

Meeting of:	Cabinet
Date of Meeting:	Monday, 08 March 2021
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	Learning and Culture
Report Title:	Estyn Thematic Review of Support for Learning Communities in schools and Pupil Referral Units.
Purpose of Report:	To advise Cabinet of the outcome of Estyn's review of the Council's support for learning communities in schools and the pupil referral unit (PRU) during the period March to October 2020.
Report Owner:	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration
Responsible Officer:	Paula Ham, Director of Learning and Skills
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	Morwen Hudson, Head of Standards and Provision
Policy Framework:	This is a matter for Executive decision by Cabinet.
Executive Summary:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During the Autumn term 2020, Estyn undertook a thematic review of the work of local authorities between March and November 2020 to support learning communities in schools and pupil referral units (PRU). • The outcome of this work in the Vale of Glamorgan is outlined in Estyn's letter which is shown in Appendix A to this report. • Although Estyn has not formulated a judgement in relation to the support provided to schools and the PRU in the Vale of Glamorgan, several noteworthy practice cameos are highlighted in the letter.

Recommendations

1. Cabinet considers the outcome of Estyn's Review of the Council's work to support learning communities in its schools and the Pupil Referral Unit.
2. Cabinet refers this report to the Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee for consideration.

Reasons for Recommendations

1. To advise Cabinet of the support provided to learners between March and October 2020.
2. To inform the Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee of the outcome of Estyn's thematic review work in the Vale of Glamorgan and allow consideration of the matter by the relevant Scrutiny Committee.

1. Background

- 1.1 During the early autumn term 2020, the Welsh Government asked Estyn to undertake a review of local authorities work in supporting learning communities in schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) during the period March to October 2020.
- 1.2 This letter attached in Appendix A outlines the outcome of this work in the Vale of Glamorgan. 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. Supporting documentation provided by the local authority and the feedback from surveys of school/PRU leaders, governors, teachers and support staff, parents and pupils, was also considered.

2. Key Issues for Consideration

- 2.1 Estyn's review of support for learning communities in schools and PRUs in the Vale of Glamorgan was thematic work undertaken in each local authority in Wales at the request of Welsh Government. This review work was used to inform a national report which was published on Estyn's website on 15 January 2021. Here is a link to that report: https://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-report/local-authority-and-regional-consortia-support-schools-and-prus-response-covid-19?_ga=2.163580598.84200458.1610966385-2125091557.1610966385
- 2.2 The review letter for the Vale of Glamorgan comments on the work undertaken by the Council to support learners from March to the end of August 2020 and from September 2020 until the review was undertaken during October / November 2020. It sets out a summary of provision under the categories of leadership and collaboration, promoting learning and supporting vulnerable learners.

2.3 Although Estyn has not formulated a judgement of the Council's support for learning communities as part of this review, a number of noteworthy practice cameos are set out in the attached letter. These relate to:

- Supporting health and safety arrangements
- Local use of the Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) system
- Supporting vulnerable learners
- Responding to need
- Assessing the level of learner engagement and wellbeing
- Brokered support to improve distance learning provision
- Supporting young people's mental health, and
- Supporting schools to re-open safely.

2.4 Since the review was undertaken distance learning approaches have continued to improve and have been tailored in response to pupil and parental feedback. School staff have accessed a range of professional learning aimed at effective remote delivery and assessment for learning. This year we have deployed 3877 end user devices to support learning in schools and remotely. A further 2621 end user devices will be deployed in May.

2.5 As well as support to ensure vulnerable learners have equitable access to learning, significant resource is being deployed on monitoring those learners who have not returned to school. Collaboration with schools and Children's Services has been key to ensuring those most vulnerable pupils have been sighted and effectively supported. Throughout the periods of lockdown, schools have remained open for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. Since the review, more than 600 vulnerable children have attended schools across the Vale each day.

2.6 The number of children who are electively home educated (EHE) has steadily increased over recent years, but since the start of the pandemic last year, we have seen an increase of 22% in the Vale of Glamorgan. This has added significant pressure to the workload of our teams who are required to provide individual support children and families.

