

Dear Phil Roberts

During the early autumn term, the Welsh Government asked us to undertake a review of local authorities 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 Swansea local authority. The content of the letter is based on virtual meetings with officers, the cabinet lead member for education and a sample of schools and PRUs. We have also considered the supporting documentation provided by the local authority 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 local authority's work to support its schools and PRU from March to August 2020

Leadership, management and collaboration

From the outset of the pandemic in Wales, representatives from Swansea's primary and secondary headteachers met regularly with union representation and local authority officers as part of the Education Emergency Board. This group took responsibility for the continuation of learning plan for Swansea local authority and plans to reopen schools safely, initially as childcare hubs and then for all pupils later in the summer term. The group established early on for the need for a recovery support programme to allow schools to focus on pupils' wellbeing and deal with any trauma they may have experienced during the lockdown.

The council's Cabinet and Scrutiny committee meetings were conducted virtually during the lockdown period although policy development meetings were cancelled due to the circumstances. The director met regularly with chairs of governors to discuss the reopening of schools and the continuation of learning strategy. Procedures were established early on to support the governance of schools. The Governors Support Team shared information on how governors could continue to operate virtually during lockdown, for example to agree on indicative budgets through online meetings. Regular bulletins and newsletters helped keep governors informed of the latest developments both nationally and within the authority. The governors' area of Hwb also provided them with access to current information and guidance from Welsh Government and the local authority. Regular headteacher network meetings helped officers to disseminate important information and gave leaders a forum to ask questions or express views on the local authority's plans and performance during the crisis.

Swansea local authority schools and PRUs could build on established approaches to allow staff to collaborate and share effective practice. Working groups such as the primary headteachers network and the Secondary Curriculum and School Evaluation Network (SCASEN) group were able to convene virtually from the start of lockdown. This enabled local authority officers to meet regularly with headteacher representatives throughout the lockdown period. On occasions, the local authority worked alongside colleagues from ERW during the summer term to develop continuity of learning plans and practices, for example to develop Welsh resources for both primary and secondary schools. The local authority also continued to engage well with ADEW to discuss national policy as well as regional and local responses and initiatives.

Throughout the spring and summer terms, the local authority continued to update parents and carers about key developments via their social media accounts and their website. In addition, schools relayed useful information and guidance via their usual communication channels. Senior local authority officers met with headteachers regularly to prepare for reopening schools. Officers, such as health and safety

advisors, visited schools to provide bespoke advice and guidance. However, an over-reliance on providing autonomy for schools to make important decisions at times, led to inconsistency of approaches across the local authority. For example, schools were allowed to decide whether to allow nursery and reception pupils to return at the end of the summer term, which may have confused parents.

Promoting learning

Local authority learning support officers have worked closely with headteachers and teachers to ensure continuity of learning since the start of lockdown. Initially, resources were shared with schools through networks and the Hwb website. In addition, the Swansea Virtual School (SVS) was established to share learning resources with teachers to support distance learning. Working groups of teachers were identified to produce recorded lessons to be hosted on the SVS site. The Primary Continuity of Learning (CoL) Strategy Group was also set up, which included headteachers and challenge advisers, to support distance learning. In addition, the SCASEN shared information across secondary schools on how best to organise distance learning.

At the beginning of May, the Primary CoL Strategy Group and the Secondary Phase team began to quality assure modelled lessons which were being produced by groups across the authority. By mid-May, the SVS site recorded around 20,000 hits in total – this increased by half the following week which suggests that teachers were making extensive use of the service. However, the national debate at the time on safeguarding considerations for synchronous teaching prevented live streaming of lessons at this time. Following the publication of ‘Safeguarding Principles and Practices of Live Streaming’ by Welsh Government, the local authority developed guidance to support schools who wanted to deliver live synchronous teaching sessions to their pupils.

The “What does distance learning look like in your school?” survey was distributed to schools in May. The feedback allowed the Primary CoL Strategy Group to review the primary curriculum and what it would look like going forward during the pandemic. The local authority also produced draft guidance on developing blended learning strategies, which was based on findings from international research and good practice from around the UK. This guidance was eventually adopted by ERW and shared with local authorities and schools across the region.

