil fails to attend a session, the headteacher contacts the home to ensure that all is well. The school continues to monitor and track pupils' attitudes to learning.

Online staff meetings are held on Mondays. This enables all staff members to keep in touch and for all concerns to be raised and addressed.

### Challenges identified by leaders

- 53 The majority of leaders report inconsistency across local authorities in their approach to holding meetings to review progress or pupils' statements of SEN and EHCPs. While some were continuing to hold these online, others had deferred them indefinitely or until it was safe to attend in person.

## On-site learning

### How schools have adapted their practice

- 54 All schools and colleges contacted report that they have made arrangements to ensure continuity in learning since the general closure of schools. For schools and colleges attached to children's or residential homes, where the provider caters only for these pupils, teachers may be continuing to teach on site, or may be providing work to be delivered by care home staff, supplemented by live streaming. Nevertheless, even these providers have been required to make adjustments to their model to implement suitable health and safety measures to minimise the risk of cross contamination. Frequently, this has resulted in changes to the curriculum, for example a reduction in off-site activities, which has led in turn to an increase in outdoor learning on the school grounds. Schools that cater for pupils from more than one children's home (the 'hub and spoke' model) have modified timetables and reviewed staffing arrangements to reduce social contact and potential infection.
- 55 A few providers report that for some learners the measures taken to enable social distancing had actually helped to promote greater independence in learning. This is generally because teaching staff have been required to think of alternatives to close physical one-to-one support to ensure learners understand and remain on task, for example through the use of visual clues and objects of reference.
- 56 A minority of mainstream schools remained open to provide education for the children of key workers. This decision was based upon demand for this service in each setting.

### The value of outdoor learning

An independent special school that educates pupils that live in the company's attached children's homes is making more use of the extensive woodland environment surrounding the homes. Pupils value having much greater time outdoors to learn about the wildlife around their homes and how to best care for the environment. The woodland workshop on site is being used to enable pupils to improve their bush craft skills and understanding of tools and machinery to construct wooden shelters. Pupils have also designed and renovated garden spaces, including recycling a Belfast sink and using barrels as planters.

Pupils sharing houses enjoy daily exercise routines such as circuit training and they regularly compete in sporting activities to show off their skills, including ball handling.

Pupils' mental health and wellbeing benefit from these opportunities to learn, keep fit and enjoy the outside space together. They work in partnership with their carers to explore the local area and what it has to offer. This supports the development of better relationships between the staff and pupils. Over time, this is helping pupils learn to trust in adults, a feature which for many had not been present in their lives

### **Independent special schools**

An independent special school that provides education and therapy for pupils who live in one of the five children's homes attached to the school has reviewed its timetabling arrangements to enable to pupils to remain in their residential bubbles.

The school allocated specific staff to work with the groups of pupils in order to reduce the risk of possible infection and pupils access the school site according to a weekly rota. The PE and outdoor education teacher visit every house on a weekly basis and deliver fitness sessions within the grounds of each house. This has enabled staff to maintain face-to-face teaching with a defined group of pupils at a suitable distance

### **Providing education across eight children's homes**

The school provides education in classrooms attached to each of its eight children's homes. Because of this model, it has been able to continue to provide education for all pupils throughout the period of the pandemic with minor modifications to its procedures. For example, it has suspended the rotation of tutors between the different homes and has temporarily restricted access to the community to minimise the risk of infection. Staff have also introduced a number of changes to the curriculum to include more opportunities to focus on pupils' wellbeing. For example there are increased opportunities for physical exercise, outdoor learning and mindfulness. In order to enable pupils to maintain social contact with their peers living in different houses, the school has introduced inter-house virtual challenges and competitions, for example a talent contest and inter-house bake-off.

### **Reorganising the school timetable to provide consistency and support for anxious pupils**

The school provides education for pupils with a range of needs including high anxieties based on their previous life experiences. All pupils live in the children's home that shares the school site. Staff have reorganised the school timetable to provide consistency for pupils' learning and to support any anxieties they may be exhibiting. In line with social distancing guidance, the school ensures that there are no more than two pupils in the class area at any one time. Pupils rotate through activities including one-to-one teacher-led online lessons in a separate area of the school and class-based activities. The clinical therapy team support pupils throughout the week using an online platform. As a result, all pupils have continued to access learning and have opportunities to discuss their concerns and anxieties with staff and the clinical therapy team.

