

Dear Debbie,

During the early autumn term, the Welsh Government asked us to undertake a review of local authorities and regional consortia's work in supporting their learning communities in schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) during the period from March to October 2020.

This letter outlines the outcome of this work in EAS. The content of the letter is based on virtual meetings with officers, as well as information from a sample of schools and PRUs in the local authorities across the EAS region. We have also considered the supporting documentation provided by EAS officers and the feedback from surveys of school/PRU leaders, governors, teachers and support staff, parents and pupils. We have referred to the outcomes of the surveys where relevant, although the surveys were mainly be used to inform the national report which was published on our website on 15 January. Here is a [link](#) to that report.

We would like to thank your staff for giving of their time to discuss their work with us and for providing additional information on request.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Meilyr Rowlands".

Meilyr Rowlands
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

The regional consortium's work to support its schools and PRUs March - August 2020

Leadership and collaboration

The EAS' approach to the pandemic has been framed around Dr Simon Breakspear's model of organisational change. The EAS' leaders view the pandemic's impact on education in three phases: repurposing (March-June), check-in, catch-up, prepare (June – September) and recruit, recover, raise standards: the accelerated learning programme (September onwards). They correlate these phases with Breakspear's crisis, adaption and opportunity phases. Leaders are eager to avoid an automatic 'snapback' to old ways of working and to retain beneficial new practice that has emerged during the crisis.

Nearly all of the regional consortium's challenge advisers are seconded from schools. In order to support capacity in schools and enable leaders to focus fully on the needs of their own schools, the EAS temporarily suspended the challenge adviser role of these staff. The EAS staff, including principal challenge advisers kept in contact with schools, especially in terms of checking on wellbeing. Other seconded members of staff also returned to their schools in order to provide additional capacity.

Throughout the summer term, the EAS continued to engage with all its stakeholders. The managing director has met weekly with the directors of education of all the local authorities in the region. She provided a written summary of the work of the EAS to each chief executive officer every six weeks. The managing director attended local authority scrutiny meetings when invited.

The service continued to report to each of its governance groups from March onwards. This included the Joint Executive Group (JEG), the Company Board and the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee. These groups considered work and revisions to plans that had come about as a result of the pandemic, but also continued to consider matters that they would usually consider, such as the service's value for money and the external auditor report.

Promoting learning

Following the initial closure of schools in March, the EAS recognised the need to adapt its ways of working in order to support a new landscape for learning and working in schools and PRUs. The service focused on keeping in regular contact with schools, regional networks and other stakeholder groups, making use of digital platforms to conduct meetings. Meetings such as the professional learning networks provided a platform for teachers to share practice and ideas regarding distance learning. The EAS staff also started to develop resources to support approaches to distance learning, offered webinars to support teachers' digital skills and began to run their usual professional learning programmes remotely. During this period, EAS officers were also heavily involved in the Welsh Government's Continuity of Learning plan.

The EAS focused much of its work to support wellbeing and distance and blended learning. The EAS staff engaged with a wide range of research studies on distance and blended learning, including those from the OECD, UNESCO and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). They summarised the findings in helpful briefings and video presentations. They also asked schools to create presentations to share their approaches to distance learning and shared these via the playlist. They shared a range of models and guidance for distance learning and using digital platforms, and provided webinars on a variety of topics. For example, they shared the ten features of high quality teaching and learning in a blended learning model and worked with the other three regions and Estyn on a blended learning resource. Attendance at the blended and distance learning webinars was high, with a representative from 98% of EAS schools attending. Subject specialists within the EAS shared subject-specific distance learning resources.

The EAS staff also sought the views and experiences of schools and PRUs regarding distance learning and shared these with practitioners and governors. For instance, they identified and shared the approaches to assessment that teachers found most useful. In June 2020, the service provided schools and PRUs with a distance and blended learning checklist. This checklist includes actions that schools should consider, such as having a distance learning strategy and identifying a senior strategic lead. Each proposed action is accompanied by links to relevant EAS resources or resources from schools. School leaders and teachers appreciated the materials on distance learning provided by the EAS, though a few felt overwhelmed by the volume of information.

