

Dear Michelle Morris,

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 Blaenau Gwent 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**

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## The local authority's work to support its schools from March to August 2020

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### Leadership and collaboration

In March, the local authority established two groups to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The gold level response team consisted of the corporate directors and the emergency response team (ERT) consisted of service area leads and associated officers. These groups supported the school repurposing planning groups which involved all officers working with schools. The authority revised this structure in June to support school re-opening, establishing two executive school planning groups, one for the secondary sector inclusive of special schools and one for the primary sector inclusive of Welsh-medium provision. In addition, a local authority transition group was established with representation from key services including health and safety, environmental health and social services to provide support to schools. Headteachers were involved in these groups, acting as cluster representatives and liaising with the schools in their own clusters.

In June, officers surveyed parents about their intentions to send children back to school for the last three weeks of the summer term. There were 4,221 responses to the survey on behalf of 8,000 pupils. The results of the survey indicated that 53% of pupils would return to school, however actual attendance was lower than this. In the first week, attendance levels were 43%, increasing to 46% in week two. The survey results also showed that most parents were concerned about children's health, particularly where families had members who were shielding or had children with medical needs. Parents had concerns about children from hubs mixing with children that had not been attending school. Officers worked with Public Health Wales to try to address these concerns and took advice from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to identify the best ways to support pupils back into school.

Officers created a strategic framework for school re-opening in September with a set of key principles to ensure consistency in approaches where possible and to try to avoid the need for schools to develop their own solutions to the challenges around re-opening. The executive school planning groups established a common local authority wide approach for the first two weeks of September. Officers provided a risk assessment template and guidance for reopening schools and established a process for reviewing these upon completion.

#### **Cameo: Strong collaboration across the local authority**

The reopening of schools in Blaenau Gwent was managed well in conjunction with corporate colleagues and schools. There are robust reporting arrangements on education matters to the gold level response team via the Emergency Response Team (ERT) protocols. In addition, education officers established two executive school planning groups - one for the secondary sector inclusive of special schools, along with one for the primary sector inclusive of Welsh-medium provision. The aim of these groups was to oversee the development of a common framework and

principles within which the reopening of schools could be implemented. Blaenau Gwent's approach was to offer pupils the opportunity to have at least three opportunities to check in and catch up during the summer term, where practicably possible. They also aimed to ensure that schools established maximum engagement opportunities for key year groups.

There was an issue with the water supply in four schools and these were unable to re-open on time. The schools' water supplies were tested once the Minister had announced that schools would re-open on 29 June. The local authority was unable to access the testing process earlier as staff involved in testing were part of the furlough scheme. By the time that the results were available, and Legionnaires' disease was found to be present in the systems, it was too late for the schools to open on 29 June. The local authority conducted an independent review so that they could prevent this happening during any future school closures. All four schools opened for the last week of the summer term.

Local authority officers supported staff in both of their non-school settings for children under five throughout the pandemic, including providing financial support through grants and advice on the furlough scheme.

Local authority officers worked well with officers from the regional consortium (EAS) to ensure that schools had appropriate guidance and information to support their work. In the main, the local authority provided support for operational processes such as school transport and health and safety and the EAS provided guidance around learning and professional development.

Officers feel that there is a good working relationship between schools and local authority staff. The local authority established a group of officers from key local authority services to support the transition from schools providing childcare hubs to reopening for education. School membership of this group is organised on a cluster basis with cluster representatives liaising with the schools in their own clusters.

Officers worked with Public Health Wales to share key messages with staff, parents and pupils about the safe reopening of schools. They provided advice and guidance to headteachers, for example about classroom organisation and pupil movement through schools. Officers put processes in place to maintain communication with parents throughout the school summer holiday period.

### **Promoting learning**

Officers consider that the EAS has provided good support to schools in blended learning approaches. The EAS implemented a 'playlist' for schools soon after providers closed. This was a resource with comprehensive coverage of key information that EAS officers shared with all headteachers on a weekly basis. The resource was designed to support school leaders by collating national and regional advice and guidance together and locating it in one place to enable easy access for

school leaders. The resource was refined and updated during the summer term as the situation evolved.

Senior officers in the local authority recognised that learner engagement was an issue during the period when schools were closed. The EAS surveyed school leaders about distance learning, with all schools in Blaenau Gwent responding. The main reasons given by schools for the lack of engagement of learners were lack of ICT equipment, lack of support from parents and parents struggling to juggle their employment responsibilities with supporting their children's learning. As a result of these findings, the local authority set up a communication group to focus on learner wellbeing. The group produced videos for families about home and distance learning. The group also considered how best to support learners from Welsh-medium schools in their home environment.