### On-site ice cream parlour and shop

Pupils who attend this residential independent special school experience a range of complex needs including ASD. Nearly all require consistent routines and structures as a condition for successful learning. Due to the current situation, staff at the school have had to think of creative ways to support the pupils to continue their independent living and community participation skills. For example, they have developed an on-site ice cream parlour and shop. Pupils run the ice cream parlour and shop as well as access it to buy items. Pupils have adapted to these changes well and have enjoyed being able to use the shop to buy snacks as well as having an afternoon treat in the ice cream parlour. This approach has enabled the school to continue to support and develop pupils' independent living skills, in spite of the restrictions on community access.



### Extending PSE activities to strengthen pupils' wellbeing

An independent special school that offers residential and day placements for pupils with complex needs and ASD, has had to restrict pupils' access to off-site activities during the pandemic. The school does not have extensive grounds but staff have been creative in supporting the pupils during this time by re-designating an area in the school to open an on-site school shop. Pupils can buy items and run the shop as part of their activities. Consequently, pupils continue to develop their independent living skills. In addition to this, the school has extended its PSE activities to strengthen pupils' wellbeing. Sessions introduced include yoga, additional dance sessions, drama, Zumba, boot camp and a variety of keep fit activities. These activities are helping pupils understand the changes they are experiencing and to manage better their feelings and emotions.

## Challenges identified by leaders

- 57 Schools and colleges that educate day learners have had to restrict the number of learners on site at any one time. In most cases, they have agreed with local authorities which learners should continue to attend based on risk assessments of their needs and vulnerabilities. However, a few of the most vulnerable pupils have been assessed as being too high risk to attend, as their personal and family circumstances mean that it is unlikely that they have been observing the lockdown or practising social distancing.
- 58 Leaders report that the reduction in off-site activities has restricted opportunities for learners to acquire and practise valuable social and independence skills in the community, for example through participation in team sports, leisure activities, travel training and work experience. This inevitably impacts negatively on their progress

against the targets in their IEPs, statements and EHCPs. Several leaders express concern about the impact this will have on learners' transition, and how local authorities and the Welsh Government will view this in future reviews of progress.

---

## Distance learning

---

### How have schools adapted their practice

- 59 In mainstream independent schools, leaders describe a variety of approaches to implementing distance learning depending upon the size and age profile of schools. Leaders also express the view that they need to be flexible to meet the needs of both staff and pupils. A few leaders who anticipated the lockdown took early action to review policies, upskill staff and ensure that arrangements for distance learning were in place.
- 60 The approach to the traditional school timetable in mainstream schools has varied. Whilst some schools have tried to maintain a normal timetable, others have adjusted their provision, often after feedback from teachers, parents or pupils.
- 61 Where schools started by teaching a full timetable, several then reduced the length or number of lessons. In other cases, the live contact time for younger pupils was increased at the request of parents. Workload for both staff and pupils is monitored regularly and adaptations made where necessary. Parental expectations have had to be managed in a situation that is new to all.
- 62 Generally, mainstream schools say that they continue to provide additional support to pupils with SEN. Often this involves 'break out sessions' on the online platform used by the school. Schools with secondary-aged pupils have devised 'pre-A Level' bridging courses and preparation for university courses for their Year 11 and Year 13 pupils respectively.
- 63 Independent special schools and colleges that educate day learners, or a mix of day and residential learners, have developed strategies that meet the different circumstances of these groups of learners. While this may include the delivery of lessons or the sharing of resources via online platforms, this is not always practical because of the challenges these pupils face to their learning or because of their family circumstances. In these cases, schools facilitate distance learning by delivering 'hard copies' or activity packs to the family home that either replace or supplement planned online activities. Leaders report that where this is particularly successful, planning includes practical activities that follow the curriculum that pupils follow at school, and that build suitably on the development of practical and independence skills.
- 64 Many special schools and colleges speak positively of the enhanced communication between the provider and families as a result of these arrangements. In many cases, parents and carers have responded positively, appreciated the provider's efforts to

provide learning and stay in touch, and have done their best to support their child's learning at home.

- 65 A few providers speak of the unexpected benefits of online learning for a few pupils in promoting greater independence, and self-reliance.