Cameo – using virtual technology effectively to provide essential professional learning for teachers and school staff

The local authority used technology effectively to deliver a series of virtual professional learning sessions to help schools understand the new blended learning concepts. Officers conducted webinars based on Swansea’s continuation of learning guidance for schools and PRUs. These sessions also looked at how to use a range of Hwb tools to facilitate effective synchronous and asynchronous teaching. This was later followed by a third blended learning webinar at the beginning of July, which included discussion on three walkthroughs including Year

6/7 Maths and ICT lessons and a key stage 3/4 geography lesson. The event was attended by over 120 delegates for the live event and others could view a recording of the session on the local authority's YouTube channel. The SCASEN virtual network meeting was also well attended and included sharing best practice, for example on supporting pupils' wellbeing.

Objective 6 of the Swansea Continuation of Learning Plan focuses on promoting Welsh language learning, including supporting pupils attending Welsh-medium schools who are from non-Welsh speaking backgrounds. The local authority worked alongside ERW regional consortium to develop resources, which were shared via the SVS site. The two local authority co-ordinators initially liaised with Welsh-medium schools across the authority to assess what was needed to support learning across the primary and secondary sector. This resulted in the team uploading over 20 lessons or challenges per week to the SVS site. In addition, they helped signpost useful resources such as Mudiad Meithrin's daily circle time and other apps and websites.

During the summer term, the local authority received around 13,000 responses from parents and carers to their 'What does distance learning look like in your school' survey on distance learning. Around 83% were satisfied with the work being provided by schools and noted that their children completed their school work regularly. As a result of the survey, the local authority were able to provide qualitative data to individual schools in order to help them evaluate and adapt their distance learning strategies. By the end of June, Swansea Virtual School had received over 40,000 page hits, averaging approximately 400 per day. At the same time, 108 video lessons were uploaded by staff which received around 3,300 views. Hwb login figures showed that all Swansea schools were using the platform with substantial increases in use compared to the previous year. For example, Hwb use for Swansea had increased by 83% in June compared with the same period in 2019.

Cameo – Ensuring that learners are not digitally disadvantaged during the pandemic

Objective 1 of the local authority's Continuation of Learning Plan focusses on supporting digitally disadvantaged families. In May 2020, the local authority surveyed all schools to establish the demand for ICT equipment to enable pupils to access online distance learning. It was estimated that up to 3,000 devices and 1,800 connectivity units were required to support pupils learning at home. As a result, officers devised a 5-phase plan to target groups of learners according to their need. The roll-out began with pupils from Year 6, Year 10 and Year 12 as well as all those with a statement of special educational needs, looked after children, children of asylum seekers, learners with English as an additional language and learners from the Gypsy and Traveller communities. Along with this initial roll-out of equipment, the local authority produced guidance on distance learning and internet safety for families, as well as an acceptable use policy for schools on the lending of equipment to families. This initiative helped to ensure that most pupils had access to at least one device to continue learning during the lockdown period.

By the end of the summer term, around 2,000 devices were loaned out to pupils, which consisted of a mixture of new equipment and repurposed old devices. In addition, around 400 MiFi devices have been given to learners that have no appropriate internet connection at home.

The local authority became aware early on in the pandemic that there was inconsistency in the way schools were delivering online distance learning materials. This prompted discussions with headteachers on how best to serve parents and pupils whilst providing continuity in the delivery within schools as well as across the local authority. As a result, best practice was identified and shared with others. For example, Pontarddulais Comprehensive School established a co-ordinator to ensure that all teachers were using the same learning platform across the school. They also created a central contact point to allow pupils and parents to contact the school should they need help and guidance with specific tasks or if they needed technical support.

Primary and secondary practitioners met via Teams on a regular basis to discuss ideas and strategies as well as to share good practice. The leadership team from the Swansea PRU Brondeg and Step Ahead Education Centre also led on training for synchronous teaching for all teachers across Swansea.

The local authority provided useful advice and learning materials for parents and carers on their 'School's out' section of their website, including videos from the Swansea Play Service and activities for pre-school children from the Early Language Development team.

Supporting vulnerable learners.