2.7 Running alongside the substantial on-going work to support learners and the safe re-opening of schools is the significant legislative reform of the Curriculum and implementation of the Additional Learning Needs Act. This, together with the investment required to enable learners to re-engage and catch up with their learning will be especially challenging in the short to medium term. Service plans for the coming year will focus on supporting schools to adapt to new ways of working.

3. How do proposals evidence the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives?

- 3.1** The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 (“the 2015 Act”) requires the Council to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change.
- 3.2** Support for learners contributes to the Council's Wellbeing Objectives drawn from the Corporate Plan 2020-25. There is specific alignment with our wellbeing objectives to work with and for our communities and to support learning, employment and sustainable economic growth.
- 3.3** We have collaborated with a range of agencies to ensure specific support has been available for vulnerable children. Distance learning approaches used by schools have developed over time to maximise access to learning and minimise inequalities.
- 3.4** The Council has provided a wide range of support for families such as free school meal vouchers during term time and holiday periods, period dignity vouchers, food deliveries and activity packs; visits to check on pupil wellbeing, WIFI connectivity and I.C.T. equipment.
- 3.5** We have worked in partnership to develop and facilitate effective blended learning, recognising the need for education provision to be flexible and responsive to future needs.
- 3.6** Estyn consulted with a wide range of stakeholders as part of its evaluation of the Council's support for learners.

4. Resources and Legal Considerations

Financial

- 4.1** There are no financial implications resulting from this report.

Employment

- 4.2** There are no employment implications resulting from this report

Legal (Including Equalities)

- 4.3** There are no legal implications resulting from this report.

5. Background Papers

None.

The local authority's work to support its schools and the PRU March-August 2020

Leadership and collaboration

The local authority's immediate priority was to ensure the health, safety, and wellbeing of its learners, staff and its learning communities. From the outset, senior officers worked quickly and flexibly to establish stronger cross-directorate working to benefit learners' wellbeing needs and to support schools and their communities.

Senior officers report that the local authority has been successful in implementing remote working for its education employees and there have been no detrimental barriers to communicating effectively within education services staff.

Communication with stakeholders during this time has been a strength. The local authority provided schools and families with clear guidance and assurances to help them manage their concerns and expectations. Officers worked closely with headteachers and governors and provided schools with a clear plan for reopening. This included undertaking a risk assessment in all schools. They supported staff to ensure the buildings were safe for the return of learners, including providing signs, hand-washing equipment, enough cleaning staff and securing school transport for all the learners needing it. The local authority communicated regularly with their learning communities via headteacher meetings and through social media. Governors within the local authority's schools have also received advice and support on operating virtual governor meetings.

Overall, headteachers report that there has been clear communication between education services and the school community. For example, senior officers issued all schools with detailed guidance to enhance Welsh Government guidelines and regular guidance along with FAQs whenever there has been a change. As a result, there was a common understanding among local authority officers and schools about current matters and arrangements.

Senior officers have held regular virtual meetings with all headteachers to address concerns, clarify the local authority's approach and discuss next steps. Discussions have included practical arrangements such as the local authority verifying the risk assessment of each provider and co-signing these with the headteacher and the governing body.

The local authority has also held meetings involving a range of professionals in multi-agency groups to support its work. Senior officers have communicated with parents through the council website and social media, as well as using surveys to gather their views.

Cameo: Supporting health and safety arrangements

The local authority produced an app to help schools to work out how many learners could safely be in each classroom at a time, using their plans of school sites. The local authority handled the information about how many families wanted their

children to return to school by writing to all parents asking if they could indicate their preferences. As a result, the local authority was able to provide schools with the numbers of children they needed to cater for during the 'check in, catch up' period from June 29.

Schools in the local authority opened for three weeks prior the summer break, closing on 17 July. Although a few members of staff across the local authority's schools were shielding for this period, there were sufficient numbers available to meet the needs of the reduced numbers of learners.

