

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

School Service Management Team

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**PORTFOLIO
HOLDER:** County Councillor Phyl Davies
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REPORT TITLE: Education Response to COVID-19

REPORT FOR: Discussion / Information

1. Purpose

This report provides an overview of the work that Schools Service and schools, in collaboration with key partners, have undertaken to support children, young people and their families in Powys during the global pandemic.

2. Emergency Childcare Hubs

2.1 Emergency Childcare for Children and Young People

In response to the directive from Welsh Government, Powys staff and schools staff met the considerable challenge to repurpose schools and provide free childcare of a high quality for the children of key workers and for our most vulnerable children and young people. In Powys, the offer was emergency childcare between 8am and 6pm for seven days of the week, including full provision during school, public and bank holidays.

Significant collaborative working between Schools Service officers, school leaders, and key internal and external partners including Union representatives, enabled emergency childcare to commence in Powys on 27th March 2020, just one week after the notification of the closure of schools from Welsh Government. Powys provided 16 Emergency Childcare Hubs (ECH) and also established two dedicated Emergency Childcare Specialist Hubs (ECSH), sited within the special schools to support our most vulnerable learners. The total weekly numbers of children accessing the hubs have ranged between 148 – 245 over the period of provision.

In addition, Schools Service, Children's Services, the Commissioning Team and other key partners, worked together to ensure that emergency childcare provision was also available for pre-school children. Between 23rd March and 29th June 2020, 28 settings were open to support the children of key workers

vulnerable children. During this period 271 pre-school children per week accessed emergency childcare provision.

From the 29th June 2020, the existing hubs reverted to providing childcare for the children from their own school as they were also providing 'Check In, Catch Up and Prepare' wellbeing sessions for their pupils. Further significant work was also undertaken to ensure that an additional five hubs were opened in leisure centres across the county, to meet the anticipated increase in key workers requiring care for their children.

2.2 Health and Safety

Personal protective equipment (PPE) was supplied to all emergency childcare hubs to ensure that appropriate health and safety measures were in place in line with Welsh Government guidelines and local risk assessments. Appropriate and specific PPE was available in the ESCHs for use while assisting with feeding and/or intimate care. In addition, long distance infrared thermometers have been purchased for use in the hubs and COVID-19 testing is available for all staff who display symptoms that may indicate infection with the virus. Schools Service, in collaboration with key partners, undertook the responsibility to arrange the purchase of all PPE and necessary equipment.

Safeguarding policies which encompassed the specific COVID-19 guidance were developed for use in the ECHs and ECHSHs. A 'Team around the Hub' was also 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 Children's Services team. These teams provided a close working partnership between Schools Services, schools, Children's Services, Youth Services, Sports Development officers and Powys Teaching Health Board (PtHB). This has facilitated an agile and adaptive response to what has been an unprecedented and swiftly changing situation.

3. Continuity of Learning / Blended Learning

3.1 Digital Connectivity

School Service has ensured that since the introduction of the Continuity of Learning Plan, schools have been supported through guidance and the establishment of good practice. 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.

3.2 Continuity of Learning

With schools partially opening in June, the period of the Continuity of Learning across Powys has identified many positive aspects and also areas to improve as schools move to blended learning.

Many schools have identified the positive use of HWB as a mechanism to share work with pupils, set assignments and provide feedback. Many schools have used Microsoft Teams to keep in contact with staff and with pupils. Many schools have used it as a worthwhile system for wellbeing calls. A few clusters or schools have started to use Teams for teaching small groups which has been positively resulted in improved learner engagement. A minority of schools have used videos to share information with pupils or to start activities. Where schools have linked learning to the Areas of Learning Experience, this has been positive in implemented approaches to the new curriculum. Learner led projects have engaged most learners. Cluster projects have allowed children to use their range of skills. Cluster co-construction of learning menus, challenges and activities have been very worthwhile and has demonstrated positive collaboration across clusters.

However, certain areas have been identified as areas to develop in order to improve learning through blended learning. These include connectivity for a few pupils in remote areas, maintaining engagement of all pupils, supporting parents to support their children's learning and developing the use of live lessons and on-line synchronous teaching.