The local authority's Continuity of Learning Plan outlines how it aimed to ensure that pupils' wellbeing and learning are prioritised through high-quality support and distance learning. The local authority provided useful information for parents on how to take care of themselves and their children during the pandemic. The emphasis was very much on establishing daily routines and prioritising wellbeing ahead of anything else. The 'Letter from a teacher' published on their website in March emphasised this point very well and gave reassurance to parents and carers. The launch of the 'Swansea Virtual School' (SVS) in April provided parents and carers with an online 'one-stop-shop' for teaching and learning resources as well as guidance on wellbeing.

Cameo – Using virtual platforms effectively to provide guidance and support for learners and their families

Swansea Virtual School was created to bring together a collection of links and teaching resources that were compiled by teaching staff and education officers, to ensure the materials are suitable for use by parents and pupils. For example, the platform provides tips and ideas for parents with younger children on how to structure each day and how to talk to them about the coronavirus pandemic and answer questions they might have. Officers from Child and Family Services, Education and Health also worked collaboratively to place useful information on

the SVS site to help young people, families and professionals know how to access support if required. This included information on how to keep in touch with key workers as well as help on managing wellbeing and mental health. The local authority used a well-publicised media campaign to signpost the relevant services to support wellbeing that were available for schools and children and young people.

The Education Psychology Service (EPS) and the Learner Support Team (LST) provided schools with guidance on the availability of services to support pupils as schools reopened for the last three weeks of the summer term. Both the EPS and the LST provided online consultations and intervention sessions in small groups as pupils returned to school. In addition, the Therapeutic Counselling Service (TCS) provided face-to-face sessions in school by the end of June.

The Emotional Health and Psychological Well Being Group secured additional funding to meet the increased demand on services both during and post lock down. The local authority used this funding to support new work streams. For example, a few schools completed bereavement training to provide support to pupils who may have witnessed the loss of a family member or someone they knew as result of COVID-19.

Swansea local authority continued to support pupils that are eligible for free school meals during the period of school closures. Carers could choose to receive either a fortnightly payment of £39 direct to their bank account or a weekly food parcel for their children. Staff from many schools and officers from the authority visited families' homes on occasions to ensure that they had the meal or payment they were entitled to. This also allowed them to check on the wellbeing of the learners and their families.

In line with Welsh Government guidance, all schools across the local authority closed their doors for pupils in March. However, most reopened as childcare hubs to care for children of key workers and vulnerable pupils. These included the pupil referral unit provisions at Arfryn Education Centre, Swansea PRU Brondeg and Step Ahead Education Centre as well as Ysgol Crug Glas and Ysgol Pen-y-Bryn special schools. The local authority also identified vulnerable pupils who were offered access to a number of childcare sessions based on need.

The local authority allowed each school to decide whether they would operate as an emergency childcare centre or provide care as a standalone school. This decision was supported by headteachers as it was seen better suited to meet the needs of their local communities. Where appropriate to the local context, a few schools worked together to open one emergency childcare centre between them. Attendance at the sites varied, but most reported spare capacity during most days. The attendance was lower for secondary schools with no pupils attending on occasions in a few schools. The number of parents taking up the childcare offer on weekends was low throughout the two terms. Throughout the summer holiday period, the local authority provided financial support for families of vulnerable pupils who required childcare. The use of the local authority's hardship fund ensured that

the learners already identified as the most vulnerable through the RAG risk-rating system received continuity in the care and support they received over the summer months.

The local authority's work to support its schools and PRU from September

Leadership, management and collaboration

Since September, local authority leaders have continued to support schools and PRUs, learners and their families through a range of activities including providing timely advice and guidance. The improved communication both within the local authority and across partner agencies has ensured that the learning and welfare of learners and their families remains the focus of their work. Services across the authority now work more closely together. Schools report that there is a more coherent response to any query or issue. School leaders report that they are confident about the support they receive from the local authority for either routine matters or urgent cases such as when a pupil or member of staff reports a positive case of COVID-19.

In the absence of the Director of Education, who has been on long-term sickness absence since the beginning of the autumn term, the interim Director and her senior management team have endeavoured to ensure regular, timely and clear communication with schools, partners and stakeholders. Headteachers particularly valued the use of the Swansea Virtual School and Hwb platforms to disseminate important documents and guidance such as useful health and safety guidance and model policies for safe operation of schools. The regular virtual 'drop in sessions' with the local authority provides headteachers with quick answers to problems caused by the pandemic. They are positive about how the local authority has continued to summarise key Welsh Government documents, which allows school leaders to implement guidance quickly. The headteachers we spoke with feel valued for their work and hope that the close engagement and co-operation between schools, the local authority and other agencies will be a model for future working.