Senior officers welcomed the clearer outline of the next steps provided by the Welsh Government for the period up to the 29 June 2020 and for the September opening. Officers were proactive in supporting schools to plan for the full reopening as soon as the decision was made by the Welsh Government. However, senior officers consider that national guidance and communication before this time could have been better organised. They felt that the limited information and short time frames made their decision-making challenging.

Cameo: Local use of the 'Test, Trace, Protect' (TTP) system

The 'Test, Trace, Protect' system has worked well in the local authority. The antibody testing has been successful with results given on site on the same day. It has informed the school community of the R rate and given staff a sense of confidence and reassurance. Feedback from headteachers and staff has been very positive about the efficiency of the system.

Promoting learning

The local authority has maintained a close relationship with their schools and regional school improvement service, the Central South Consortium (CSC), to help develop approaches to distance learning. Over time, this work has evolved appropriately reflecting the significant changes in working practices in schools and the PRU.

Our engagement phone calls confirm that practitioners have developed a range of suitable approaches and resources to engage and support learners. Schools and the PRU in the local authority have collaborated and become more confident in implementing distance learning approaches. The engagement phone calls also confirm that practice has become more consistent, partly because schools and the PRU have been sharing practice locally as well as across neighbouring local authorities in the regional consortium. However, officers have been concerned about the quality of work in its schools and the PRU and how well it is differentiated to meet the needs of learners. The level of learner engagement has been variable across the local authority and the local authority is finding it difficult to evaluate the impact of this work on learners' progress.

The local authority has used a range of social media to engage learners and ensure that parents receive a steady and useful flow of information to help them support

their child's learning. It has also developed parental questionnaires and has received useful developmental feedback about how parents have managed to support their children's learning during the pandemic.

Within the local authority, Welsh-medium schools are collaborating well, sharing resources and helping parents to support their child's learning.

The local authority has supported digital learning by working with schools to provide ICT equipment and by improving internet access for learners. The local authority, with the help of schools, has ensured that learners have access to a wide range of learning platforms. CSC staff report that teachers use these platforms safely to ensure effective communication between themselves and learners to support learning. These platforms have also been used to promote the wellbeing of learners and to enhance communication with parents. Schools within the authority have made good use of various virtual transition projects for learners moving to the next stage in their education.

Supporting vulnerable learners

The Vale of Glamorgan's approach to supporting learner wellbeing and mental health included helpful arrangements for communicating with and supporting its schools, learners and parents.

The local authority identified support for learner wellbeing as a priority from the outset of the pandemic. For example, when schools were closed, the local authority contacted providers requesting that staff made contact with all vulnerable learners on a weekly basis to discuss their wellbeing, and their learning. Officers' work to support vulnerable learners included ensuring the regular collection of information about the wellbeing of vulnerable learners, and signposting parents and carers to wellbeing and mental-health support. During this time, staff from across the learning and skills and social care directorates worked closely to ensure that there was regular contact with vulnerable learners and their families. Over time, the local authority reported an increase in the number of safeguarding referrals and wellbeing issues.

Cameo: Supporting vulnerable learners

Support and provision for vulnerable learners became a high priority for the local authority and it acted on this issue quickly. The local authority and schools have worked together to ensure a weekly return on each vulnerable learner and 'RAG' risk assessed those learners to identify clearly any concerns. As a result, the relevant follow up levels were introduced and appropriate staff identified to deal with the concerns raised. Roles and responsibilities within the authority were changed to meet the needs of vulnerable learners. Socially distanced home visits, following concerns from schools, have been a second wave of support, with education welfare officers and youth service workers involved in this provision.

Overall, officers report that the local authority has generally been successful in providing schools with support and advice to ensure that the wellbeing and mental

health of its learners and staff are catered for well. Our engagement calls to school leaders generally support this view.

When schools closed in March 2020, the local authority provided childcare services for children of key workers and for vulnerable learners in school hubs housed across the local authority. This arrangement was reviewed regularly and amended to meet childcare needs better. For example, the special school remained open as a childcare hub, with appropriate risk assessments in place, and 14 hubs across 17 sites remained open to cover the geographic context of the authority and minimise travel, including for Welsh medium provision. The local authority also provided admissions and general resourcing to the hubs.