3.3 'Check In, Catch Up and Prepare'

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.

4. Well-being

4.1 Wellbeing Workstream

A Wellbeing workstream was established in Powys on 20 March 2020, 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 Schools Service including the, Educational Psychology team and Youth Services, health, Children's Services, Commissioned Services, such as counselling organisations, are working in partnership with representative headteachers from mainstream schools, special schools and the PRU. In addition, training was provided by Trauma Informed Schools UK to support pupils' emotional wellbeing on returning to school. Two staff members for every school were able to attend, and this training was also offered to key partners, many of whom attended, consolidating the learning across a wide range of professionals who support children and young people in Powys.

The workstream's actions are informed by the recently approved 'Emotional Health and Wellbeing Strategy' for Powys County Council; this document was discussed with, and circulated to, all schools in March 2020. Examples of information and links provided and shared by the workstream can be found in **Appendix A**.

4.2 Vulnerable Learners

Schools Service, Children's Services, health professionals and other key partners are working together pro-actively to provide effective support for vulnerable learners. ECSH's were established in the special schools for those learners who attend either a special school or the PRU. Each Childcare hub has been provided with a list of children within their catchment area who are children looked after or are on the child protection register. This is in order to monitor the well-being of these more vulnerable children closely and provide multi-agency response when required.

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.

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 pre-existing educational challenges or as a consequence of the pandemic on their future plans.

Working in partnership with Career Wales and other organisations, these young people are being offered support to maximise their potential and attain satisfactory post-Year 11 destinations. The Detached Youth Work Team also work in partnership with Housing in order to offer essential support to the increasing number of young people aged 16-25 who have presented as homeless during this time.

During the period of lockdown there has been a significant increase in recorded instances of children and young people 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, our commissioned counselling service, currently have 190 active cases. Working in close collaboration with key partners, Schools Service is making effective use of additional funds received from Welsh Government to reduce the number of children and young on the counselling waiting list and increase the numbers sessions available. In addition, funding has been accessed to implement play therapy and counselling support for the younger pupils in our early years' settings and primary schools. This web-based counselling service from Kooth also remains available.

Specific assistance has been developed working in collaboration with Children's Services, to support children looked after and their families during this time. For example, the Education Psychology team have been making regulars calls to foster families to provide guidance in respect of distance learning, and the Open Access Youth Team have been developing an online youth group specifically for children looked after.

4.3 Social Support for Young People

The Open Access Youth Team moved their face-to-face support to online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams to ensure they are able to continue to provide are social support for young people. In addition, 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.

The team send out a weekly activity resource pack to the ECHs and are in contact with the Urdd to provide Welsh Language activities. Also, schools are

in contact with their designated Youth Workers to advise about those young people who may need emotional support. The Open Access Youth Team also work in close collaboration with the police and Housing Department to provide advice and guidance around social distancing in public. This combined approach encourages 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. Conclusions and Next Steps

The Authority has acted swiftly and decisively in its response to COVID-19, ensuring that appropriate community-based support was in place for the children and young people of Powys. This was achieved through three key multi-agency working groups, which focused on emergency childcare provision, continuity of learning, and learner and staff wellbeing.

Through consistent and effective leadership, the following has been achieved:

- Powys committed to exceeding the expectations placed on it and has consistently gone above and beyond the requirements of the nationally issued guidelines and directives;
- Effective stakeholder engagement and communication;
- Increased use of technology enhanced collaboration and stakeholder engagement in decision making;
- Collaborative and robust decision by leaders was taken at pace;
- Learner wellbeing underpinned all strategic decision making;
- Extensive multi-agency collaboration resulted in consistent approaches across Powys;
- Officers produced clear guidance for schools and parents;
- Appropriate delegation of tasks and responsibilities;
- Improved working relationships and collaboration with school leaders;

As the lockdown is lifted and we enter a new phase that will see all schools reopening in September, the School Service continues to reflect and evaluate the progress made in order to build capacity and resilience in the service. The response to the pandemic has resulted in alternative ways of working that will be developed and enhanced to create new, more effective working practices in line with the authority's post pandemic design principles.

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Appendix A:

- 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/yli281>
- 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