Early in the pandemic, the EAS identified that school and PRU staff, and governors needed support with digital skills. The EAS staff provided video resources on how to use different platforms and signposted resources available through Hwb and YouTube. The EAS staff offered a range of webinars and workshops on topics such as using Microsoft Teams to conduct meetings and using FlipGrid through the medium of Welsh. These proved popular, with almost 1200 people accessing them. Officers also offered support for virtual recruitment processes. Estyn surveyed school leaders about the support that they had received from local authorities and consortia. The response to this survey from headteachers across the region was low but those that did respond were positive about the support they had had from the EAS officers to enable them to carry on school business virtually.

The EAS created a 'Supporting Our Schools' playlist which housed all their pandemic-related resources and information in one location. It covered aspects such as supporting wellbeing, leadership and professional learning, as well as distant and blended learning. The playlist was heavily focused on the impact of the pandemic on different aspects of schools' and PRUs' work, though it also included more general school improvement resources. Officers added to this playlist on a weekly basis. The playlist was well received by school and PRU leaders, though leaders felt that it became too unwieldy and difficult to navigate as more information was added. Senior leaders responded to headteachers' views on this and moved the playlist to a different platform.

As EAS staff were unable to visit schools from March onwards they sought alternative methods of establishing what was happening in schools and PRUs in terms of learning. In the summer term they conducted an online survey and held conversations with staff from schools and PRUs about matters such as levels of engagement from pupils, the different digital platforms schools and PRUs were using and how they were monitoring provision. As a result of this work, they produced a helpful review of distance learning in the region. The review covered a range of issues, including internet connectivity, access to Hwb, the structure of remote learning days, pupil engagement, professional learning and monitoring practices. This review enabled the EAS staff to identify and share positive emerging practice from schools and PRUs and identified a need for support around quality assurance. Towards the end of the summer term, the service set up a cross-sector group of practitioners from around 40 schools from within and outside the region to consider distance and blended learning in more depth, including approaches to assessment and quality assurance.

Prior to the pandemic, the EAS offered a broad range of professional learning opportunities for leaders, teachers, support staff and governors. Early in the pandemic the EAS staff realised that they would have to adapt their methods of delivering this provision. The EAS moved much of its provision online and continued to offer a variety of learning opportunities, including leadership and coaching courses for middle and senior leaders, and sessions on the Curriculum for Wales. They researched the best methods for the delivery of online training and adapted their approach accordingly. For instance, they included videos to enhance the training and set up breakout rooms to facilitate discussions. The professional learning offer was made accessible to all. This resulted in engagement with a much broader range of practitioners. The professional learning offer was modified and extended to reflect needs brought about by the pandemic, but the service also continued to offer its usual provision, such as coaching for senior leaders and the teaching assistant programme. The EAS found that demand for professional learning was high during the lockdown period as many staff were working from home. Many school and PRU staff found online delivery more convenient, mainly due to the elimination of travel time. A few school and PRU staff had difficulty in accessing courses initially due to issues with the use of different platforms and the timing of courses, though these issues were addressed, for example by the recording of professional learning events.

Professional learning networks also moved online and these provided valuable opportunities for school and PRU leaders to keep in touch with each other and learn from each other's practices. For example, the networks enabled practitioners to share ideas around preparations for a partial lockdown or how to engage specific groups of learners.

In a few cases, the EAS responded to individual school or local authority requests for bespoke professional learning. For example, its middle leadership development programme was adapted to meet the needs and reflect the priorities of specific schools.

Early in the pandemic, the EAS' Welsh language team identified a need to support parents, especially non-Welsh speaking parents. They provided resources and ideas for parents of pupils in all key stages in order to help them to support their children. They also identified a demand from teachers and school and PRU staff for resources to improve their own Welsh language skills. In response, they created a bilingual playlist of resources and links. The EAS staff prepared resources for schools, including a list of the top ten distance learning activities for learning Welsh for each year group.