Cameo: Responding to need

The local authority provided contact and support from central specialist special educational needs (SEN) services to support the attendance of learners with SEN in hub childcare provision. For example, one-page profiles were made available for staff who were unfamiliar with learners with SEN and their particular requirements. Specialist resources were distributed, along with on-site hub support from specialist teachers for individual learners with complex needs or challenging behaviours. This support included each hub having a designated educational psychologist. As a result, about 20% of vulnerable learners attended hub provision.

Officers affirm that the creation of hubs has led to closer working relationships between cluster schools. The local authority officers have held regular hub lead meetings to support ongoing work, for example about health and safety issues such as fire safety process and protocols around disinfecting the building and resources. They also reported that having hubs open had made re-opening schools easier.

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

Leadership and collaboration

Since September, senior officers in the local authority have continued to engage with schools and the PRU to assess their needs, provide support and communicate expectations. Overall, their approach is welcomed by leaders who have felt well supported by the local authority throughout the crisis. Local authority leaders have continued to adapt their processes and procedures to support schools to reopen. They continued to ensure that their main focus is on the health, safety and wellbeing of learners, school staff and officers.

Officers demonstrated a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities and collectively worked to ensure all schools received the necessary support to plan effectively for reopening. The focus is to ensure schools receive useful operational guidance, to give schools time to consult with key local authority personnel. Through regular cross-directorate sessions that evaluate what is working well and what needs

to be improved, lead officers are able to adapt and develop their approaches to supporting schools and their communities to reopen successfully.

The Cabinet has continued to operate and make important decisions, for example, for the 21st Century Schools Project and the Centre for Learning and Wellbeing. Elected members have been briefed on the ever-evolving situation both informally and formally. The Director for Learning and Skills has continued to provide relevant information to elected members. As a result, councillors are well informed on the actions taken by the local authority in supporting its learners and its schools. In addition, reports and presentations focus well on both existing and future challenges. The Cabinet member identified that working virtual has supported more effective joint working.

Headteachers report that communication with all stakeholders continues to be a strength. For example, prior to the summer holidays discussions between relevant partners produced a bespoke list of work that both lead officers and improvement partners would undertake to support the successful opening of schools. This included supporting school leaders in essential health and safety matters, preparing risk assessments and providing useful guidance to schools on blended and distance learning. This guidance aimed to provide consistency across all schools yet allow for local determination where necessary.

Local authority officers are prepared to be flexible and adapt their work to meet the changing needs and requirements of schools. Through regular meetings with headteachers and governors the Director for Learning and Skills and her team are able to disseminate information, share the rationale behind decisions, listen to feedback and adjust as necessary. Headteachers welcome the support offered by the local authority and comment favourably on the strong partnerships that exist.

Promoting learning

From the start of the pandemic onwards, senior officers in the local authority have worked together to provide well-co-ordinated, practical and flexible support for schools and learners. Headteachers told us about the strong support that they received from the local authority during this period. Likewise, senior officers have commented on the resolve of school leaders in responding to all the requirements made by the local authority.

Since September, the local authority has continued to work closely with the CSC and its schools to introduce a recovery curriculum, with a specific focus on developing a distance learning approach in case of future interruptions. Since the initial lockdown, this work has evolved considerably following the significant changes in methods of working and the obvious challenges involved. For example, the local authority and CSC agreed that the clear steer for the autumn term is about supporting staff wellbeing, reducing the pressure on schools to produce documentation and creating room for school leaders to develop good practice.

School improvement officers, in partnership with colleagues from CSC, have monitored schools' curriculum offers. CSC's improvement partners report that in general, schools are providing a broad and balanced curriculum with a strong focus on literacy, numeracy and learner wellbeing. The local authority facilitates collaborative sessions for headteachers to discuss and share experiences on curriculum and learning issues and schools are building on trauma-informed practices that were initiated before lockdown. However, improvement partners feel that moving towards the Curriculum for Wales is causing a few schools some concern. To clarify the nature and extent of these concerns, the local authority has scheduled a discussion about Curriculum for Wales at the forthcoming sector headteacher meetings.