The local authority undertook a survey to find out how many learners had either no digital equipment or no internet access at home. To support these learners and to enable them to access the provision offered by schools, officers arranged for devices from schools to be rebuilt. Around 900 laptops and approximately 133 Wi-Fi devices were allocated to learners and distributed to their homes.

Officers provided guidance and resources to support schools in managing the change to digital learning. The EAS provided professional learning opportunities for teachers and support staff. Prior to the publication of Welsh Government guidance, the EAS discouraged teachers across the region from streaming lessons live. However, after receiving the guidance one secondary school and one all-age school started to stream lessons, primarily to pupils in key stage 4. Coleg Gwent has also engaged with pupils using this method. The all-age school shared its live lessons with pupils from a school in a neighbouring authority.

### **Supporting vulnerable learners**

The response to the pandemic forged closer links between social services, family services, CAMHS and the education service and allowed the local authority to streamline some of its work. Officers from these services held early discussions about school closures and by 3 April, the educational psychology service had produced and distributed five support packs for children and families. Both the

#### **Cameo: Beneficial support for vulnerable pupils by the educational psychology service**

The educational psychology service produced and distributed support packs for children and families. These focused on managing worries, learning at home including wellbeing advice, emotional health and wellbeing, communication and relationships and transition back into school. This work was done early in the school closure period to provide timely support for families. Parents and schools provided positive feedback on this guidance and the local authority shared this resource with local authorities across Wales.

education psychology service and the education welfare service set up telephone helpline services to support families. At the start of the lockdown period, headteachers identified children whose wellbeing they had concerns about and provided the local authority with information about these. Education welfare officers contacted these families by telephone or by making a socially distanced home visit to discuss wellbeing and learning.

The local authority implemented a food distribution service for pupils eligible for free school meals when schools first closed. This service provided meals each day, which were available for families to collect from hubs or were delivered to families in more isolated communities. In early May, the local authority replaced the food delivery service with direct payments to families. There was a high level of uptake for these payments and local authority officers contacted eligible families who had not applied for funding to give them support with the application process. Since the start of the pandemic, the number for families with school-aged children who submitted applications for universal credit increased by 600.

### **Cameo: The work of the local authority youth service**

The local authority reconfigured the youth service to support the young people identified as having the greatest need for support and intervention. Officers obtained details of pupils identified as needing support from schools. Around 600 pupils below the age of 16 and 150 young people over the age of 16 were identified and have been contacted weekly by youth support staff. The lead officer for youth work tried to ensure the young people were familiar with the youth workers assigned to them. The youth service identified a number of challenges facing young people in the first few weeks of the pandemic. These included the loss of employment, running out of money and eviction from accommodation. Youth workers supported young people to find accommodation and the local authority placed some young people who would not usually be eligible to access support in bed and breakfast accommodation to try to ensure that they had a safe place to live. Youth workers also helped young people to apply for financial support. As the lockdown period progressed, youth workers liaised with other agencies to produce resources to emphasise the importance of social distancing to young people. Youth officers began working in different ways with young people, for example providing music sessions and cookery lessons online. This allowed them to work with an increased number of young people.

Following the urgent work carried out to support young people in these early weeks, youth workers moved from crisis management to focus on young people's wellbeing. They held one-to-one and group sessions virtually and continued with counselling sessions where these were in place previously. They recognised the difficulties for some young people in not having a private place for sessions, so a number of engagements became check-ins and some young people asked for sessions to be put on hold. Youth workers provided guidance to young people on the restrictions in place as a result of the pandemic and tried to make sure that young people were not congregating in groups outdoors. The youth service worked in partnership with agencies such as the police and crime commissioners and contributed to videos

produced to explain to young people the importance of staying at home and not mixing with others.

Youth workers identified early on in the pandemic that many of the young people they were working with did not have access to ICT equipment. They responded quickly to these needs, for example by distributing mobile phones and laptops. They started working with young people in different ways, for example holding music sessions and group cookery lessons online. The local authority reports that these have been successful, and they anticipate that these will continue as they have reached young people that would not usually attend youth centres. Youth workers provided weekly updates to schools about school age learners and to parents and carers.

