

Appendix to Gwynedd Scrutiny Committee

This period has been very challenging for all Gwynedd schools and for us as a service. However, many exciting and interesting developments have taken place in schools across the county as everyone adapts their methods to try to ensure that pupils receive the best possible provision in a turbulent time.

During these challenging times the Learning Service and GwE have worked together purposefully e.g. by introducing and supporting Risk Assessment processes and collaborating on agreed 'continuing to learn' principles through the Learning and Teaching Group. High level messages to the primary schools were shared and discussed through regular GYDCA (Primary and Special Schools' Advisory Group) meetings with further, specific guidance being discussed at catchment or individual school level. Links and communication between the schools and GwE are strong. In the spirit of working together to meet the challenges of the pandemic, GwE Supporting Improvement Advisers also helped out in school care hubs when capacity was limited to help schools stay open, and ensure continuity of provision and care for the children of the county. Specific support is tailored to the needs of each school and subsequent action is very robust. According to an Estyn report in January 2021 "most leaders agreed that GwE provided effective support and guidance to support the learning in their school."

Supporting welfare and wellbeing has been a top priority in our work over this period. GwE Advisers have been maintaining regular individual contacts with headteachers (through virtual meetings or telephone conversations) offering support as needed. The frequency of contact has varied according to the needs of the headteachers, their particular circumstances and their wishes. When restrictions were relaxed and in line with relevant risk assessments, face-to-face pastoral visits were held with headteachers who wanted us to do so, and almost all of them appreciated the support and valued the visits.

Trying to ensure that the Welsh language does not lose ground has been at the forefront of all our minds during this time and GwE and the Authority have been working hard to support schools in trying to ensure that this does not happen. Specific resources have been shared and are available to all schools in the GwE Support Centre e.g. School Development Plan priority for developing Welsh, resources for promoting oracy, language modeling resources and guidance for supporting parents.

There are numerous examples of schools supporting non Welsh-speaking parents at home to ensure that pupils continue to hear the language during this period. These include school staff reading stories nightly to children, videos to support oral language development through Google Classroom and teachers recording presentations and including bilingual instructions for their remote lessons.

Primary:

In general, nearly all the primary schools received similar support from their SIA, as there are no primary schools in Gwynedd in any of Estyn's follow-up categories. Specific, additional support was however given to the few schools that had come out of Estyn monitoring fairly recently and to those schools where there was a new headteacher or a headteacher in charge. For example, one catchment area SIA has been in frequent contact with a new headteacher, ensuring that he and his staff are coping with the situation and succeeding in prioritising wellbeing and continuing to sustain the learning. A good early rapport has been established with this headteacher and he was able to draw on the adviser's time and experience to cope with a difficult first term. SIAs also use their knowledge of schools and headteachers to contact and support more frequently if any concern about well-being or difficult circumstances arise due to the impact of the virus. In such situations, the SIA, for example, offered teachers guidance on possible distance learning

models and shared blended learning resources and good practice that would be appropriate to support pupils' education.

Early in the pandemic it became apparent that schools needed to be distance learning for an extended period. This involves giving pupils educational tasks to complete from home. GwE's guidance was to prioritise well-being but also to ensure fun activities that developed age-appropriate skills, using the environment and resources around the home. During this time GwE promoted collaboration between schools to reduce workload, for example, under GwE's guidance, groups of teachers from some catchment areas met to share good practice in distance learning and to discuss which digital media worked best to secure learner engagement. It was an opportunity for teachers to share ideas in key stage groups, to respond to common concerns and to offer each other support and suggest possible solutions. A number of examples of good practice were shared with schools and catchment areas through the SIAs and the impact of this on implementation was seen with schools successfully following and developing the same ideas.

In September, when school development plan priorities are usually formulated, GwE found, through the local SIAs, that a number of Gwynedd schools had an obvious pattern of very similar initial priorities. It was therefore decided to offer templates of exemplar priorities to schools in order to avoid administrative work at a time when the head teacher's focus was on getting the pupils and staff back to school safely. Some of the exemplar priorities were adopted and adapted by most schools and used effectively throughout the first term.