The local authority has adapted quickly to using online meetings and digital communications to ensure that essential services continue. For example, speech and language support for vulnerable learners is conducted virtually when face-to-face meetings are not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions. In addition, virtual meetings across local authority departments and with external agencies has ensured a co-ordinated and quick response to issues. The senior management team reflect regularly on how beneficial changes they have made in response to the pandemic will become established in practice going forward.

Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, officers and elected members have continued to address key priorities in their strategic plan. For example, they have remained largely on track with their additional learning needs (ALN) transformation

agenda including making key appointments to lead roles and providing training for them. The local authority has maintained their capital programme throughout the COVID-19 period despite the challenges posed, for example the opening of the new PRU, Maes Derw, has remained largely on track with pupils set to move from the current buildings in early 2021.

Cameo – Using a parent and carer forum to help inform policy and decision making

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, the local authority has continued to engage with parents through their 'Parent and carer forum' to discuss ideas and policy. A notable feature of this work includes the use of a parent forum to inform policy and decisions around ALN provision. Officers continued to engage with representatives from the forum throughout the pandemic, which helped to inform their support and guidance around groups of learners such as the specialist support for pupils with autistic spectrum condition and their families. This helped to ensure that their policies and decisions were based on the needs of the learners and their families as much as possible.

Promoting learning

Since September, the local authority has continued to provide substantial support to schools to ensure continuity of learning. Many pupils in Swansea Local Authority have been able to attend school and benefit from face-to-face teaching wherever possible. Where pupils are required to isolate or shield, schools are providing distance learning until they are able to return. Nearly all schools we contacted in Swansea were very appreciative of the local authority's support and guidance as they set about re-establishing learning at the beginning of the autumn term. Although the local authority has stipulated to schools that it does not have a preferred methodology for the delivery of their continuity of learning, their advice has centred on schools tailoring their distance learning strategies to meet their own contexts. As a result, schools have adopted a range of strategies that better suit their learners or the ability of their staff to deliver distance learning. For example, leaders in Bishopston Comprehensive School are focussing on the development of live streaming through synchronous teaching while Penyrheol Comprehensive School are focussing more on providing mainly asynchronous learning for their learners. Local authority officers have supported schools well by offering them research-based advice on a variety of methodologies. They have kept abreast of findings from a wide range of organisations to inform their guidance documents and training, including live webinars to teachers across the authority. Officers have worked closely with school leaders and have ensured open communication at all stages through the SCASEN and the Primary CoL Strategy Group. Officers hold weekly virtual team meetings to discuss progress against the targets set out in their CoL plan and to share new information.

Officers have worked flexibly with schools to help them make difficult decisions about their curriculum. For example, Morriston Comprehensive School and Bishop Vaughan Catholic Comprehensive School have an arrangement to share the

teaching of eight subjects in the sixth form, with pupils travelling between sites. Officers were open-minded about the possibility of such arrangements but as a result of wide-ranging discussions with leaders in both schools there is live streaming of lessons instead. This arrangement seems to be an acceptable solution for now although some parents have complained about disruption to learning this term and that pupils are not receiving equal learning experiences.

Many secondary schools have had whole groups self-isolating as a result of the 'Test, Trace and Protect' (TTP) strategy. In a few cases, the same group of pupils have missed considerable amount of direct face-to-face contact with their teachers due to the TTP strategy in Swansea. Although, distance learning arrangements have been put in place, officers and teachers identify that the ongoing disruption is likely to impact on pupils' emotional wellbeing.

Cameo: Using evidence from communication with schools to inform professional learning

Officers sent out a survey to primary head teachers, seeking information on specific training needs during the pandemic. They analysed the responses and came up with a list of items for future webinars including:

- developing the use of live sessions
- how to use the tools available via hwb and other useful platforms/apps
- easy-to-use tools for teachers to help them when designing online/home learning activities

As a result of this, the local authority produced a comprehensive programme of webinars to address the issues above.