Once it became apparent in March that schools would close to most pupils and that the local authority would need to provide childcare for the children of key workers and those that are most vulnerable, officers developed a hub protocol. The protocol provided detailed guidance on safeguarding, health and safety, hygiene and social distancing as well as clear procedures for organising the hub provision, including meal provision, opening hours and registration procedures. They established a repurposing group to carry out this work and to monitor the childcare hubs.

Initially hubs were organised around the four secondary catchment areas with an additional hub in the local authority's special school for pupils with specific needs, for example those with healthcare plans. In response to feedback from primary head teachers who were concerned with the initial arrangements for hubs to be solely in secondary schools, the local authority quickly arranged for an additional hub to be based in a primary school. The hubs were open from 8am until 6pm including through school holiday periods. Approximately 380 children of key workers and \*\*\* vulnerable pupils attended hub provision between March and July. Officers from education and social services worked together to identify vulnerable children to attend the provision, including at the special school. Hub provision ceased on 19 June and the children that had been attending returned to their own schools during the week beginning 22 June.

The local authority has two non-school settings for children under five. One remained open throughout the pandemic to cater for the children of key workers. In addition, the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme, funded by Welsh Government, for children between the ages of 0-4 years supported 145 children to access funded childcare.

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## **The local authority's work to support its schools from September**

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### **Leadership and collaboration**

Following eight months of undertaking the role on an interim basis, in early November the local authority appointed the new permanent corporate director of

education. To help strengthen the education department, in the summer term, the local authority advertised for a new lead officer for school improvement. However, they failed to appoint to this position and a decision was taken to delay the appointment until the new corporate director had been appointed. Neither the interim arrangements for the corporate director position or the lack of school improvement lead officer appear to have impacted negatively on the local authority's ability to support schools during the pandemic. The new director has already met with headteachers and has outlined his vision for the local authority and his desire to align the various education teams more closely. The executive member for education is very well informed about the local authority's support for schools during the pandemic and has a clear understanding of the challenges facing schools and their leaders.

Education officers within the local authority continue to work productively with other corporate service staff. The gold level response team has maintained their lead work since September through their twice-weekly meetings. Education officers think that collaborative working across the council has been strengthened throughout the pandemic and that the local authority's 'one council' ethos is being reinforced through joint working practices to support children their families and the local community as a whole. This improved partnership working, and collaborative approaches have supported a strong response to the local challenges.

Officers have held workshops to discuss lessons that they have learnt through their actions so far and how they are addressing new ways of working. Officers are learning on a daily basis and they now have stronger amended systems and processes in place to manage the challenges should there be another full lockdown.

Working in conjunction with the EAS, local authority officers continue to recognise the importance of supporting the wellbeing of school leaders. Officers consider that they have provided leaders with a high level of support and Estyn's survey results show that many headteachers feel that the local authority cares about their wellbeing. Headteachers have appreciated how swiftly officers have responded to their concerns and this has helped them deal with a range of issues quickly. The local authority is also providing education officers with appropriate wellbeing support. This includes timely communication, guidance and resources to support effective homeworking, recognising officers' commitments to support family members and the need for a flexible approach to homeworking to support individual needs.

## **Promoting learning**

From September, the local authority maintained a strong focus on supporting schools to provide a safe return to school for pupils and staff. Officers issued schools with an updated version of their 'Guidance for whole school reopening document' to help leaders manage operational matters. In addition, they have provided schools with a flexible range of support in order to respond to emerging learner and school improvement needs. Officers have worked closely with the EAS,

school leaders, staff and governors to support the identified needs. They have ensured that they have provided timely communication for school leaders as well as access to virtual networks for staff governors and pupils.

Across Wales, very few pupils currently need to receive blended learning. Most pupils are able to attend school and benefit from face-to-face teaching. Where pupils are required to isolate or shield, schools are providing distance learning until they are able to return. A blended learning approach would involve a cohesive, intentional plan for pupils' learning to involve a combination of learning in school and at home which is not required in most schools at the moment.

The local authority has worked in partnership with the EAS to support schools to plan their distance learning offer and to enable them to plan for a blended approach should they require it in the future. Officers have recognised key areas for improvement regarding distance learning, including ensuring better engagement from parents and all learners. As a result, officers have worked closely with schools to provide additional guidance for parents who need support in using ICT to help support their children's learning at home and to access communication.

In September, officers collaborated with colleagues from the EAS to produce an executive update on their strategy for supporting schools with continuity of learning. The document outlines various phases for school support and includes how the local authority and the regional consortia worked with other partners to produce guidance for schools to support them in preparing their approaches for distance learning. Initially written in September, the document was then updated in November and presented to all elected members.