Cameo: Assessing the level of learner engagement and wellbeing

Prior to reopening, the local authority in collaboration with the CSC and schools, developed a matrix to assess the level of engagement of learners and their wellbeing. Through conversations held between improvement partners and headteachers, information was collected from 55 out of 56 schools in the Vale of Glamorgan. The useful report summarised the key findings, the barriers and challenges encountered by schools, effective practice across the region and concluded by highlighting ways forward. The information gathered has been used to inform local policy and share effective practice across the local authority through a collection of case studies. In addition, support was provided to schools to help strengthen areas such as increasing the engagement of vulnerable learners.

The education service is well supported by elected members. Every aspect of reopening has gone through the scrutiny process. Relationships between cabinet members and officers is strengthened through regular updates and frequent virtual communication. The use of a digital media platform allows for all scheduled meetings to take place and for business to continue as normal. Lead officers believe that the information sharing processes across the local authority have improved.

All schools and the PRU have received prompt support from their improvement partners when needed and this has been appreciated by the headteachers. Teachers are able to access a wide variety of resources and guidance through the CSC such as a ten-point roadmap for blended learning, including playlists of effective practice. In addition, improvement partners state they have brokered professional learning for staff who have struggled with changes to pedagogy, such as on how to use a variety of digital platforms to set home learning tasks. Improvement partners have reflected on what has worked well and refined their support. The CSC notes that many schools have now moved to using online learning platforms and distance learning techniques as an integral part of their practice. They feel that this demonstrates the emerging impact of their support.

Cameo: Brokered support to improve distance learning provision

In one primary school, at the start of the lockdown period, an initial discussion between the headteacher and the school's improvement partner identified strengths and barriers to their provision for distance learning. The improvement partner

brokered support from the CSC's Digital Team. This included training for all staff on the use of Google Classroom, support for the digital lead and drop-in sessions for all staff. In addition, the improvement partner shared and discussed key documents relating to blended learning with the headteacher, including a guidance document and the CSC's ten-point road map. In the autumn term there was a refresher session for all staff. They received training for Google Meet and guidance on the use of live streaming. The impact included improved staff confidence and digital skill levels, and a deeper understanding of how to use Google Classroom for learner assessment, feedback and peer collaboration.

The local authority states that the biggest challenge going forward will be 'hybrid' learning, particularly for those learners who find themselves repeatedly in and out of school. They realise the ability of schools to deliver a quality distance learning model is developing. Despite this, the CSC is confident that most schools have prepared well for any future lockdown or self-isolation scenario. Schools are using online and face-to-face teaching when necessary. The local authority believes that this is gradually increasing the confidence and capability of staff in using relatively new and unfamiliar teaching methods. The local authority is mindful that the introduction of distance learning and the requirement for schools to plan for different methods of delivery is placing extra pressure on schools.

The focus of schools since returning in September has been on re-engaging with learners and supporting their emotional and wellbeing needs. The local authority understands that groups of learners will have experienced various levels of learning loss. It is encouraging schools and the PRU to consider and learn from the latest research as well as discussing and learning from improvement partner visits to schools. The local authority continues to recognise the challenge of ensuring sufficient differentiation in the distance learning.

The CSC reports that monitoring arrangements for the 'Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards: the Accelerated Learning Programme' funding are being developed at both a local authority and regional level. The local authority has a clear record of all funding allocations to schools and how they are being used. There are clear financial reporting structures in place and the use and outcomes of the grant will be reported by schools to the local authority for consideration and scrutiny.

Schools have identified general gaps in literacy and numeracy skills using a variety of assessments. They attribute these gaps to lack of access to digital equipment and/or parental support. The improvement partners have signposted schools to effective use of the accelerated learning grant but the local authority recognises that for many schools, grant funding is a small amount. Improvement partners have supported those schools that are less autonomous and have led discussions around how the funding could be used to best meet the needs of their learners. In most cases, schools are using the grant funding to employ additional staff. For example, one primary school has allocated an additional teacher to work in specific year groups where they have identified greater learning loss, such as in Year 1 and Year 3. In one secondary school, leaders prioritised Key Stage 4 and 5 pupils as requiring

additional support and decided to appoint qualified, experienced teachers to assist with the high standards of teaching required at this level.