The shared understanding of what blended and distance learning means for Swansea schools has changed since September as it is not always possible to plan for pupil absence. Officers continue to work with schools to provide the best fit model for individual circumstances. For example, the local authority has been promoting the use of established principles for designing paper materials for distance learning. This has been based on the evidence that pupils do not learn as well in front of a screen when compared with on paper and are promoting the idea of ensuring that pupils carry out some of their learning on paper. Across the local authority, officers have been working closely with schools to develop their approach to assessing pupils' work through virtual platforms. They have offered virtual training on approaches that include using mini quizzes, giving feedback using the live-chat facility on platforms like 'Microsoft Teams', using video recordings to explain new tasks and to identify misconceptions and offering whole-class feedback on common misconceptions.

Since September, officers have continued to seek stakeholders' views through virtual meetings and surveys. They have distilled developing practice from these activities and disseminated ideas and resources across the local authority. A good example of this is the development of pupils' Welsh oracy, if they need to isolate, through the 'Cynllun Clonc' resources and video links, including staff reading stories and developing pupils' vocabulary and oracy skills.

The SVS website includes a range of learning resources that teachers or parents can use if pupils are away from school. Officers and teachers continue to contribute to its content in order to share resources and best practice. The 'learning' area of the site is developing appropriately although the foundation and primary sections are more developed than the secondary area, which is mainly limited to mathematics resources at present. A particularly positive aspect of this website is the continuous professional learning area that offers teachers useful guidance on distance learning, recording lessons, live streaming, blended learning and transition arrangements. Many headteachers report that they have found it very useful to be able to access this guidance online, especially as it is all located in a 'one stop shop' area.

The local authority continues to support access to digital equipment for all learners well. Officers link regularly with schools to find out which pupils are digitally excluded and ensure that they have access to ICT equipment and internet access. However, a very few schools report that there are still a number of families that do not have access to enough ICT equipment so that all of their children can access work at the same time.

The local authority has continued with its programme of professional learning events with a mixture of input from officers and schools. Officers have reflected on the value of the on-line training materials including webinars and the use of guest speakers, to inform ongoing support to schools and staff. For example, they recently used the results of staff surveys to determine the availability of ICT equipment in schools and the competency of teachers to deliver remote learning. As a result, the local authority has designed their training sessions on different approaches to blended-learning and asynchronous learning, in order to meet the current needs of groups of teachers. Officers have also developed and shared sensible protocols on the continuity of learning with school leaders and subject specific teams to promote consistency. The training offered by officers includes a strong focus on teaching strategies such as building on pupils' prior knowledge and skills, clear explanations,

Cameo: Developing literacy

The Primary CoL Strategy Group produced a plan to set books online for the pupils to read. The books are interactive and are available to pupils to access from the home. The series includes interactive challenges that reinforces their understanding of the text as well as developing their vocabulary. There are also links to 'rapid reading books' that pupils can access to develop their reading skills further. This strategy has helped maintain continuity in pupils' reading should they need to self-isolate as well as reducing the risk of transmission of the virus through shared books.

modelling examples and solutions, well-sequenced tasks and feedback. Officers have also provided teachers with worthwhile training on the use of equipment such as visualisers, to support modelling and demonstrations through video recordings and live sessions.

The digital literacy groups continue to offer useful advice on remote learning development and have produced staff bulletins to share good practice in areas such as online assessment. Officers have also shared information about adaptations to the 2021 subject orders with curriculum leaders but have not yet had discussions with them about the proposed new assessments.

The local authority has started to engage with schools on curriculum reform in a manner that is sensitive to the current situation. Officers have produced and delivered stimulating training materials based on the work of established leaders and experts in this field.

The local authority has continued to support pupils' Welsh language development by creating blended learning resources for latecomers in Welsh-medium schools. Welsh specialist teachers have engaged with schools this term to support the learning of Welsh through face-to-face teaching where possible. In addition, they are continuing to develop resources for the Swansea Virtual School to develop Welsh language skills as well as translating a range of resources and lessons for schools. They have supported teachers in English and Welsh-medium schools with planning and developing digital bilingual resources, lessons and weekly challenges. These resources have also been uploaded to the Swansea Virtual School to offer parents support to help their child learn.