In September, in line with other local authorities within the EAS, officers sent a survey to all headteachers to gain information around their strategy for distance learning. The response from schools in Blaenau Gwent was higher than the region as a whole. Local authority officers used the information from the survey to share good practice and to identify any professional learning requirements within individual schools to help them customise support. The results of this survey suggest that all schools are offering pupils a suitable variety of blended learning approaches. There are no schools where the local authority has concerns over their ability to support pupils' learning effectively. The local authority has used the survey responses to help share good practice, for example in the use of shared platforms and the streaming of live lessons.

Officers have used the findings of the Children's Commissioner's survey 'COVID and me' to help improve their support for schools. An example of this is increased emphasis on teaching pupils resilience to help them remain focused when learning at home. The survey also highlighted that over half of pupils worried about falling behind when not in school and so this information was shared with school leaders.

Local authority officers have weekly updates from the EAS as to how challenge advisers are working with individual schools. The local authority has now resumed a more formal approach to working with their three schools who are causing concern.



This has included more regular meetings that now have a stronger focus on school improvement rather than just supporting leaders to address wellbeing issues.

The local authority's Welsh-medium education forum is helping to embed the Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP). Officers also feel they have good representation from the Welsh-medium sector on their various strategic groups. They have established a communications group who are promoting the benefits of being bilingual. In addition, officers have worked with partners from other local authorities to develop a regional booklet on the benefits of being bilingual. This is now included in their admissions booklet and on their website. To help promote Welsh oracy in particular, the local authority organises a Welsh-medium youth club. Since the start of the pandemic this has been run as a virtual club and officers report that members attending has increased when compared to face-to-face sessions. Officers are continuing with their plans to expand provision for Welsh-medium education within the authority.

Local authority officers are well aware of the impact of high levels of COVID-19 within the locality and there are many schools with positive cases. Officers have worked closely with school leaders to assist them in supporting pupils with distance learning when they are isolating. The local authority has continued to provide a high level of support for pupils who require ICT equipment and Wi-Fi access in their homes. Officers have liaised regularly with school leaders to ensure that they target that provision to pupils in greatest need. They have also been proactive in supporting schools to work with parents to increase their capacity to support their children's learning at home.

#### **Cameo: Effective sharing of ICT resources**

Over recent months there has been an international problem of delays in procuring additional ICT devices with increased demand due to additional home learning and working. To help overcome this issue, local authority officers have worked effectively with schools to help co-ordinate the sharing of surplus ICT devices. Where there has been a need to provide pupils with ICT hardware, this local approach has been effective in supporting pupils' learning at home. It has helped mitigate the impact of a delay in receiving new devices.

Officers have undertaken a survey with members of their youth service to measure the impact of their support and to ask young people for suggestions for improvement. From this work, they discovered that at times, young people felt contacted too often and therefore youth officers have reduced contact with young people when appropriate. They also amended their approach in contacting these young people by addressing individual preference for either face-to-face, virtual or telephone contact.

Local authority officers have maintained their regular headteacher stakeholder group meetings with a strong focus this term on supporting learning.

At the start of the autumn term, local authority officers were mindful of not placing excess pressure on schools and therefore took a graduated approach in considering how schools were using their 'Recruit, recover, raise standards: the accelerating learning programme' grant funding. Working with officers from the EAS, they

grouped schools into three tiers depending on their categorisation. Schools therefore received a level of initial support to complete their plans based on their individual needs. All leaders were expected to submit their school development plan by October half-term.

The local authority has directed all schools to use the EAS grant monitoring tool to plan and check on that spending. Officers are fully aware of the year groups who have been disproportionately affected by school closures. They are working with individual school leaders to ensure that additional funding is targeted appropriately to support these pupils to catch up with their learning. Officers have not yet put plans in place to monitor the impact of grant spending by each school but will be working closely with EAS challenge advisors once schools have evidence available to measure the impact of their plans on improving outcomes for pupils.

In particular, officers are working very closely with the leaders of schools causing concern and expect leaders to provide them with a regular update on the progress against each of their recommendations. The local authority is working in conjunction with the EAS to continue to broker and provide bespoke support to these schools, dependent on their individual need. Additional support has a strong focus on helping to improve teaching, learning and leadership.