The CSC's professional learning offer remains in place and has moved to online delivery. It has provided support and guidance to schools for blended learning, curriculum planning, and trialled strategies for the use of live streaming. The engagement service has delivered a series of complementary training to support trauma-informed practice. Nearly all schools in the local authority have accessed online professional learning opportunities and improvement partners have a list of all professional learning undertaken by each school in the local authority. Assessing the impact of the professional learning on learner engagement and progress will be essential work going forward. The local authority recognises that it will be key for schools to improve learners' resilience by developing learners' key learning skills and staff knowledge of trauma.

The local authority recognises the challenges for learners who come from non-Welsh speaking households but attend Welsh-medium schools, although they feel that their schools support these learners well. Feedback from the parent's survey suggests that a number of parents are concerned about their children who are just starting to learn Welsh. Schools are using a portion of their grant funding to support learners' oracy skills, and state this is a newly identified vulnerable group. Additional support for schools has been brokered by improvement partners and they have also shared relevant resources. The local authority has ensured that resources are available to schools on Hwb.

Based on the lessons learned since lockdown, the local authority would in similar situations improve the frequency of meetings with headteachers. They would aim to broker more open discussions. Officers report that digital meetings have worked well and headteachers have asked more questions in virtual meetings than when face-to-face. Due to this, some meetings will remain in a digital format. Senior officers consider that although relationships with schools have always been strong they have strengthened during the pandemic.

Supporting vulnerable learners

Since September the Vale of Glamorgan local authority has continued to place a strong emphasis on supporting the wellbeing of vulnerable learners.

Working collaboratively with schools, the local authority has continued to support vulnerable learners they had already identified. In addition, together with social services they identified those learners who have become vulnerable over the course of the pandemic and the return to school phase. These include learners with social, emotional and mental health concerns along with learners who have not returned to school at all or who have only returned on a part-time basis due to anxiety.

The local authority continues to work with a variety of services, for example, the youth intervention team, education welfare services and the engagement service, to understand the reasons for learners' non-return to school and support families to overcome these barriers. Youth services and the inclusion team work with older

vulnerable learners in a virtual manner and the local authority feels that the online nature of this support is particularly suited to these learners. Distributed devices and internet connections help the team to keep in contact with vulnerable learners and support both their wellbeing and their learning. However, the local authority notes that one of their biggest challenges is to ensure equity of provision for those learners who have not yet returned to school.

Cameo: Supporting young people's mental health.

The local authority purchased an online tool for use by all schools to support the increased number of learners experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties. The tool uses a series of questions to help adults better understand how well a child or young person is functioning in terms of their mental health and wellbeing. The results enable schools to create bespoke programmes of practical activities and interventions for children and young people identified as needing more support. In order to better support the vulnerable learners and their families during this time, the grant covering the purchase of this tool has been extended for a period of 12 months. The results will form the basis of referrals to the local authority's engagement service and social, emotional, and mental health panel.

The local authority reports an increase in the number of learners with specific needs who require support from the local authority's inclusion team. They also note an increase in the number of learners referred to children's services and an increase in the number of learners eligible for free school meals. In addition, they identify a 25% increase in the number of learners electing for home education. The local authority has sought to strengthen its services through restructuring and the recruitment of additional staff in order to meet the additional demands brought by these increased numbers of vulnerable learners.

The local authority attributes the increase in the number of children looked after (CLA) to the pressures placed on families due to COVID-19. Although there are issues around placements of learners, the local authority feels that the multi-agency partnerships are working well to support these children and schools are positive about the quality of the support from the local authority. The local authority reports that the migration of CLA reviews to an online system has worked well and learners appear to be increasingly active participants in their own reviews.