#### **Balancing work and holiday time**

Adjusting to the feedback about distance learning, a small all-age school is teaching in three-week slots, followed by a week's holiday. Parents, pupils and staff all prefer this approach, finding it 'less exhausting'

- 66 A few schools restructured their school timetable to reduce the length or number of lessons

#### **Restructuring the timetable**

One school restructured its teaching timetable to provide three 1.5-hour sessions. These sessions consist of:

- 30 minutes – live streamed teacher introduction / setting scene / explanations / discussion of work
- 30 minutes where pupils can ask questions / clarify / seek support
- 30 minutes independent learning

- 67 A few schools have adapted their curriculum arrangements. In a few primary schools, the focus has been on English and mathematics.

#### **A virtual Spanish day**

In one primary school, all subject areas are continuing through distance learning, including drama and Spanish, with the school devising different and interesting ways to sustain pupils' enthusiasm and interests. For example, the usual Year 6 trip to Spain was cancelled, and pupils have therefore held a virtual Spanish Day. There is an emphasis on staying connected within the school community. To support this approach within the curriculum, after half-term, Wednesdays will become 'off-curriculum topic days' with challenge days for each year group including a careers day, which will involve parents, and a construction day where pupils will design an object such as a float for a carnival or bridge.

#### **Supporting and maintaining learning for pupils who are shielding at home**

A provider for pupils with PMLD, that has day and residential pupils, has made arrangements to support and maintain learning for pupils who are shielding at home. The school sends home a weekly timetable of learning activities for pupils that provide structure to the day but are not restrictive.



For example, each day starts with a song and includes a range of suggested activities to engage and interest pupils without putting too much pressure on pupils and their parents. In addition, all parents have access to online or telephone consultation with the school's therapy department, including occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and physiotherapy.

Examples of activities for secondary school pupils:

- Focus on wellbeing – creating a positive jar; write down a new positive thought each day / week
- Making weekly diary entries using eye gaze – my time in lockdown
- Fact files on various topics covered for example – making an animal fact-file after a focus on endangered animals
- Focus on life skills – make a healthy meal for your family using eye gaze to create instructions
- Focus on national celebration days – VE Day

For primary school pupils, each week has a focus on a book with activities drawn from a story, for example:

- Monkey Puzzle – activities involve learning the signs for the main animals and exploring symmetry through painting butterflies
- The Very Hungry Caterpillar – activities include listening to the story and making fruit kebabs; using actual or playdough fruit

The above activities are supplemented with suggested time for physiotherapy and stretches, and online links to songs and stories.

### **Enjoying practical outdoor activities with online support**

When the lockdown began, a school, which provides day placements for pupils with SEBD, had just updated its information technology system. A prompt series of professional dialogues with their colleagues left staff excited by the challenge of using their newly acquired system and their updated skills to support teaching.

They quickly developed different aspects of their online technology to suit the varying needs of the wide age range of pupils at the school. The school has found that even the most practical outdoor activities can be enjoyed using technology: one member of staff found that gardening, including building a pond online with a pupil, was surprisingly easy. A few staff have been cooking and baking cakes online with pupils and their parents. These activities are helping pupils, and their families to engage in learning in new, motivational ways.



For a few pupils, the opportunity to work from home using technology has helped them to realise that developing expertise in technology may make their future career options more achievable.

Parents have been encouraged to work online with their children and this has provided staff with daily opportunities to engage with families. A daily challenge has become very popular with families. The challenges are wide and varied, including following instructions to make a set of juggling balls

out of old socks and rice then following video instructions to learn to juggle. These challenges have, for a few parents in particular, had a positive impact on relationships between them and their children.

### **Designing a garden planter**

This independent special school that provides placements for residential and day pupils quickly ensured that all day pupils were able to access equipment for online learning. They distributed school devices and pre-loaded them with relevant software. This allows the pupils to engage with online learning via a platform that the school had established. Pupils are given the task of designing and submitting a plan for a garden planter. These were then made by staff at the school using the 3D printer. The planters were delivered to the pupils along with seeds and soil and have become the basis of a cross-curricular project incorporating English, mathematics and science.

### **Taking a flexible approach to meet the different needs of its pupils**

This independent special school provides day and 52-week residential provision for pupils aged from 7 to 16 years with a range of needs, including SEBD and ASD. The school has responded to the challenges provided by the pandemic by adopting a flexible approach to meet the different needs of its pupils. It is continuing to offer on-site teaching to around nine very vulnerable pupils. Pupils attend from 9:00 to 2:00 and provision is tailored to small groups of pupils with consistent staff. Another team of staff deliver lessons via an online platform for all other pupils, including those who reside in the children's home attached to the school.