During the lockdown period, the EAS' Welsh language team started working with staff from schools, Estyn and the other regions on the Welsh Government's Continuity of Learning plan for Welsh. The region was represented in five of the six sub-groups involved in this work, which resulted in a national resource for developing Welsh at each key stage in both Welsh and English-medium schools.

The EAS continued its work in supporting governing bodies and management committees. They provided a playlist specifically for governors and provided virtual professional learning opportunities on a range of topics ranging from pandemic related issues to preparation for the Curriculum for Wales. These were in addition to their professional learning provision focused on the specific roles and responsibilities of governors. The service also continued to provide a clerking service to governing bodies and supported them to move their meetings online and adapt their processes for recruiting new governors. The EAS leaders held regular virtual briefings for Chairs of Governors, which were very well attended, with 95% of Chairs from secondary schools in the region attending. The leaders who responded to the survey were particularly positive about the support from the EAS to help them to set up virtual meetings with governing bodies or management committees and continue with school and PRU business.

Supporting vulnerable learners

During the re-purposing phase from March, nearly all challenge advisers returned to their school posts. The principal challenge advisers kept in close contact with schools in the summer term, particularly around the wellbeing of pupils and staff. Officers from the wellbeing and equity team produced a WELL toolkit for schools to complete at the start of the school closure period. They encouraged schools to look at this again in June before the 'check in, catch up' period and again before the full return to school in September and adapt their plans in light of their findings.

Officers from the wellbeing and equity team met with the lead officers for inclusion from the five local authorities every month to ensure that between them, the region and the local authorities were offering clear and consistent support and guidance to schools about vulnerable learners. Officers from the EAS established that they would keep in touch with the school wellbeing leads each month. In the year before the pandemic, the EAS had funded all secondary schools to enable them to have a vulnerable learner lead and officers continued to communicate with these through the summer term. Officers met PRU managers and headteachers of special schools

every month at the beginning of the summer term to focus on sharing effective practice, for example about how to engage hard to reach learners.

Senior leaders at the EAS were aware of the pressures on school staff in the summer term and commissioned an external organisation to provide five videos to support staff wellbeing. These provided helpful advice including the importance of maintaining good physical health levels and how to manage emotions during difficult circumstances.

Officers created a '5Rs to wellbeing' playlist for schools to consider how to prepare to welcome all pupils back at the end of June. During our engagement phone calls to schools, headteachers said that they had found this resource useful. This resource provides guidance on regrouping and promotes the importance of reflecting, renewing, re-establishing relationships and relaxation. The EAS purchased access to the 'Social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL)' community for all schools in the region to help them to access additional resources to support pupils' social and emotional wellbeing. Officers also refreshed the professional learning for teachers who had undertaken the adverse childhood experiences training in the past and provided the training to teachers who had not previously taken part in this. During our engagement calls to schools, headteachers said that they felt that the training offered, for example about supporting pupils with trauma and bereavement, was tailored well to the lockdown period.

The regional consortium's work to support its schools and PRUs from September 2020

Leadership and collaboration

In preparation for the full return of pupils to schools and PRUs in September, the EAS revised its business plan, adapting priorities to meet the needs of schools.

From September, school-based challenge advisers resumed their roles but the service continued to support capacity in schools by seconding members of staff into schools. For example, subject advisers are working in schools for a proportion of their time.

As was the case in several local authorities, the consortium did not anticipate that there would be such extensive disruption to schools and PRUs so early in the academic year. For example, in Caerphilly, schools experienced positive cases of COVID-19 within the first few days of term. Leaders initially felt that they could resume 'normal' activity, such as challenge advisor visits to schools. However, in response to the extent of the disruption, and concerns from senior leaders in schools and PRUs, EAS officers revised their approach and timelines and pared back their original requirements of schools and PRUs. For example, additional time and support was offered to complete grant plans and improvement plans.

From September, the service continued to use the Breakspear model to frame their work. The service provided information to schools and PRUs about the model and encouraged them to adopt this approach. Prior to the pandemic, the service had started to make links with schools in Australia. In September, the EAS organised a webinar with Australian headteachers in order for them to share their experiences as they experienced the pandemic, and a second wave, earlier than the UK. This webinar was well-attended by headteachers, who found it useful.