Confidential counselling services have been increased by grant funding to meet the greater demand for the service amongst learners, particularly secondary learners and those in year 6. In addition, the local authority has appointed a play therapist who is taking referrals from primary schools to support younger learners. The increased demand highlights the impact of the pandemic on learners experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

Overall, the local authority was responsive and proactive in providing IT resources and addressing the challenges presented by the digital inclusion agenda. This was valued by many school leaders. A notable example is where local authority officers and school leaders engaged with neighbours of vulnerable children in order to facilitate shared internet opportunities. When schools reopened, learners returned the devices and these are now in use in schools. As a result, the local authority is

considering strategies to address the further digital exclusion of learners self-isolating without devices.

Cameo: Supporting schools to reopen safely.

The local authority health and safety officer held a site visit at one school prior to its re-opening to discuss how to implement the risk assessment and wider guidance. The school felt that this provided strong support around, for example, numbers to be accommodated in classrooms, systems to direct movement around the building, and the use of face coverings and visors. In addition, the local authority has provided practical support and resources, for example, templates for risk assessments, signage, floor stickers, and personal protective equipment (PPE) as required. The school felt that this guidance has been of significant benefit in maintaining staff confidence and morale, and in enabling learners to return to school safely.

School and pupil referral unit leaders are positive about the local authority support for health and safety issues. Leaders in schools feel that the local authority has been proactive in providing help and guidance on for example, positive cases of COVID-19. Schools appreciate the speed by which the local authority responds to requests for guidance around health and safety. To support the whole school community and in particular those learners who are more vulnerable, generic risk assessments have been developed by the local authority and, in collaboration with schools, they have been personalised to each context. Headteachers found this process helpful. The local authority has also provided helpful guidance and FAQs to support headteachers.

Collaboration between local authority departments, social services and health services have continued since September. The local authority feels that partnership working and the processes of sharing data have strengthened due to the new ways of working they have developed in response to COVID-19. Evidence from our engagement and pastoral phone calls affirm this. For example, one school noted that that working relationships between themselves and their external partners, particularly those within the local authority, have become stronger during this period. They attribute this to a sense of common purpose which has in turn contributed to all partners having a greater understanding of each other's roles and the challenges they face.

The local authority has concentrated on the impact of the pandemic on families at home. Collaboratively the local authority departments considered the support that they could provide for all learners but particularly vulnerable learners and their families. For example, the countryside team communicated activities that families could engage with when they were out of the house, the library service transferred to an online service so that families could join the library and borrow books, and the communications team shared ideas of activities that were permitted within the national and local restrictions. This all contributed to a collective approach to problem-solving and an understanding of the challenges for vulnerable families and council departments. As a result, the local authority is planning to continue with the

improved processes for communication and the sharing of data as they feel that these are more effective than before.

Generally, local authority support for learners with special education needs has been valued by schools. Statutory panels, statutory referrals and annual reviews continue to be held virtually. Inclusion teams and the network for SENCOs established by the local authority have facilitated staff to work together and share experiences, challenges and successes. Schools feel that this has been a strong feature of the local authority's support.

Children with and without statements are considered weekly in the local authority social, emotional and mental health panel meetings and swift actions are taken to address learners' wellbeing and learning needs. In addition, training for individual development planning and person-centred approaches to engage vulnerable and disengaged learners is ongoing.

The local authority's 21st Century Schools programme which is focused on providing support for vulnerable learners has continued despite difficulties posed by COVID-19. Since re-opening, the 21st Century Schools contractors have worked with schools to help them to adhere to guidance and prepare for the full return to school in September. The contractors also developed an app to help parents and learners to see what the new normal would look like in schools. The local authority felt that this was particularly valuable for vulnerable learners and their families.

The local authority has developed a programme of professional learning to enhance the support for vulnerable learners. This includes training for anxiety, relationships, attachment and enhancing teacher wellbeing. The Engagement Service has delivered a comprehensive professional learning programme as part of the Vale of Glamorgan Social, Emotional and Mental Health Action Plan. Online training to support the wellbeing of learners and to support schools to prepare mentally, emotionally and practically for the challenges of the new school year has been positively received by all local authority and school staff. Alongside this, the engagement service produced guidance documents and workbooks to support learners to return to school and similarly provided guidance documents for parents.