## **Challenges identified by leaders**

- 68 Independent special schools and colleges that educate day learners face different challenges in providing meaningful activities for their learners, many of whom, by nature of their SEN, are likely to find it more challenging to engage with distance learning. Many independent special school pupils in particular experience periods of

disruption to their education prior to their placement at the school and do not have a picture of themselves as successful learners. Generally, these pupils have less access to their own ICT resources to enable online learning at home, and overall their domestic and family circumstances may not be amenable to home learning. As a result, schools report that the engagement of these pupils in learning is inconsistent with many pupils not engaging consistently with the work set.

- 69 In addition, while school leaders report that work is being set in all cases, it is not possible to evaluate how effective this work is. While the majority of schools appear to have suitable arrangements for the collection of work and assessing work completed, a minority do not because of perceived risks around contamination. As a result, it is likely that many day pupils learning remotely are not making suitable progress in their learning.
- 70 Leaders say that in a few cases, parents and carers are reluctant to support their child's learning at home and did not appreciate the school or college's efforts to stay in touch. Leaders also report the difficulties that many parents faced in supporting their children's education at home, either because of their own learning difficulties, the nature of their child's needs, or the difficulty in balancing this with the demands of their own work.

---

## Arrangements to support the transition of new pupils joining the school

---

### How schools have adapted their practice

- 71 Many independent special schools and colleges are facing challenges in facilitating transition processes for learners joining the school or college, as well as for those preparing to leave. They have adapted their usual procedures to support the transition of new learners to the school or college. For example, they use online meetings to complete face-to-face assessments, where this is relevant to individual learners' needs. In a few cases, providers have continued to admit new learners during the pandemic. By following health guidelines, they conduct site tours and hold meetings with the family and prospective learners on site even when there have been no learners on site. This has enabled them to introduce key staff who will then work with the learner remotely in the first instance until the school is able to reopen fully.
- 72 Where schools are attached to residential homes, induction procedures into the school have occurred as usual, after the learner has first settled into the home.

### **Ensuring a phased approach to transition**

A school, which caters for pupils with complex needs and behaviours associated with ASD, has continued to accept new pupils to its school and attached on-site residential home throughout this period. The headteacher, working collaboratively with the multi-disciplinary team, local authorities, social services, parents and pupils have used an online platform to enable all assessments, meetings and taster visits to the school to continue. Access to daily sessions between teachers, pupils and parents and to the clinical assessment team has ensured that phased transition arrangements specific to each pupil's individual needs are in place. An outcome of this adapted approach to admissions for the school has identified the benefits of reducing travel time of professionals to conduct such work. The headteacher reports that this approach is likely to be retained as part of the ongoing transition arrangements for pupils to the school.

### **A transition process that focuses on pupil safety**

This small residential school, which supports pupils with a range of behavioural challenges, has continued to admit pupils to the school during the pandemic. Using a carefully planned approach based on individual needs, residential, school, and clinical staff have developed a transition process to enable pupils to join the provision safely. Each pupil has a standard induction programme where they establish routines within the care home situation as the first planned step. Risk assessments are in place to safeguard pupils and staff across the provision. Additional care staff are in place to support transition between the home and school setting. The school has identified alternative learning areas in the main school building to accommodate the additional pupils and support their introduction to the school. This allows the pupils already established at the school to manage the changes to the group dynamics with the minimum of interruption to their already established routines. New pupils have sessions in the school during their first week to understand the school routines and to develop a timetable based on their interests and needs

### **Challenges identified by leaders**

- 73 School and colleges report that it has been particularly difficult to ensure continuity in the arrangements to support learners preparing to leave the school or college at the end of the summer term. This is because, typically, the planning to support learners' transition to a new destination involves collaboration between several parties, and is usually co-ordinated by the local authority. It is difficult for providers to support this work when the learner is based at home, is unable to visit their next placement and meet the individuals they will be living or working with, or when decisions about learners' next steps have been delayed or postponed.
- 74 A minority of leaders express concerns that arrangements for holding reviews of learners' progress online, and other meetings to consider learners' transition, limit the

scope for person-centred planning. The physical distance between the learner and key staff means that it is difficult to consider and explore the wishes of the child and family closely enough.