When pupils started to return to schools gradually, and especially when the threat of bubbles having to isolate arose, blended learning methods came to the fore. This means preparing the staff, pupils and parents for a combination of face-to-face learning at school and joint distance learning. Teams from GwE developed a number of rich exemplar cross-curricular themes for teachers that developed the use of blended learning. One catchment area, for example, used some of these blended learning ideas, and the SIA's digital expertise, to come together and co-create rich cross-curricular resources on the theme of 'Come to Wales'. This resource has led to developing pupils' digital skills and pupil collaboration as well as preparing them for further lockdown learning. Groups of teachers from another area came together to develop specific areas of blended learning; a virtual classroom was used to share resources and to offer suggestions on each other's tasks and units. This collaboration enabled teachers to develop their digital skills as well as improving the use of technology and software, enriching learners' experiences.

At such a difficult time where the situation of a school could change from one week to the next, the possibility of having to isolate or further unannounced lockdown periods arose. GwE therefore drew up exemplar plans for schools to prepare for the continuation of learning. This means that forward planning is needed to ensure that staff, pupils and parents have the appropriate skills, knowledge and tools to be able to access distance learning as required. One school, for example, used these plans to respond successfully to a period when many classes had to isolate for two weeks; they had virtual thematic cross-curricular resources already prepared, with pupils and parents fully aware of how to access from home from the first morning.

Secondary:

Since the announcement in the summer that schools would re-open, and the urgent need to ensure that learning could be sustained and delivered on a 'blended learning' pattern - there has been a strong emphasis across all secondary schools on upskilling staff for them to have the appropriate skills to get pupils to learn digitally effectively. This was done formally through training days, informal and voluntary training often outside the school day, and by practising teachers at work every day. School training days also helped schools and teachers prepare for the challenges. We have supported this training at GwE by

sharing ideas for blended learning at head teacher forums, leaders of learning and teaching forums and subject forums. We have supported digital training by showcasing Hwb resources such as Screencastify and Flipgrid in addition to individual discussions with leaders and teachers. There are also learning models and various resources in the GwE resource centre, which schools use. These sessions were well supported by schools, and numbers have been high. With the more recent move to distance learning, live learning support is being offered.

Throughout the pandemic, GwE has offered strong support to the schools and additional one-to-one support to those schools that needed it, including those in the Estyn follow-up category, with regular discussions between senior management teams and the SIA forming the basis for support plans. Core subject networks have continued to meet under the guidance of the subject SIA which has provided advisers with the opportunity to provide further training sessions for departmental heads and teachers, as well as an opportunity to share practice and discuss ideas for provision during this period.

Alongside this, there has been an emphasis on supporting the range of teaching and learning styles that lend themselves to the blended learning model. These discussions have led to a deepening of understanding and improved practice in many situations e.g. effective questioning, how to give feedback etc. It is fair to note that digital learning has been new to us all, and the resulting leap of professional learning has been huge. The digital skills of staff across the county have developed dramatically and the work done in a relatively short period of time is impressive. This has been acknowledged by GwE advisers, LA officers and by Estyn during the thematic review.

Schools use flexibility when providing blended learning. Some schools choose to stream some lessons, or parts of lessons, live to groups of pupils; others have taken a more 'blended' approach - some live lessons, some asynchronous learning via pre-recorded videos or PowerPoint and tasks via the virtual classroom. All schools have very good things to say about the effort of teaching staff, their commitment to learners and their willingness to adapt to new teaching methods. However, a number of schools have identified problems with the infrastructure of IT systems which in turn has hampered efforts to provide live lessons. The Authority and schools have worked together to try to ensure that all learners have access to a device and internet connection from home.

Schools have adapted to the needs of learners and teachers over the period in terms of how they approach the learning for pupils who are at school, those who have had to isolate or have had to work for extended periods from home. Most senior management teams ensure that feedback from pupils and their parents feeds into the planning for Blended Learning and make adjustments to its provision based on perceptions.