The EAS has focused much of its work on communicating with partners. Staff have maintained all existing networks through remote meetings. Regular meetings with the headteachers' strategy group, which includes headteachers from all sectors as well as National Academy for Educational Leadership (NAEL) associates, has helped the service to understand the day-to-day issues facing schools and what support is needed. Monthly quality assurance meetings with each local authority have also continued.

The EAS leaders feel that the pandemic has necessitated changes that have been beneficial and which they will retain. For example, remote meetings and training events save a great deal of travel time and are more convenient for schools. Working remotely has also enabled the service to have contact with more school and PRU staff than they would normally have done.

The EAS is seeking stakeholder views on its provision for schools. Leaders are also monitoring participation in their events and the number of people accessing their materials. However, as EAS staff are unable to visit schools and PRUs at the moment and challenge advisers are unable to conduct their usual range of monitoring activities, they cannot fully evaluate the impact or effectiveness of their work.

Promoting learning

The EAS has continued to develop its work to support learning in schools and PRUs since September. School leaders are generally positive about the support and resources provided by the EAS. In particular, they have appreciated the professional learning offer and the resources regarding distance and blended learning, especially the examples from schools. However, many leaders feel that, as time went on, the volume of information shared and the limitations of the playlist platform made it difficult and time consuming to identify the most useful resources. Through stakeholder engagement activities, EAS leaders became aware of these concerns and set up a task and finish group to address these issues.

Cameo: 'Supporting Our Schools' website

In response to feedback from stakeholders, the EAS have created a new website to house their support for schools resources. The new website is easier to navigate than the playlist that the service used previously. Resources are clearly

labelled and easy to scan. The website contains sections covering different topics such as governance, school improvement, guidance on using the accelerating learning grant funding and curriculum support. The website also contains a link to another new website that houses all resources related to distance and blended learning. These resources are also clearly organised under themes and there are several examples of informative case studies and presentations from schools, as well as links to helpful external resources. In order to make it easy for leaders to identify any new resources, these are signposted each week in a separate section, before being moved to the relevant themed section. The EAS staff are providing online introductory sessions to the new websites. These well-attended, informative sessions are sector specific and available through both English and Welsh. In addition to providing a demonstration of the websites, these sessions also include a choice of breakout sessions involving presentations from schools and an opportunity for discussions in small groups.

The EAS staff have focused particularly on supporting schools to understand and develop approaches to distance and blended learning, building on the work they started in the spring and summer terms. The main driver for this work has been the working group of 40 schools set up at the end of the summer term. Schools created a range of resources on key themes linked to distance and blended learning, including leadership and professional learning. These were quality assured by the EAS staff. All materials have been located in the new website.

The service shared an editable strategic plan document for distance/blended learning with schools which was intended as a support for leaders when writing their own school and PRU development plan. Headteachers and school and PRU leaders found elements of this document helpful in shaping their own plans, but a few found it overwhelming as it was too lengthy.

In October 2020, the EAS conducted a blended learning survey in order to gauge schools' and PRUs' understanding and what support they needed. This was supplemented by feedback from practitioners attending online courses. A strategic overview of the findings has been provided for each local authority, as well as key actions for the EAS or the local authority to support individual schools.

Overall, school and PRU staff from all the local authorities in the region have engaged well with the professional learning offer from the EAS. The service has continued to provide a wide range of professional learning opportunities since September, including a virtual professional learning offer for newly qualified teachers run collaboratively by all four regions. Since moving its provision online during the lockdown period, more practitioners have registered for programmes as they no longer involve full days out of school and materials can be accessed at any time. In response to this demand and to make the provision accessible to all, the service has continued to offer a wide range of learning opportunities. It has also subsidised its most popular improving teaching programmes and opened them up to all settings.

The service is providing tailored support for a few specific schools, particularly those causing concern. For instance, subject advisers are providing subject-specific

advice and guidance and the EAS has continued to broker funded partnerships with schools outside the region to support specific schools.