- 75 Similarly, online arrangements to conduct face-to-face assessments are not reliable for many learners with complex needs. Destination schools and colleges have to rely heavily on information provided by learners' previous schools, which may not always be relevant or address fully what staff at the new placement need to know.



---

## Professional learning

---

### How schools have adapted their practice

- 76 Many providers report that they have continued to provide professional development for staff during this period through access to online training. A few have made use of the increased time available to develop and implement training programmes for staff that link to previously identified priorities for development such as the development of the curriculum or professional learning for LSAs.
- 77 Many leaders report that all staff have improved considerably their ability to use ICT and online platforms to support learning. Leaders report that staff are 'embracing emerging technology', 'have made gains in their ICT competencies' and have 'rejuvenated their teaching approaches.' Providers have also benefited from developing their systems to facilitate online meetings between staff and external stakeholders. Several schools report how this was helping their pupils to engage more happily in annual reviews as they felt more comfortable and in control than in face-to-face meetings in an enclosed environment.

### **Reviewing the curriculum**

A school for pupils with PMLD, that has day and residential pupils, has taken a strategic approach to ensuring that teaching staff who are not attending in person are engaged in a highly useful programme of planning and training. The school has used this period purposefully to work on its curriculum, which is being developed according to the principles of the Curriculum for Wales. The teachers have been able to think carefully and plan together as they develop their curriculum. The planning is bespoke and focuses on developing skills for pupils working pre-progression step 1. In addition, staff use this time to complete relevant professional development online, for example safeguarding and food hygiene training.

### **Supporting pupils who have highly challenging behaviours through applied behavioural analysis (ABA)**

An independent special school, providing day placements for pupils with complex needs that include communication difficulties associated with ASD, has invested additional time in training staff during the lockdown. Leaders believe that consistent use of applied behavioural analysis (ABA) is an effective way to support pupils who have highly challenging behaviours to make progress.

The reduced pupil numbers on site have enabled the school to provide staff with a weekly study day and regular digital study group meetings. As a result of this additional training, all staff have made progress towards achieving the registered behaviour technician (RBT) award in ABA. This means that all staff at the school now understand specific techniques to support, manage and monitor pupils' behaviour. They are now better prepared to provide the consistent approach planned by leaders.

### **Strengthening the skill set for the LSAs**

A school that offers residential and day provision for pupils with complex needs and ASD has taken this opportunity to develop a professional learning programme to strengthen the skill set for the LSAs. New teaching staff who have recently joined the school have also been able to access an enhanced induction and support programme. LSAs have received input based on a training needs analysis, their own personal interests, and the needs of pupils at the school. This has included training on SEN, ADHD, and ASD to support their understanding and roles more fully. A small number of LSAs have developed an on-site resource centre as part of their professional development.

## **Challenges identified by leaders**

- 78 The lack of an online learning portal presented initial difficulties for a few schools. The lack of staff knowledge about distance learning pedagogy, particularly ensuring

that the specific needs of each child are met, has had to be addressed. Staff have had to adapt to new ways of providing feedback and assessing the progress of pupils.

---

## Community building

---

### How schools have adapted their practice

- 79 Many mainstream independent schools have engaged in community projects, for example providing PPE for local businesses.
- 80 Many independent mainstream schools describe how they have maintained a community spirit through whole school and house assemblies, fun challenges for pupils and the continuation of weekly awards. In a few schools, particularly mainstream independent boarding schools, extra-curricular activities have continued online to retain the sense of being part of the school community, especially for pupils who have returned to their homes abroad.

#### Engaging pupils in virtual fieldtrips

The range of extra-curricular activities provided include on-line fitness sessions, gardening club and photography club. One all-age mainstream independent school has made use of online resources to engage pupils in virtual fieldtrips.

#### Preparing for and completing a virtual camp out

A mainstream independent school for pupils aged 9-18 has adjusted its learning through the outdoors programme to include sessions where pupils prepare for and complete a virtual camp out. This includes preparing a menu, packing a virtual or actual rucksack, deciding where to place the tent and reasons why, with photos from the pupils' own environment to show evidence and share and discuss with others. The programme also includes a webinar with a motivational speaker who has previously presented at school speech day. The past pupil spoke to the full school community about adapting to the 'new normal' in education and the importance of showing resilience and the ability to adapt to different challenges. The headteacher believes that pupils have engaged with the online programme enthusiastically.

