



Powys Schools Service COVID-19 Response

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1. Introduction

In light of the points raised by the Children's Commissioner for Wales in her recent letter to the Chief Executives of local authorities in Wales, we are pleased to be able to report that Powys County Council has so far proved to be both agile and conscientious in its response to the Coronavirus pandemic, and most especially in those areas highlighted by the Commissioner.

The Authority has acted swiftly and decisively to develop new working practices and resources to ensure the provision of both educational and wellbeing support for the County's children and young people. At the same time, PCC has been able to supply free, good quality childcare for the children of essential workers within the region, and has delivered guidance, support and protective measures for our staff. Powys has been committed to exceeding the expectations placed on it and has consistently gone above and beyond the requirements of the nationally issued guidelines and directives. This report offers a brief overview of the most significant of these activities and highlights how Powys has met the challenges offered by the pandemic and subsequent disruption to everyday life.

2. Schools/education

2.1 Digital Connectivity

The Powys School Service has ensured that during the first two weeks of the Continuity of Learning Plan, schools have been supported through guidance and the establishment of good practice. Practical support has been supplied to enable schools to meet the challenges encountered with regard to connectivity and making sure that all pupils are able to take part in online learning activities.

Following enquiry, it was recognised that some families in Powys with school-age children do not have access to home Wi-Fi or to a suitable device that would allow their children to take part in digital learning activities. In order to address this issue, schools and other services were asked to identify available devices and by the beginning of May 881 devices had been sourced, reconfigured and redistributed to learners. By June, through close working with Welsh Government, 532 4G MiFi dongles had been purchased and distributed to families within the County.

2.2 Teaching and Timetabling

Schools within Powys will be opened for four weeks during July and will be using this time to place increased focus on pupil wellbeing and how best to build on the progress already made in this area. With the requirement for smaller class sizes and up to a maximum of a third of the pupils on site at any one time, schools are beginning to plan an approach that will allow available resources to be utilised to greatest effect. Extensive preparation work has already been carried out with regards to the establishment of a range of 'blended learning' options

that will maximise both staff and environmental flexibility to changing circumstances through a combination of periods of 'open' or face-to-face teaching, 'closed' or all-digital learning, and 'partial opening' that will include both digital and face-to-face lessons.

Digital learning networks are being developed and schools are receiving support through the provision of guidance and useful examples on a weekly basis. Where schools within Powys have successfully adopted digital resources or approaches these are being shared across the region as examples of good practice.

3. Vulnerable Learners

Within Powys, the Schools Service, Children's Services and health professionals have been working successfully together to quickly identify vulnerable learners and to ensure that they can be effectively monitored and supported. While Powys has deliberately opted to keep the definition of a 'vulnerable learner' loose and non-proscriptive, it has included:

- Children and families who are supported by the Team Around the Family
- Children and families who receive input from Care and Support
- Children who are included on the Child Protection register
- Children Looked After
- Children with disabilities
- Children with Statements of SEN, or with lower levels of ALN/SEN
- Children with Hearing or Visual Impairments (Sensory Support Service are maintaining regular contact)
- Children who are Young Carers
- Children with other wellbeing needs
- Children with Statements of SEN who are on roll at a maintained special school
- Children on roll at the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)

In addition, staff have identified a number of learners that they consider to be vulnerable, but who may not fall within the official definition provided by Welsh Government.

Each Childcare hub has been provided with a list of children within their catchment area who are included on the CLA or CP lists. This list is checked, updated and redistributed weekly by the Schools Service.

Learners who would normally attend either a special school or the PRU are receiving provision within a rota system that ensures that there is access for all pupils to the ECSH. This also ensures that suitable members of staff who have received the relevant training, will be available on site to meet the needs of each individual learner.

The YIS have liaised with pastoral and safeguarding leads within high schools to identify young people who might benefit from the additional support offered by the service. Together with the Detached Youth Work Team they have worked with schools to identify learners in Year 11 who may experience difficulty in making a successful transition into employment,

education or training, either as a result of an existing situation or as a consequence of the potential negative impact of the pandemic on their future plans. Working in partnership with Career Wales and other organisations, they will offer support to enable these young people to maximise their potential and attain satisfactory post-Year 11 destinations.

