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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Guidance for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

Contents

Introduction	2
Legislative background	5
The basic curriculum	5
Education other than at school	5
Special educational needs	5
Preparing an approach from September 2020	6
Operational guidance	6
Learning guidance	14
Preparing for a further lockdown or blended learning approach	29
Ensuring continuity of learning	30
Multi-agency working	32
Statutory assessment/annual review process	32
Working with parents/carers	33
Annex: Recruit, recover and raise standards – the accelerating learning programme	34

Introduction

The outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) resulted in most learners, including those from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, being unable to access their place of learning during the period of school and setting closure. This impacted on their ability to access education and other services that they would ordinarily have had access to. During the crisis it is clear that many learners have suffered negative impacts in terms of their well-being and progress in learning, some heavily so. While the experience for some learners may have been positive, evidence from a range of sources, including the [Coronavirus and Me](#) survey, suggests that most learners have been negatively affected, and that vulnerable and disadvantaged groups have been affected the most.

Local authorities, schools and settings (which include learning centres and work-based learning), as well as practitioners and partner agencies, have shown resilience and agility in adapting the services they provide for children and young people and their families who face barriers to their learning in these unprecedented times. Likewise, many parents/carers and families across Wales have had to quickly adapt and balance new ways of working while providing care, support and education for their children. The Welsh Government commends all education staff, parents/carers and learners in adapting to the challenges presented by the outbreak.

Since 29 June 2020, schools and settings have been increasing their operations and welcoming learners back. The focus was for learners to 'check-in, catch-up and prepare', providing settings with the opportunity to identify and plan for supporting the needs of individual learners. Wales is the only part of the UK to have provided all learners who were able (e.g. who were not shielding) with this opportunity.

On 9 July 2020, the Minister for Education announced that schools and settings will return to full capacity from 1 September 2020, with only limited [social distancing within contact groups](#). The Minister for Education confirmed that the autumn term will start on 1 September 2020 and schools and settings that can accommodate all learners from the start of the term should do so. There will be a two-week transition period, with all learners expected to be accommodated by their school or setting by 14 September 2020 at the latest.

The Minister for Education outlined the plan to open all schools and settings to enable 100 per cent of learners to be physically present on school sites, subject to a continuing, steady decline in the presence of COVID-19 in the community.

The Minister for Education was clear that every school should continue to be 'COVID secure' – having carried out risk assessments and mitigated risks with a combination of controls in line with the operational guidance.

Further information on the operational arrangements for all settings can be found in [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#).

The guidance for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners supplements guidance found in the [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#) and [Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term](#), providing specific advice for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners. Therefore, this guidance should be read alongside the latest versions of the operational and learning guidance. This guidance will set out additional information, where it is required, for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

For the purposes of this guidance, a wide definition of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners has been adopted. It includes, but is not limited to, learners who are in one or more of the following groups:

- learners with special educational needs (SEN)
- learners from minority ethnic groups who have English or Welsh as an additional language (EAL/WAL)
- care-experienced children, including looked after children
- learners educated other than at school (EOTAS)
- children of refugees and asylum seekers
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children
- learners eligible for free school meals (eFSM)
- young carers
- children at risk of harm, abuse or neglect.

Not all learners from these groups will face barriers to learning or be vulnerable to underachieving. Learners from these groups may face a range of barriers to achieving their potential and will, therefore, require different solutions and support targeted towards meeting each of their individual needs. In addition, learners may belong to several of the above groups at the same time, depending on their individual circumstances.

The list of groups is not exhaustive. Learners not in these groups may be considered vulnerable or disadvantaged, including specifically as a result of COVID-19. For example, some learners who would not have been considered vulnerable or disadvantaged pre-COVID-19 may require additional support when they return to school because of their experience during lockdown. Learners educated through the medium of Welsh from homes where Welsh is not spoken may also require additional support, especially where they also face other barriers to learning. This may also be the case for those learners where English or Welsh is not their first language.

We know most learning will have been impacted in some form over recent months, with more significant impacts expected in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. There is also a specific impact on those taking formal qualifications in 2021 – those going into Years 11, 12 and 13. This is linked to a concern that, upon leaving school, these young people might not progress to a positive destination in education, employment or training. The Welsh Government has announced £29 million to ‘recruit, recover and raise standards’, bringing teachers into schools and settings to provide in-depth, focused support for those who have specific challenges to enable them to achieve their potential (see the Annex for a summary).

The guidance included in this document is intended to support schools and settings to ensure an inclusive approach as they prepare for full operation from September 2020. While application of the guidance will disproportionately benefit vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, it will ensure benefits beyond the groups listed above; since what works for our vulnerable and disadvantaged groups will likely benefit all learners.