## Planning for the return to on-site education for all learners

### How schools have adapted their practice

- 81 In most cases, special schools and colleges have continued to operate during the period of lockdown, albeit for a reduced number of pupils. This has given leaders an insight into what is working well under the current restrictions and they need to refine and adapt to accommodate a full return to school.
- 82 All schools and colleges are considering carefully what they need to do to prepare for the return of all learners. They are assessing what adaptations need to be made to the physical environment and what health and safety measures are required to prevent the spread of infection, particularly where learners have underlying health conditions that make them particularly vulnerable to the disease. In nearly all cases, these considerations have an impact on what can be taught and how and most providers are reviewing how their current curriculum and model of delivery can accommodate enhanced infection control measures. Communications with parents and ensuring parental confidence about returning to school are key.
- 83 Where there have been unexpected positive consequences from their current practice, for example the use of ICT to support learning or the benefits of allowing staff to work from home, providers are considering how these can be incorporated into their future practice to retain these benefits.

#### **A video to welcome their pupils back to school**

Many mainstream independent schools have recorded a video to welcome their pupils back to school. The films show the pupils and parents what to expect when they return to school. They include details about drop off points, 'bubbles', classroom lay out and cleaning arrangements. Another mainstream independent primary school is completing 'virtual recruitment', including using favourite moment video messages by Year 6 pupils

#### **Delivering education packs to the residential houses for the majority of residential learners who have remained on site**

A specialist college that provides day and residential placements for learners with moderate to profound and multiple learning difficulties, physical difficulties and ASD has continued to provide education for its learners, either on-site or remotely. Tutors deliver education packs to the residential houses for the majority of residential learners who have remained on site, or ensure that these are posted to the houses of those learning remotely. In addition, a few day learners attend on site where this has been identified as a priority by individual learners' social workers.



As the pandemic has developed, the college has been liaising with social workers to plan learners' return to on-site education and what additional support will be necessary to enable their successful re-integration to college. As part of this, leaders are considering what staffing models will be necessary and re-dedicating existing teaching areas for specific staff/learner combinations to minimise unnecessary contact and how to demarcate



teaching areas to enable social distancing to take place according to Welsh Government guidance.

In addition, the college is looking at what aspects of the current practice will be retained as part of its model of provision moving forward, for example maintaining the arrangement where tutors are allocated to residential houses, as well as having their own on-site tutorial group. The college is also considering how it can continue to use online tutorials for those who can access these, as they have been

found to support some learners' independence, and for staff development and training, as well as how effective working from home can be for staff.

### **Re-introducing pupils to community activities**

The range of needs of pupils attending this residential special school, including high levels of anxiety and high vulnerabilities of pupils, mean that staff are mindful of the impact the withdrawal of community access is having for all pupils. A key focus of the work of staff in normal times is to support the pupils to engage in the community safely. School, residential and clinical staff are planning a recovery model that will reintroduce pupils to community activities. This involves a gradual phased transition to key activities with enhanced risk assessments in place, the need to discuss with each pupil their concerns about re-engaging with the community and scenarios they could face when the lockdown is lifted. Pupils appreciate the increased opportunities to discuss their anxieties around this issue and actions they can take to remediate against them.

### Challenges identified by leaders

- 84 As with many providers, schools and colleges have found it an ongoing challenge to reassure staff, parents and learners about future plans while they are uncertain of when and how all learners will return to onsite learning. In many cases, schools and colleges work with individual learners with very specific needs and leaders have had to work out how to interpret and apply guidance in these very specific circumstances.
- 85 Logistical concerns include the challenges presented by school transportation, the practicalities of the school building, issues for boarding houses and the return of international pupils.
- 86 Wellbeing concerns include the recognition of a potential need for ‘bereavement’ counselling. Also, schools anticipate a particular impact of lockdown in terms of ‘lonely’ children. One school noted that they had already noticed that children with no siblings were finding it more difficult to cope with the lockdown. A few schools are looking for guidance about what to look for when pupils return and how to support pupils’ wellbeing.
- 87 With distance learning, schools’ main concerns relate to the difficulty of operating a mixed economy of both in school and on-line learning. Depending upon when schools are able to reopen, a school was considering placing their primary age pupils in their current class in September to establish a period of ‘normality’ before moving them up a class.