From September, officers determined that they would need to revise their transport provision to ensure that it would enable them to provide safe travel for all eligible pupils. Currently pupils from 15 schools within the local authority are eligible for transport in line with the council's policy, along with pupils from 12 schools and specialist education facilities outside of the authority. The local authority has been able to meet the transport requirements identified by schools within and outside of the authority. This has assisted in providing these pupils with continuity of learning.

Since September, the local authority has continued to work closely with the EAS to provide schools with a weekly 'playlist' of support and training. There is a strong focus on blended learning and approaches to delivering a curriculum virtually and in school and to ensure that professional learning opportunities are available for all staff. The playlist is updated regularly in response to feedback from staff and to share good practice. Individual schools are able to apply to have their good practice included in the playlist. Local authority and regional consortia officers endorse this provision before it is included in the training materials.

Feedback from headteachers has been that there has been a lot of useful information on the playlist and it has supported training needs well. However, a few leaders have expressed concerns that the playlist can be too large, overwhelming and difficult to navigate.

In November, the EAS has launched a new website to help support schools to maintain consistent high quality blended and distance learning experiences for pupils. The website has been designed to share practice in learning approaches to help schools in their curriculum design. Local authority officers have undertaken work with the EAS to support schools with this work, for example through organising master classes to be shared on the website. The local authority has recognised that

it is of paramount importance to enable staff to access professional learning flexibly. As a result, professional learning sessions are recorded and therefore available for staff to access at their preferred time. Feedback from school leaders is that this approach has been much appreciated by schools. Local authority officers monitor the impact of professional learning through monthly reports and quality assurance meetings with the EAS. Through this work, officers help identify further areas for development and target professional learning opportunities accordingly.

Middle leaders across the local authority continue to access the EAS's useful middle leadership training. This is particularly helpful in strengthening the capacity of leadership in schools causing concern.

### **Supporting vulnerable learners**

Local authority officers have continued to work closely with schools and other services, such as children's services, to identify and support vulnerable learners within the local authority. Education officers liaise with officers from children's services and their established group meets on a regular basis to consider how best to provide support for vulnerable pupils.

Across the local authority, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) pupils had generally been the most anxious about re-engaging in education in September. The local authority's GRT worker has been working closely with GRT families and schools with large numbers of GRT pupils. There is a higher level of non-attendance amongst these pupils and officers are working hard to persuade parents not to register their children as being electively home educated. Officers have had concerns regarding some GRT pupils and their access to digital learning platforms. They have addressed this by supplying these families with printed paper packs of work as required.

At the time of writing, school attendance was between 80% and 85%. Officers are aware that some pupils have been anxious about returning to school and that they have individual needs. The local authority has adopted a risk-based approach to address these needs and support learners and their parents. Staff from the Gwent Education Minority Ethnic Service (GEMS) have assisted schools in making phone calls to families and provided a translation service when needed. This has helped ease the anxieties of some parents of pupils who have English as an additional language.

The contact that education welfare officers (EWOs) and educational psychologists established during lockdown to offer support to families continued during the autumn term. Feedback from parents and staff is that this has been a very useful service and it provided valuable support for them, particularly for pupils with special educational needs. Across the local authority, there has been a sharp increase from parents requesting elective home education with 27 new requests received since the start of the autumn term. Numbers of these requests had previously been reducing. EWOs

are providing advice and information to parents to ensure that they are aware of the full implications of their decision.

The local authority put procedures in place to ensure that it maintained contact with vulnerable learners in Year 9 to post-16 who could not return to school during the fire break. Officers met with all secondary headteachers and they have agreed a programme of distance learning to provide support for these pupils. All youth service workers that are normally based in schools returned to their school after half-term in November but have changed the focus of their support. They now support identified pupils to develop their literacy and numeracy skills and also make visits to pupils' homes as needed.

Local authority officers recognise the importance of smooth transition for vulnerable pupils to post-16 provision. To address this, they have strong links with Coleg Gwent.

Since September, the local authority has continued to use its early identification tool for learners who may potentially be not in education, employment or training (NEET). They have now added additional factors such as family breakdown and accommodation issues which could lead to youth homelessness. Schools can refer pupils for immediate crisis support. Officers will also work with schools to identify other pupils who need enhanced support or contact.

Officers feel that they have given schools a high level of support to ensure a safe return to school. This has included guidance on social distancing, good hygiene, and suitable personal protective equipment (PPE). They have also provided model risk assessments. All schools have adopted and adapted the local authority risk assessment templates. Guidance was provided to schools regarding the use of PPE in general, for first aid, medical, intimate care and other purposes. PPE and other resource requirements such as signage, were audited on a school by school basis to allow appropriate provisions to be made.