The local authority has disseminated the grant funding for the 'Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards: Accelerated Learning Programme' directly to schools. Schools are required to submit their plans to the local authority in order to allow officers to discuss the effectiveness of their proposals. Such discussions will also form part of the autumn term visit by the challenger advisers. The local authority is also using the outcomes of such dialogue to develop sensible plans for future professional learning linked to this funding stream. Early evidence suggests that the local authority had reached its target of recruiting at least 37 extra teachers to support learners through the 'Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards: Accelerated Learning Programme'.

Support for vulnerable learners

The local authority continued to prioritise the wellbeing of their pupils and staff as schools and PRUs re-established learning from the beginning of September. The continued collaborative working across the local authority as well as with other agencies has ensured that pupils have received appropriate support. The local authority continues to monitor the attendance of vulnerable pupils on a daily basis in order to safeguard their wellbeing. They note that attendance rates, particularly those of vulnerable learners, is clearly below the average for Swansea and Wales

before the lockdown period in March. In addition, they acknowledge that it is much more difficult to identify any patterns in attendance during the autumn term due to the complexity around the new attendance codes. However, the local authority continues to identify and track vulnerable learners using their well-established RAG risk-rating system. The focus remains on providing reassurance and support for those learners and their families, who may be worried about returning to school.

In our conversations with schools, headteachers were very positive and grateful for the work of the education welfare officers (EWOs) and ALN family liaison officers in ensuring the wellbeing of vulnerable learners. They have kept in regular contact with families of learners who have been reluctant to return to school in September. This has helped to reassure those learners who have experienced anxiety about returning to school, for example they may have feared catching COVID-19 or may have struggled to keep up with their learning during the lockdown period. The local authority report that they have experienced an increase since September in the number of families who wish to educate their children at home. The EWO team and family liaison officers have been proactively engaging with these families in order to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of elective home education. In a few cases, they have worked with the school to re-establish learning for these learners by creating a bespoke timetable to help them to re-engage. This has also ensured that the appropriate support has been in place to ensure the wellbeing of these vulnerable pupils as they return to school. In another example, the EWO worked with a school to enable a family to come to the school at the same time as the staggered start times for different year groups made it difficult for the parent to ensure that all the children attended daily. This close collaboration between schools, the local authority and other agencies has helped learners to resume their learning as smoothly as possible during the autumn term.

The local authority's Educational Psychologist Service (EPS) has continued to provide beneficial support to vulnerable learners and staff. They have collaborated with the counselling service provider to help develop pupils' resilience and promote improved attitudes to learning on their return to school. They have introduced positive psychology training to staff to support learners, which focuses on five pathways of happiness and wellbeing. The EPS team, along with the Learner Support Team, continue to provide consultations and intervention sessions for those most vulnerable learners who are in need of help and support. The Therapeutic Counselling Service (TCS) also continue to provide face-to-face counselling sessions to learners, especially those who may have experienced trauma or anxiety as a result of COVID-19. This programme has been recently extended to include Headteachers who may require specialist support during this difficult period.

The local authority have engaged this term with families from the Gypsy, Roma or Traveller group who have been more reluctant to allow their children to return to school. Officers are communicating regularly with families in order to reassure them of the measures put in place to safeguard their children at school. However, most learners have continued to remain absent from school. The local authority note that they have had better success with their engagement of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). At the end of the summer term, officers

collated a list of learners from schools and PRUs who were most likely to be NEET in September. These learners were referred to early help hubs for support and guidance on their next steps. The local authority has continued to monitor these learners this term and report that the strategy has been largely successful. The multi-agency approach employed to supporting these vulnerable pupils has ensured that nearly all are now engaged in some form of learning, training or employment this term. In particular, the improved working between the Education Services and the Child and Family Service within the Social Services Directorate has facilitated a more integrated approach to providing help and support for these vulnerable pupils.