The Detached Youth Work Team also continues to offer one to one support to the vulnerable young people aged 16-25 open to the team, including those learners who are in post-16 Education, and to work in partnership with Housing in order to offer essential support to the increasing number of young people who have presented as homeless at this time.

4. Childcare

4.1 Childcare for School-Aged Children

In response to the directive from Welsh Government, Powys staff have worked hard to provide free childcare of a high quality for the children of essential workers and for those children identified as being vulnerable. In Powys, the obligation has been interpreted to mean the delivery of childcare between 8am and 6pm on seven days of the week including full provision over public and bank holidays.

Childcare commenced in Powys on 27th March 2020, a week after the closure and repurposing of schools. Powys has provided 16 Emergency Childcare Hubs (ECH) and has also established two dedicated Emergency Childcare Specialist Hubs (ECSP) sited within the special schools/PRU to cater for and protect our most vulnerable learners. The ECSHs are open as requested and for identified pupils.

The total weekly numbers of children accessing the hubs have ranged between 148 – 245 over the period of provision. From the 29th July, when schools will reopen, the existing hubs will revert to providing childcare for the children from their own establishment and a further five hubs will be opened in leisure centres to meet the anticipated increase in essential workers requiring care for their children.

4.2 Early Years Childcare

In order to deliver the WG Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS) the Powys Childcare Team set up a pre-school emergency childcare allocation system to support parents and enable them to find suitable and available provision that would allow them to continue in their roles as critical workers. Between 23rd March and 29th June, 28 settings remained open to support critical worker families and vulnerable children. The make-up of the provision comprised maintained and private settings based within schools and sharing premises with the Childcare Hubs, non-maintained privately run settings, and childminders. During this period 271 preschool children per week were provided with early years childcare and 325 critical keyworkers families were supported with early years childcare.

Where gaps in provision were identified, the Childcare Team worked with providers to ensure sufficient and appropriate childcare was made available and this included lowering the age of CIW registration for five childcare settings in order to provide sufficient spaces for children between the ages of 0-3 years. Appropriate equipment and resources were purchased to support this extra childcare provision for younger children. New CIW registered provision was set up in the Presteigne area where there was no available childcare for families of keyworkers and the registration process was fast-tracked, taking just over a week. Additional provision was also opened up in Welshpool to meet the increased demand for childcare for vulnerable children.

The Childcare team has worked tirelessly to coordinate the opening and closing of the provision, staff rotas and catering provision on a weekly basis and has assisted with the redeployment of maintained staff to support childcare providers who otherwise would have had insufficient staff to be able to offer their services. Weekend and bank holiday childcare was sourced and provided to families who had requested this cover. Weekend care was provided by 4 childcare providers who cared for 10 children during this period and bank holiday care was provided by 26 of the 28 settings. Childcare for older siblings was offered to five families where it was considered a more suitable option for the children to be cared for in one setting. PPE requirements were coordinated for the C-CAS providers over this period.

Since 29th June a further 20 childcare providers have opened their doors and in preparation the Childcare Team distributed the Welsh Government guidance and a comprehensive suite of support tools, including sample policies and risk assessments, to all Powys childcare providers. In order to support both the childcare sector and the families who use the service, the funding model has been adapted to allow children to return to their previous settings when this has been requested by their parents. Powys is now funding 17 childminders and 30 day nursery settings to deliver C-CAS funded hours to families. During the week of 29th June, the Childcare Team allocated spaces to 373 children of critical workers and 17 vulnerable children. A total of 468 critical worker parents received support during that week.

Powys Childcare Team completed the CIW registrations to allow childcare to be provided for school age children in 4 Leisure Centres and again, these were fast-tracked to allow the process to be completed within a week. The Team continue to process the C-CAS applications on a weekly basis.

