

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL

School Service Management Team

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REPORT TITLE: Education Response to COVID-19 and Lessons Learnt

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.

The report also addresses lessons learnt during the pandemic.

2. Emergency Childcare Hubs

2.1 Emergency Childcare for Children and Young People

In March 2020, and 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 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 and vulnerable children. During this period 271 pre-school children per week accessed emergency childcare provision.

From the 29th of 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.

Lessons Learnt:

Local Authority and school-based staff worked together very effectively to set up emergency childcare hubs. Collaborative working with regular communication ensured highly effective delivery of the service.

Although schools had a well-defined model of delivery, with support, they demonstrated flexibility and were able to quickly respond to the requests of the Welsh Government and repurpose schools.

A few children found it difficult to attend an unfamiliar setting, therefore in the second lockdown period, the hubs were available in each individual school. As a result, and due to the changing COVID restrictions, more pupils attended childcare hubs in their own schools.

3. Health and Safety

3.1 Health and Safety Support to Schools

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 were 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 school improvement advisor, 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 facilitated an agile and adaptive response to an unprecedented and swiftly changing situation.

Lessons learnt:

The close collaborative working has been a significant factor in ensuring schools have been able to work effectively throughout the pandemic.

As a result, support has continued throughout the pandemic, with a Task and Finish Group ensuring that key Health and Safety issues are responded to at pace, including the interpretation and dissemination of key Welsh Government guidance. This group has a wide membership including headteachers, HR staff, Union representatives, a Health and Safety Advisor, the Schools Safeguarding Lead, and other Schools Service staff.

As the pandemic has continued, H&S support provided by Schools Service and partners to schools also includes the following key activities:

- regular orders and deliveries of PPE for all schools
- delivery of, and guidance relating to, CO² monitors
- the distribution and delivery of LFDs to schools
- updated risk assessments as and when the Welsh Government guidance changed

4. Continuity of Learning / Blended Learning / Remote Learning

4.1 Digital Connectivity

School Service ensured that following the introduction of the Continuity of Learning Plan, schools were supported through guidance and the establishment of good practice. Practical support was provided 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 did 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 2020, 881 devices had been sourced, reconfigured, and redistributed to learners. By June 2020, through close working with Welsh Government, 532 4G MiFi dongles had been purchased and distributed to families within the County.

At the beginning of the spring term 2021, all schools moved to remote learning provision. On 22 February, foundation phase pupils returned to face-to-face learning. On 15 March, key stage 2 and year 11 and 13 pupils returned to face-to-face learning in schools and other year groups experienced wellbeing sessions in preparation for the full reopening of schools on the 12 April 2021.

One thousand, three hundred learners received digital devices supporting 800 families through the loaning of digital devices for learners to access online learning over the spring term 2021. Nearly 400 mobile Wi-Fi devices were distributed to families to help them overcome connectivity issues.

Lessons learnt:

Local Authority staff from different service areas and school-based staff worked effectively in collaboration to ensure all pupils had access to digital devices, including the loaning of devices from school to school

Schools developed a range of live, pre-recorded lessons and physical resources. Most schools focused remote learning on literacy and numeracy skills, and engagement of pupils significantly increased from the first lockdown period, with over 90% of learners sharing and attending online lessons.

Where schools realised that pupils did not have connectivity they ensured access to their learning through the Childcare Hubs

4.2 Blended and Remote Learning

Schools across Powys have identified many positive aspects of Blended Learning and also areas to improve:

- Nearly all schools have identified the positive use of HWB as a mechanism to share work with pupils, set assignments and provide feedback.
- Nearly all schools have used Microsoft Teams to keep in contact with staff and with pupils, for example staff meetings and when pupils have had to self-isolate for the provision of education when they are unable to attend school.
- Nearly all schools have used it as a worthwhile system for wellbeing calls.
- Learner led projects have engaged most learners.
- Cluster projects have allowed pupils to develop their range of skills successfully.
- Cluster co-construction of learning menus, challenges and activities during the periods of remote learning have been very worthwhile and have demonstrated positive collaboration across clusters.
- Schools staff received support and guidance for remote learning.

Lessons learnt:

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

- developing the use of live lessons and on-line synchronous teaching.

There are different ways of providing access to learning where connectivity was an issue.

There is no one system for delivering blended learning and has to be reactive to local need.

Regular engagement with pupils is essential – ‘be seen, be heard’.

As a result of staff engagement, there was positive impact on the professional learning offer and a wide range of opportunities to trial new pedagogies relating to the new curriculum have been provided

4.3 ‘Check In, Catch Up and Prepare’

Schools within Powys were opened for four weeks during July 2020 and used 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 planned an approach that allowed available resources to be utilised to greatest effect. Extensive preparation work was undertaken ensuring that a range of ‘blended learning’ options were available that maximised 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 included both digital and face-to-face lessons. As a result, schools are now able to work flexibly and respond to circumstances quickly.

Lessons learnt:

Effective consultation with headteachers, governors, officers and key partners, including Unions, using the statistical modelling available at the time, ensured that the needs of Powys learners were prioritised ensuring that:

- learners were brought back into carefully managed school environments after an unprecedented length of detachment from schools.
- multi-agency support for our most vulnerable learners and those with SEN / ALN continued to adapt responsively to the needs of our learners to ensure appropriate support, for example as part of the Team Around the Cluster model.
- continued close work with all key partners provided additional emergency childcare capacity in July 2020 to enable schools to maximise the number of ‘Check In, Catch Up and Prepare’ sessions for their learners and assist residents to return to work.
- October 2020 half-term was extended by an additional week, which proved a prudent decision and provided an appropriate firebreak given the rise of coronavirus cases during the autumn 2020-21 term.