As schools re-opened fully to all pupils in September, the focus remained on supporting learner and staff wellbeing. Elements of the curriculum were re-introduced more as the term progressed with an emphasis on developing learner's basic skills and their attitude to learning. Staff also ensured that specialist services from the local authority and other agencies were safe to revisit their settings in order to provide essential support to vulnerable learners. In addition, the learning in pupil referral units as well as support for those learners receiving education other than at schools (EOTAS) also returned to a degree of normality as the term progressed. The use of synchronous teaching to support groups of learners during the lockdown period and at the beginning of the autumn term helped staff and learners to remain in contact during this difficult period. This also helped to prepare learners and their families for possible further disruption to their learning during the year. For example, an outbreak of COVID-19 at a special school affected around a third of staff which resulted in a reduced timetable being implemented over four days, with the fifth day being used to provide additional cleaning of the school site. Swansea's two special schools reopened their doors at the beginning of term having carried out appropriate enhanced risk assessments to ensure the safety of all their learners, particularly those with profound and multiple learning difficulties. The local authority also supported these schools in implementing a blended approach for these vulnerable learners during the early part of the term. This has ensured that the learning returned to near normal by as the weeks progressed.

Nearly all headteachers who took part in our engagement phone calls praised highly the support that they had received with regards to health and safety issues. They valued the guidance from the local authority health and safety specialists when they had to prepare for the reopening of their schools in September. Headteachers stated that the use of the virtual platform by the local authority to host updated health and safety guidance was particularly useful. They also commended the effectiveness and clarity of advice provided by the local authority, especially around issues relating to the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable pupils such as those requiring specialist support. Headteachers also appreciated for the on-site visits by the health and safety team, who provided practical advice on how best to operate as safely as possible. They have remained 'on-call' from the outset of the pandemic to answer queries and questions from school leaders. As a result, headteachers felt confident that they were well prepared for the reopening of schools and to make important decisions on health and safety issues at a local level when the need arose. A few headteachers, who have responsibility for specialist teaching facilities (STF)

on-site, were grateful to the work of the local authority for organising the safe transportation of pupils to these settings. Officers from both the education and transport departments collaborated to ensure that taxis were organised to transport pupils safely, removing this added burden from headteachers.

Given the relatively high proportion of learners with English as an additional language (EAL) attending Swansea schools, the local authority ensured from the outset that all important guidance documents were translated in many languages. In addition, they ensured that these learners were not digitally disadvantaged especially as on-line translation services were so vital to their learning. Schools and the local authority continued to support their EAL pupils well as schools re-opened, including ensuring the wellbeing of their families.

As schools re-opened in September, the local authority continued to work more effectively both across departments and with other agencies to provide support for learners and their families. Although the local authority have not experienced a surge in demand in statutory referrals from schools, the improved co-operation between agencies has provided much needed early help and support. This, together with better use of computer technology to digitise the referral process and to facilitate virtual meetings and consultations, may have contributed to the lower than expected number of referrals for support for learners. Since September, many schools have been grateful of the support their learners have received from specialist services, particularly those requiring help as a result of bereavement or those suffering from increased anxiety. In our discussion with headteachers, the local authority's guidance on supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing has been gratefully received by staff in their efforts to support vulnerable learners. In addition, they also value the co-operation between agencies as part of 'Operation Encompass' which has provided useful information on learners who may have witnessed domestic violence.

Cameo – Local authority guidance on supporting learners' mental health and wellbeing

From the outset, the local authority has prioritised the health and wellbeing of learners and staff a priority. The improved sharing of information across the local authority and with external agencies during the pandemic, allowed officers to highlight and focus on common issues affecting learners across Swansea. In particular it became evident that there could be an increase of learners self-harming, suffering from anxiety and depression or attempting to take their own lives. As a result, the local authority produced timely guidance for schools to support their learners and information on where to seek further help. The guidance was also shared with a neighbouring local authority to help support their learners.

Since September, the local authority has continued to provide a range of virtual professional learning opportunities and bespoke training for staff working with vulnerable learners. The combination of 'in-house' and third party providers has

ensured a breadth of worthwhile training on a range of pertinent topics including supporting looked after children, learners with Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC), person-centred approaches in preparation for the ALN reforms and trauma-informed practices. In addition, headteachers have particularly valued the multi-agency approach to training that has allowed practitioners to gain a better understanding of current issues such as dealing with learners who are self-harming or suffering from increased anxiety. They are also appreciative of the support that their ALNCOs have received via the regular forum organised by the local authority. In addition, they value the important information on ALN and support for vulnerable learners that are included in regular newsletters from the local authority. This has generated useful discussions between schools in their own cluster as well as with similar schools across Swansea. Such co-operation has reinforced the team ethos generated across the local authority and its schools throughout the pandemic.