4.3 Early Help Provision

As a result of the limitations imposed by Covid-19 the Authority has been unable to provide face-to-face universal groups but have instead increased one-to-one parenting support via online platforms that include Microsoft teams, Skype and WhatsApp. An initial pilot trial carried out with eight families worked well and the team are now running two additional groups and planning to roll out a universal service from September. A range of other support activities have also been moved into online environments including multi agency meetings, parenting co-ordination meetings, Emotional Health and Wellbeing Network meetings and Early Intervention meetings.

The Family Information Service Outreach support has continued to provide support via telephone, email and the Family Information Service Facebook page. The information shared via these platforms has included updates on support services and resources and has worked to maintain a presence offering information regarding domestic abuse services and child and adolescent mental health support. Family Support workers continue to provide assistance and support to families that are at risk of stepping into Statutory services if their needs are not met by Early help and the Stronger Families support workers continue to offer help to primary school children and their families through the provision of resources and transition packs.

4.4 Health and Safety Procedures

PPE has been supplied in all childcare hubs; in the 14 ECHs, it is available to safeguard staff in the event that they are required to interact with pupils who are displaying symptoms and need to be isolated under supervision while awaiting collection by their parents. In the ECSHs, additional PPE is available for use while assisting with feeding and/or intimate care. Long distance infrared thermometers have been purchased for use in the hubs and COVID-19 tests are available for all staff who display symptoms that may indicate infection with the virus.

Bespoke safeguarding policies have been developed for use in both ECHs and ECSHs and a 'Team around the Hub' has been put in place at each location. These teams are comprised of a challenge adviser, an ALN manager, a foundation phase advisory teacher, a Xenzone counsellor, an Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) and a member of the Social Services team. These teams have fostered a close working partnership between the Education Services, Children's Services, Youth Service, Sports and PTHB and this has facilitated an agile and adaptive response to what has been an unpredictable and swiftly changing situation.

5. Wellbeing:

5.1 Wellbeing Workstream

The wellbeing of our children and young people has recently, as always, been of primary importance to the authority and PCC has strived to ensure that all new educational and childcare processes developed during this concerning and disorienting time are focussed around supporting and protecting this group. In order to address this issue an Emotional Health and Wellbeing Workstream was established in Powys on 20th March and continues to meet weekly to provide co-ordinated support and guidance for all early years' settings, schools, special schools and PRU within the County. Through the Workstream, colleagues from education, educational psychology team, youth services, health, and children's services and also from commissioned services, such as counselling organisations are working in partnership with representative headteachers from mainstream schools, special schools and

PRU. The Workstream's actions are informed by the new 'Powys Emotional Health and Wellbeing Strategy', and this document was circulated to all schools and early years' settings in March 2020. The Workstream provides a platform for colleagues to share concerns, identify i89 changing areas of need and to provide support, guidance and training. The workstream also works closely with the emergency childcare hubs to provide a 'team around the hub' and with challenge advisers to share resources in support of the continuity of learning. Examples of information and links provided and shared by the Workstream include:

- A wellbeing resource for primary schools. A useful book to assist in explaining Coronavirus to primary pupils, available in Welsh, English and other languages. These resources are available on the Penaethiaid Powys Headteacher network on HWB
- Powys SEN /ALN network on HWB <https://hwb.gov.wales/networks/f8a73fdf-3918-46a5-8fa2b8e8da9876d8> which provides an extensive bank of resources and proforma
- Powys Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing in Schools community network on HWB <https://hwb.gov.wales/go/ylij281>
- World Health Organisation WHO – Helping children cope with stress during the COVID-19 outbreak: https://www.who.int/docs/defaultsource/coronaviruse/helping-childrencope-with-stressprint.pdf?sfvrsn=f3a063ff_2
- Support for parents - Powys Top Ten Tips for Parents during lockdown. 10 Top Tips to support parents and carers of babies and young children suitable from birth to 4 at home. Available in Welsh and English
- Anna Freud – 'Mentally Healthy Schools' <https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/risks-and-protective-factors/school-based-risk-factors/transitions/>
- Covidbook: Foundation Phase <https://www.mindheart.co/descargables> An interactive resource designed to support and reassure children aged 7 and under, designed to help children explain and draw the emotions that they might be experiencing during the pandemic (available in English, Welsh and many other languages)
- Anxiety Booklet: produced by Powys Youth Service
- CAMHS – A set of resources produced by CAMHS