5. Wellbeing

5.1 Wellbeing Workstream

An emotional health and wellbeing workstream was established on 20 March 2020, in response to concerns for the emotional health and wellbeing, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, on children, young people, school staff and early years settings across Powys. The workstream comprises colleagues from education, educational psychology team, youth services, health, and children's services and also from commissioned services, such as counselling organisations. It is informed by the new 'Powys Emotional Health and Wellbeing Strategy', which was circulated to all schools and early years settings in March 2020. We have also set up a network on Hwb for all school staff. The main purpose of the workstream is for colleagues to share concerns, identify ever changing areas of need and to provide support, guidance and training.

During the first period of lockdown, the workstream also worked closely with the emergency childcare hubs to provide a 'team around the hub' and with school improvement advisers to share resources in support of blended learning. This has now been developed into a 'Team Around the Cluster' model to continue to provide ongoing multi-agency support to schools. The emotional health and wellbeing workstream continues to meet fortnightly to provide updated and relevant support and guidance for all early years settings, schools, special schools and PRU across Powys. The workstream continues to meet weekly and to support both schools and early years settings. Currently it is looking at grant funding to enable colleagues to provide training for schools on emotional health and wellbeing. The workstream also includes representative headteachers from mainstream schools, special schools and PRU. Most recently the workstream has provided 'mindfulness' training for school staff and wellbeing training for pupils delivered by 'Trauma Informed Schools UK'. A range of high-quality training has been provided to schools including:

- Trauma Informed Schools training for all schools; 10-day trainer courses funded for 32 identified staff across Powys schools. This has led to improved practitioner awareness of how to support children who have experienced trauma and need support for their emotional and mental well-being. Further roll out will continue each year, subject to funding availability.
- ACEs, ELSA, Thrive and Kiva training
- Suicide awareness and prevention training offered to all schools
- Youth Mental health first aid
- Foundations Mindfulness for school staff
- Incredible Years
- Emotion Coaching

We have a clear vision for supporting the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children and young people in Powys and have been implementing our strategy successfully over the last two years. Recently we have reviewed our strategy to align it with the Welsh Government's 'Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being', March 2021. We have also established an implementation group which includes mental health champions from each cluster of schools in Powys. The strategy includes:

- Clear links to the health and wellbeing AOLE in the curriculum for Wales framework
- clear outcomes and goals for schools
- clarity for schools in how they should support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of pupils and recommendations of how these outcomes and goals can be achieved
- links to appropriate third-party services
- an explanation of the rationale underpinning the whole school approach
- clear guidance on the process and progress
- the role of Powys officers in supporting schools to embed the strategy
- Launch of and training for mental health leads in schools to deliver Silver Cloud

Lessons learnt:

Wellbeing needs to be a priority within the school setting. Young people need to be given the opportunity to talk about mental health and emotional wellbeing and to understand more about it.

It is important that all young people know where and how to find support.

It is important that parents and carers are provided with information on where and how to access support and clear signposting is needed.

It is essential that all services working to support learners' mental health and wellbeing work closely together, for example through a 'Team Around the Cluster' approach.

While the wellbeing of children and young people is a collective responsibility, it is imperative that there are officers designated as wellbeing leads in the council and that all schools have a wellbeing lead/mental health champion.

5.2 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 was provided with a list of children within their catchment area who are children looked after or are on the child protection register. This was in order to monitor the wellbeing of these more vulnerable children closely and provide multi-agency response when required.

The Youth Intervention Service (YIS) continued 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 was 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 was 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.

Working in partnership with Career Wales and other organisations, young people were offered support to maximise their potential and attain satisfactory post-Year 11 destinations. The Detached Youth Work Team also worked in partnership with Housing Services to offer essential support to the increasing number of young people aged 16-25 who presented as homeless during the pandemic.

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. 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 number of 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. Face-to-face and web-based counselling service from Kooth remains available for children and young people. Education service worked very effectively in collaboration with Children's Services, to support children looked after and their families during the pandemic. For example, the Education Psychology team made regular calls to foster families to provide guidance in respect of distance learning, and the Open Access Youth Team developed an online youth group specifically for children looked after.

Lessons learnt:

Supporting vulnerable learners continues to be one of the highest priorities.

The Team around the Cluster has been instrumental in ensuring children are 'seen' throughout the pandemic.

5.3 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 were able to continue to provide social support for young people. In addition, they have published a series of videos on these platforms to send messages out to young people. Weekly youth club sessions were held across the county via Microsoft Teams, these have now returned as face-to-face meetings.

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.

Lessons learnt:

Wellbeing needs to be a priority within the school setting.

Young people need to be given the opportunity to talk about mental health and emotional wellbeing and to understand more about it

7. Conclusions and Next Steps

The Authority has acted swiftly and decisively in its response to COVID-19, ensuring that appropriate community-based support is in place for the children and young people of Powys. Initially this was achieved through three key multi-agency working groups. The three groups consisted of:

- emergency childcare provision
- continuity of learning
- 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 and embedding use of technology enhanced collaboration and stakeholder engagement in decision making;
- Collaborative and robust decision by leaders taken at pace;

- Learner wellbeing underpinning all strategic decision making;
- Extensive multi-agency collaboration resulting in consistent approaches across Powys;
- Officers producing clear guidance for schools and parents;
- Appropriate delegation of tasks and responsibilities;
- Improved working relationships and collaboration with school leaders;
- Service improvement at pace, in response to the Estyn recommendations, and as a result the Authority is no longer in the category of local authority causing significant concern.

Through the varied phases of the pandemic, and the differing challenges that each phase presents, the focus remains on supporting schools and their learners. 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 are being embedded and further enhanced to create more effective working practices in line with the authority's post pandemic design principles and the New Ways of Working

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