The EAS have provided guidance, advice and exemplar plans to schools regarding the spending of the 'Recruit, recover, raise standards: the accelerated learning programme' Welsh Government grant funding. The EAS leaders have adapted the grant monitoring tool that they have developed for schools to plan and monitor the spending of all grant funding to accommodate this new funding. They have provided opportunities for headteachers to meet and share ideas regarding the spending of the funding.

The EAS has given each secondary school £10,000 of additional funding to spend on a menu of options to support learners in key stages 4 and 5. This menu was co-constructed with headteachers and includes options such as the purchase of textbooks and revision materials or access to learning support for identified learners outside of the school day. In addition, and in response to requests from headteachers, the EAS has paid for an online assessment package for Year 7 for all secondary schools. This includes assessments through the medium of Welsh. The assessments are for the schools' internal use only. Headteachers appreciate this additional package of financial support from the EAS and value the fact that they were consulted. The EAS also returned a total of £75,000 back to the local authorities from the efficiencies it had made from reduced costs during the time when schools were closed.

The EAS staff's involvement with the work on the national resource to support Welsh language teaching has continued since September. The resource has now been shared and is proving popular with practitioners. A particularly successful aspect of this work has been the launching of a website to facilitate the study and enjoyment of the novel Llyfr Glas Nebo. This innovative resource includes audio files and a virtual tour as well as materials, including exemplar answers, which have been mapped against the GCSE specification.

Cameo: Supporting pupils' Welsh language skills

Staff in Welsh-medium schools were concerned regarding the impact of the lockdown on pupils' ability and confidence in speaking Welsh as many had not had an opportunity to practise or hear the language for many months. In response, the EAS placed members of their Welsh language team in Welsh-medium primary schools in order to increase capacity and support recovery.

In preparation for the return to school in September, the EAS' Welsh language team provided interactive transition resources for primary and secondary schools. They also provided guidance for parents whose children attend Welsh-medium primary schools, in response to requests from headteachers.

Supporting vulnerable learners

As schools re-opened fully in September, the equity and wellbeing team provided helpful guidance to schools to enable them to support their vulnerable learners. Officers from the team already had good communication channels with the school's vulnerable lead teachers which meant that advice and guidance was provided to the relevant school staff in a timely manner. Officers hold regular network meetings with these teachers as well as with teachers from the post-16 and PRU sectors. They also maintain regular contact with the inclusion officers from the five local authorities in the region.

Senior leaders at the EAS recognised that learners who were not necessarily vulnerable prior to the start of the pandemic have become vulnerable as a result of it. As a result, the EAS list of learners deemed to be vulnerable has widened and now includes for example, pupils who did not have access to the internet or digital devices, pupils where parents were working full-time and learners from English-speaking homes who attend Welsh-medium schools. Officers and challenge advisers now consider how they can incorporate addressing these learners' needs into their support for schools.

Officers worked with the local authorities in their region to identify the support needed for specific vulnerable learners. Individual local authorities identified a range of needs within their own communities, for example the development of oracy skills for young pupils and the need to improve pupils' basic numeracy skills. One local authority asked for support for foster carers so that they could support learning at home for the children they are looking after. Officers at the EAS worked with the looked after children education service team in the local authority to provide guidance around using stories effectively, information about the new curriculum and strategies to help children to manage their emotions.

Officers developed useful resources for schools through the school summer holiday period and these were available for schools to use from September. For example the 'All Together Now' programme. This consists of eight units of work designed to be used in schools in the first half of the autumn term. The resource links well with the Areas of Learning and Experience from the Curriculum for Wales and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to enable it to support and supplement the provision already in place in schools. The programme helps schools to embed wellbeing into the curriculum, making sure that the rights of the child and pupil voice have a high priority.