Education and Health and Safety teams visited all school sites in order to review the reopening plans, risk assessments and to undertake environmental health-based assessments ensuring compliance with key legislation, guidance and infection control and management measures. Individual risk assessments were also undertaken to support the needs of pupils accessing specialist provision including resource bases, along with vulnerable and shielding pupils or families. Officers agreed with headteachers that there would not be a requirement for pupils to wear uniform and that the dress code would be relaxed. In addition, it was agreed that pupils would bring their own refreshments into schools.

Officers recognise that there is a real concern for the wellbeing of young people aged 16 to 25. They have used youth service buildings to provide takeaway food for these young people as well as giving them access to digital resources which they may not otherwise be able to use. Partners from the 'raising aspirations strategic group' have met regularly to help ensure that all young people can achieve as well as they can. Partners include the Prince's Trust, Careers Wales and the housing sector.

On a regional basis, the local authority has supported the South East Wales Consortium (SEWC) ALN Transformation Network on Hwb, a place where ALN resources and training materials can be accessed by all school and central staff. Over 1,000 members have been able to access this network. The local authority has provided weekly specific ALN resource ideas to all schools, for pupils and parents including suggesting online web-sites, games to play, and things to do whilst at home and fun exercises. Staff from the Sensory and Communication Support Service (SenCom) and GEMS have also contributed specific resources and advice. In response to headteachers identifying a regression in pupil's language skills on return to school, the local authority extended their 'Word Aware training' to support the development of language within primary schools.

The local authority have facilitated regional drop in advice sessions for schools to access. For example, for ALNCoS are able to speak to occupational therapists, speech and language workers, physiotherapists, and CAMHS. At the time of writing, none of these specialist support workers are visiting schools with all their work being undertaken remotely.

The local authority anticipated a surge in new referrals for counselling, with the service being close to full capacity. Feedback from pupils already accessing counselling services has been mixed with many saying that it is not working well as they cannot find a private place in their homes with which to chat to the counsellors. When this has been the case, phone calls have just been used to check up on their wellbeing. The local authority has used additional funding from Welsh Government for counselling services to recruit extra counsellors.

There is a new partnership board with the council's leisure services and officers hope that this work will further strengthen working relationships between different departments. The local authority has agreed to continue commissioning the Aneurin Leisure trust for the next five years as it has worked well previously. They feel that provision is good and that it has helped them with revenue savings.

The Education and Environment Directorates worked closely with schools, along with colleagues in Social Services and Aneurin Leisure Trust, to establish Clwb Yr Haf/Summer Club. The club operated in four school buildings in the most deprived areas of Blaenau Gwent with the schools being selected on the basis of eFSM, area/deprivation status and interest.

Since September, the local authority reports that all annual reviews have taken place as planned. As these meetings have taken place virtually, attendance at meetings by other professionals has been higher than usual. Education officers have seen this as a positive benefit to working this way. Feedback from parents has also been that they have been happy with this approach to holding reviews. All reviews for looked after children within the local authority are up-to-date with all meetings also having taken place virtually.

The local authority has met requirements on pupils' individual statements as far as possible given the current restrictions due to the pandemic. However, the local

authority recognises that this has not been at the same level of support as it was prior to the pandemic. Since September, most support has returned to normal levels. If pupils are self-isolating, this support has to be adapted and schools have used support staff to meet pupils' needs.

Within the local authority, most statemented pupils are in Learning Resource Bases (LRBs) or special schools. Schools have maintained a high level of online contact with statemented pupils and this process is evolving and should improve further over time.

Schools have reported a big increase in information received through the Operation Encompass initiative, possibly reflecting a rise of cases of domestic abuse within the local authority.

Officers recognised that, due to the pandemic, there was the potential for the implementation of their plans to meet additional learning need reforms to be delayed. However, they are taking steps to address this. They have already seconded another person with ALN specialism to work for the local authority for two days a week and will shortly be seconding a full time ALNCo to join the team. They are establishing an oversight group with partners from Children's Services and other agencies to help them be ready for implementation. All schools are now trialling the use of individual development plans (IDPs) and are accessing refresher training to help staff prepare. As a result of this work, officers feel that they have largely caught up and schools have reported that they are now on track and have no concerns about being ready for implementation in September 2021.