The Welsh Government recognises the significant difficulties faced by local authorities and schools and settings in delivering services and meeting their statutory duties, including learners with SEN and EOTAS learners, during the lockdown period.

Schools and settings will need to prepare for a range of scenarios for the next academic year – full operation, a blended approach and further national or local lockdowns. It is recognised there will be particular challenges for work-based learning and ensuring learners within the workplace for work experience, or work placements, are safe at all times. Good communication with employers, learners and their families will be vitally important.

This guidance provides advice and sets expectations relating to support for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners for a range of scenarios. The situation will be monitored carefully as we move into the 2020/21 academic year and this guidance will be updated to reflect changes in circumstances as necessary.

In the event of a further national or local lockdown, consideration will be given again to the need to modify local authority duties in respect of SEN. Consideration will also be given to issuing detailed guidance relating to undertaking risk assessment to support SEN learners. Work on this suite of measures was well advanced ahead of the decision to return to full operation of settings in September, with detailed engagement having taken place with a range of partners, including local authorities. As a consequence, we would expect to be in a position to move swiftly to implement a new set of arrangements were the need to arise.

For the purposes of this guidance, the term 'schools and settings' includes maintained primary, secondary and special schools and settings in Wales, as well as pupil referral units (PRUs).

Independent schools and non-maintained early years settings may wish to take into consideration aspects of this advice they consider to be relevant and/or helpful. Separate guidance has also been published, or is due to be published, for these settings.

Legislative background

The basic curriculum

On 23 June 2020 the [basic curriculum requirements for Wales and associated assessment arrangements for schools and non-maintained nursery settings were suspended](#) as part of the Coronavirus Act 2020. This was intended to provide schools and settings with the necessary space and flexibility to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. As mandated under the powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020, the notice applied for a period of one month from 24 June to 23 July 2020.

We are also mindful of the need for schools and settings to adapt their approach to learning during the autumn term as they negotiate a range of challenges and we will take this into account in all decisions. The Welsh Government will clarify the expectations for legislation in due course and our focus will continue to be the needs and interests of learners in these unprecedented times.

Education other than at school

Local authority responsibilities in relation to education other than at school (EOTAS) remain in force. EOTAS is education provision designed to meet the specific needs of learners who, for whatever reason, cannot attend a mainstream or special school. Section 19(1) of the Education Act 1996 places responsibility for arranging the provision of EOTAS on local authorities.

Each local education authority shall make arrangements for the provision of suitable education at school or otherwise than at school for those children of compulsory age who, by reason of illness, exclusion from school or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them.

Section 19(6) of the Education Act 1996 defines suitable education in relation to a child or a young person as efficient education suitable to the age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs the child may have.

Where provision is delivered through PRUs, the local authority must deliver a broad and balanced curriculum together with sex education.

Special educational needs

There have been no modifications to the statutory duties of local authorities in respect of special educational needs (SEN). The duties of local authorities arising from the Education Act 1996 and the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations (Wales) 2002 remain in force, and the Special Education Needs Code of Practice for Wales 2002 still applies. The Code focuses on removing barriers to participation and learning. It provides practical advice to local authorities, maintained schools, early years settings and others on carrying out their statutory duties to identify, assess and make provision for learners' special educational needs.

Preparing an approach from September 2020

Operational guidance

Detailed guidance for all schools and settings in relation to the operational arrangements that should be considered generally and apply to all learners from September 2020 is provided by the Welsh Government in [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#). The guidance provided in this document is supplementary and both documents should be read alongside each other. This section relates specifically to the additional considerations relevant to supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

Attendance

All learners, including those that were previously shielding, will be expected to begin to return to their school or setting from 1 September 2020. Detailed guidance on attendance arrangements, including use of attendance codes, can be found in the [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#).

Engaging with, and supporting, children, young people and their families

The relationship between parents/carers and local authorities, schools and settings is particularly important at this time. Essential to the effective increase in operations from September 2020 will be the trust parents/carers and learners have that schools and settings are safe. This applies to all learners and families but is likely to be of more significance to parents/carers of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, who may have specific health concerns or other concerns associated with returning to their school or setting. For example, some learners, including learners with SEN or Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) learners, or their parents/carers, may be anxious about a perceived risk of contracting, or the consequences of contracting, COVID-19. Also, young carers, for example, might be worried about potentially taking the virus home to an unwell relative, or may be concerned about the needs of the person they care for were they to attend school or have to [self-isolate](#).

Understanding the specific needs and barriers faced by individual learners and seeking to address and provide reassurance by explaining the protective measures being implemented is paramount.