School leaders say that the support from the wellbeing and equity team has been good. They welcomed the EAS strategies for supporting vulnerable learners and the practical activities that teachers were able to use to promote wellbeing in the curriculum. For example, teachers found the 5Rs to wellbeing resource particularly helpful to plan their support for vulnerable learners as they returned to school in the autumn term. The resource puts an emphasis on focusing on good relationships and helping children to relax in situations that they may find stressful. One school described how teachers had adapted this resource to support pupils by developing a 3Rs approach to recover, re-establish and reconnect pupils with school routines.

Prior to the pandemic, the EAS had been working with a few schools to implement the Raising the Attainment of Disadvantaged Youngsters (RADY) programme. The headteachers of these schools were keen to continue with this work as it provided a focus for their work with vulnerable pupils, including those who are eligible for free school meals. The number of schools engaging with the programme has increased and there are now 26 clusters of schools using RADY across the region. Officers hold regional termly meetings for teachers from schools involved in the programme to share effective practice such as how to reach the most disengaged families. In addition, the EAS facilitated sessions for teachers with RADY consultants. These included joint forums about vulnerable learners with schools in England. This provided a positive networking experience through which schools have made valuable connections with schools outside the region.

Early in the autumn term, officers provided support and guidance for schools on ways of re-engaging pupils who had become disengaged from school through the summer term. They shared practice from the PRUs and youth services across the region. Offices noted how the engagement of pupils in schools with similar levels of deprivation varied and paired up schools that had been able to re-engage pupils successfully with those that were having more difficulty with this.

Challenge advisers initially focused on the wellbeing of pupils and staff as they resumed their roles in supporting schools in the autumn term. As most challenge advisers are also headteachers they were facing similar issues around the return to school of vulnerable pupils. They were able to share their own experience and expertise about this with the senior leaders of the schools that they are supporting. Challenge advisers worked with headteachers to identify priorities for using the grants available to support vulnerable learners, for example the pupil development grant. In their meetings with schools this term, challenge advisers are monitoring the progress of groups of learners, for example those eligible for free school meals.

Headteachers have identified concerns about particular groups and cohorts of learners, for example Year 1 pupils who missed the final term of the reception year. They have also identified skill areas in which pupils made little or no progress during the summer term including extended writing and reading at length. Challenge advisers are using their knowledge of individual school priorities to signpost school leaders to suitable professional learning opportunities that meet the needs of vulnerable pupils in each school. Officers from the wellbeing and equity team are aware that they need to take a systematic approach to gathering information about pupils' skill deficits in order to provide support for schools in addressing these.

Officers identified and delivered training on useful intervention programmes that teaching assistants in schools could use to support the curriculum for vulnerable learners. These included 'coping and connecting' and 'reading and regulating'. Coping and connecting is a six-week intervention programme, with separate content for primary and secondary pupils, to support vulnerable learners to settle back into school life. Reading and regulating is a four-week programme which uses picture books to help children to talk about their experiences and to understand their feelings about the pandemic. Headteachers say that the programmes have had a

positive impact in school, with the picture books in particular being a valuable teaching resource.

The wellbeing and equity team continued with its professional learning programme in the autumn term for teachers working with vulnerable learners. Officers responded well to feedback from wellbeing leads about the difficulties of attending sessions during the school day and arranged sessions for late afternoon. Professional learning events and network meetings held after school have been well attended and as a result officers have reconsidered the way that they will deliver professional learning in the future.

The EAS has continued its work with the EEF this term, sharing resources and webinars with schools. Officers are emphasising to schools the EEF's messages about the importance of staff being trained well for the interventions that they are providing and the need to link their sessions well to pupils' classroom work. Officers re-visited the ACEs training previously delivered to schools to help schools to consider it in the light of pupils made vulnerable by the impact of the pandemic.

Officers have invested in a professional learning programme to support the RADY work in schools. 'Thinking Differently for Disadvantaged Learners' provides a training module each half term focusing on helping teachers to think about the impact that financial hardship has on pupils. The programme provides guidance for teachers about how they can support improved participation in school life for this group of learners and how they can improve the hopes and aspirations of disadvantaged pupils from a young age.

School staff have access to the full range of information about the EAS provision to support disadvantaged and vulnerable learners on the new EAS 'Supporting our Schools' website.