In light of the impact of the pandemic on learners' basic skills and the need to accelerate learning, a comprehensive resource pack has been developed to support teachers in improving pupils' literacy and numeracy skills. Several schools have taken advantage of training opportunities in order to make effective use of these resources in their schools. In some specific schools, advisers have undertaken further training to secure support for a range of teaching staff involved in this work including middle leaders, teachers and assistants.

A very robust learner engagement strategy has underpinned the teaching. Attendance at lessons is rigorously monitored through various systems with some schools having established teams of individuals, including SMT members, teachers, assistants and administrative staff to liaise with learners and their parents if learners do not attend. There are also many examples where Assistants continue to support

ALN pupils to complete tasks with the most vulnerable accessing the school for specific help with their work.

Headteachers recognise that variation in quality continues within and across schools and they work effectively with the service to ensure consistency of experiences for learners.

Special

Similar to their mainstream school peers, the special schools have received support and guidance from GwE advisers throughout this difficult time. The staff at the schools have been working extremely hard and tirelessly throughout the pandemic offering a very high level of support to these special children and young people and their families. The well-being of the whole school community has been a priority for their plans and provision in very challenging times. Their regular and thoughtful communication with parents and carers has been a particularly strong element.

Comprehensive corporate and individual risk assessments have been created, followed and adapted to ensure that pupils remain safe and can resume attending schools in September. Despite all the complex and difficult challenges, the teaching was sustained using elements such as blended and accelerated learning from the GwE Support Centre to practice and develop the core skills.

Through this period the schools have succeeded, with guidance from their SIA, to continue the education reform journey ensuring the professional development of all staff and securing development through effective collaboration with their fellow schools. Leaders and their staff have succeeded in tirelessly finding highly innovative and positive solutions to ensure continuity of learning for all children and young people.

Next steps

Most schools plan to focus on developing digital skills, linked to the new curriculum. Preparing for the new curriculum and forthcoming ALN reforms is a priority for all schools. Schools are also planning how best to use GwE's Professional Offer to support these areas. GwE will provide a combination of generic and unique support to support schools in further developing a blended learning approach.

Primary and secondary schools have the opportunity to share resources that they have co-designed in order to help ensure enrichment of optimal provision. In the primary sector, schools continue to work together within their catchment areas to create and share rich teaching and learning resources. This is intended to promote mutual support, share good practice and reduce workload locally and to contribute to a regional resource bank that will be available to schools across the region as they prepare their provision for pupils. In the secondary sector, the schools have formed three Collaboration Alliances (Arfon, Meirion and Dwyfor) with the intention of sharing resources in the first instance - through the GwE Support Centre - and then to move forward to ensure collaboration on areas such as the Curriculum for Wales. The alliances also enable schools to support each other when different scenarios arise as a result of the pandemic e.g. the potential for sharing specialisms, establishing minority subject networks etc, and supporting the formal assessment processes at KS4 and 5. These clusters / alliances are funded by the consortium.

It is likely that much work will likely be required, when pupils are back in schools, to regain and develop many pupils' use of Welsh. GwE and the Authority will continue to work together to prepare guidance, support and resources for schools in preparation for this.

Monitoring and evaluating impact and progress over the period has proved challenging. We will continue to work with schools over the coming term to ensure that they have a clear picture of their strengths, areas for improvement and to ensure that they are ready to transition over lockdown to preparations for the new curriculum.

We have been working closely with advisers from other Consortia across Wales to ensure that effective Leadership Development Programs are available in a virtual form for the workforce. They are available to practitioners at every stage of their career - from the newly qualified teacher to the experienced headteacher and will begin, next term, to support leaders at all levels. It is our intention to continue to look at what leaders really need during the difficult pandemic period so that they can successfully lead their schools. In addition to this there is a series of workshops for middle leaders on 'Outstanding Middle Leadership in disruptive times', with a number of middle leaders from Gwynedd attending the training.