5.2 Children's and Young People's Mental Health in Powys

During the period of lockdown there has been a significant increase in recorded instances of young people and children within the County experiencing anxiety and a range of other mental health issues. A corresponding increase in demand for counselling has resulted in 60 new referrals during this period and Xenzone, the Powys commissioned counselling service, currently have 190 active cases on their books. Prior to the pandemic Xenzone would normally work with 90 to 100 cases at any one time. Of the 60 new referrals, 30 are for year 6 pupils, a figure that in normal times would represent the entire annual total for this age group and referrals have continued to increase over the past few weeks across all age groups. The most recent figures show that 58 children and young people still remain on the waiting list and the authority is making effective use of additional funds received from Welsh Government to reduce this number. In addition, the authority is seeking grant funding to implement play therapy and counselling support for the younger pupils in our early years' settings and schools.

Xenzone have agreed to conduct twice-weekly check-ins with any child who is on the face-to-face counselling caseload. The provision of remote or tele-counselling support (i.e. contact with a counsellor via telephone, Skype or similar) is under continual review, and the Schools Service is seeking ways to enact this. This is distinct from the web based Kooth provision, which also remains available.

5.3 Wellbeing of Vulnerable Learners

Children's Services are making sure that they remain in contact with the families that they support and in addition to communication regarding academic work, schools and the PRU are making contact with learners as frequently as is necessary to monitor wellbeing – a RAG rating system is commonly being used, with learners contacted daily, more-than-weekly, or weekly as needed.. Educational Welfare Officers are linked with clusters and childcare hubs and are keeping in touch with vulnerable pupils and their families.

Emotional Health meetings are held weekly and are attended by Children's Commissioning, PRUs, Open Access Youth Service, Youth Intervention Service, Detached Youth Work team, CAMHS, School Nurses, Credu (Young Carers), Xenzone, domestic violence services, Careers Wales, NPTC College and others. During these meetings, the level and type of services currently being offered to children and young people are discussed and gaps or cross-working opportunities are identified and acted upon.

The Youth Intervention Service (YIS) continue to deliver one to one support for some of the most vulnerable young people in Powys who exhibit a range of support needs, often exacerbated by school closures. Individually tailored support is offered via telephone and through digital channels and remains under continual review by the team and managers, allowing adaption to alterations in the young person's emotional health as the situation alters. Support is also offered to the parents of young people open to YIS, in order to help them to better handle issues around behaviour, boundaries, loss of routine and the effects of living in extended close proximity as a family.

5.4 Social Support for Young People

The Open Access Youth Team are supporting young people through a number of online platforms that include Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams. They have published a series of videos on these platforms to send messages out to young people, for example 'stay home, stay safe' and 'Diolch/Thank you to young people who are listening and staying home'.

Weekly youth club sessions are held across the county via Microsoft Teams and this has worked well to date. Young people are able join in activities that are delivered by the youth workers and have an opportunity to ask questions, seek information and support, and to ask for further contact outside of these sessions via phone calls, emails or Facebook messenger if needed. The team send out a weekly activity resource pack to the Hubs and are in contact

with the Urdd to provide Welsh Language activities. Wellbeing Links within schools are in contact with the School Youth Workers to enable young people who may need emotional support to contact a Youth Worker who is already known to them from the High Schools across Powys.

The Open Access Youth Team will also liaise with the police and Housing Department to disperse gatherings of young people when necessary. This collaboration is intended to take a youth work approach and to encourage discussion around context; for example, why a gathering has occurred - whether there may be an underlying issue that has forced the participants out of their home environments or alternatively whether boredom might be the underlying cause.

6. Conclusion

As the lockdown is lifted and we enter a new phase, Powys continues to work hard to build capacity and resilience into our processes, The wellbeing and education of our County's children and young people, and mitigating the impact of the current situation on their development, will remain areas of primary importance for the authority. We will continue to prepare wholeheartedly for their future and whatever new developments this year may bring.