Schools and settings should reassure learners and parents/carers of the measures they are taking to reduce risk. This may include providing parents/carers with information on the:

- health and safety arrangements, such as [social distancing](#) practices in relation to arriving and leaving schools and settings, including minimising contact between adults dropping off and collecting children, and robust hand-washing and respiratory hygiene
- class organisation, including the number of staff and learners in a class
- arrangements for access to the curriculum

- [cleaning arrangements](#) in place throughout the school day and after using specific equipment and/or resources
- use of personal protective equipment (PPE) by staff and learners and arrangements for those learners for whom the use of PPE will prove problematic
- arrangements to be made during break and lunchtimes
- arrangements for personal care, e.g. changing and feeding
- arrangements in place for visiting professionals, e.g. allied health professionals such as therapists, school nurses and local authority specialist staff.

Schools should consider how [youth work approaches](#) could be used to help address concerns learners have about returning to school, particularly where support from youth services may have been given during the lockdown period.

As well as the groups of learners who will need reassurance about the return to their school or setting because of health concerns associated with COVID-19, there are likely to be groups of learners who will need reassurance and/or support to return to their school or setting because they have not had contact with their school or setting during lockdown, or have become disengaged from education altogether. There is a risk that, in the future, those disengaged learners will become NEET (not in education, employment or training); the [Youth engagement and progression framework](#) is in place to reduce the number of young people who may become NEET.

Some learners will also be reluctant to attend due to negative associations and experiences, e.g. if they were bullied in school and had more positive experiences during lockdown.

Some learners may have developed anxiety or other mental health issues as a result of the impacts of COVID-19. In addition, COVID-19 may have increased or exacerbated pre-existing anxiety and other mental health issues. Learners who are experiencing anxiety or other mental health issues may be reluctant to return, or become increasingly anxious about returning, to their school or setting as a result of their attendance being disrupted.

Staff based in schools and settings with attendance and parental/carer engagement responsibilities will be key to identifying learners who would benefit from support when returning to school in September 2020 and to engaging and supporting carers and families. Understanding the cause of their concern will be essential in identifying how they can be supported to return. This may involve a conversation with a trusted adult at the school or setting who would be best placed to talk to them about their concerns and build their confidence to return. This will be vital to help the learner to feel their voice is heard, allow them to visualise what returning to school will look like for them and re-establishing the staff member's role as a 'safe base' within the school or setting. Other professionals, such as school and community-based counsellors, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) staff and youth workers, may be able to assist with these conversations, given their expertise in developing supportive relationships with young people. These conversations will also provide the essential foundation for contingency planning and preparations for potential future national or local lockdowns.

Schools and settings should use the knowledge they have of learners to plan their return. This may include visits to the school or setting, using social stories, contact with the learner and their family or any other approaches that the school, setting or local authority would normally use to enable the learner to return. It may be appropriate to consider flexible attendance patterns in the short term, or a phased return, to enable the learner to build their confidence.

Where provision put in place has not been successful in supporting learners to attend school, the school or setting should contact the local authority for advice and follow local procedures for making referrals to the Education Welfare Service and/or other appropriate services, such as Educational Psychology Services.

Barnardo's and Action for Children produced a report [Lessons from Lockdown: Supporting vulnerable children and young people returning to school and learning](#). The report includes useful tips on how to support children and young people as they return to school.

The [Education Endowment Foundation](#) has produced a range of resources to help practitioners to support learners as they return to their school or setting.

Transition

Transition to a new school or setting can be an unsettling time for learners. The current situation may have exacerbated any anxieties due to, for example, established transition arrangements having to be modified. The effective transition of learners from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups is particularly important, both in terms of their well-being and their wider learning.

Ideally, the process of transition should have started before the outbreak of COVID-19 and should be continuing, as far as is possible. Local authorities, schools and settings should have well-established arrangements in place, including partnerships with colleges and other learning providers for learners who are transitioning into post-16 learning. Education settings will have started sharing information with parents/carers and the next place of learning.

The local authority and/or school or setting should contact learners and their parents/carers to explain how the transition process will be managed and will include learners, their parents/carers and where appropriate, support agencies, in discussions that relate to transition, including the provision to be made. Such discussions will need to consider the implications of minimising contact and possibly transport, medical/health-related issues, financial support, and any increased support need for the learners and their family.

Learners may be anxious about how their learning experience may look different, particularly in a new and unfamiliar environment, and older learners may also have concerns about future educational, training and employment prospects after completing their learning. There are many examples where schools and settings have, for example, undertaken virtual tours for learners and their parents/carers. In addition, settings may have been providing further information, advice and guidance

via direct contact, published materials and on websites. Consideration should also be given to whether bespoke information and/or ways of providing that information would be required for new entrants, e.g. learners with SEN, learners with EAL/WAL or learners who are from the Gypsy, Roma or Traveller communities, and care leavers.

There is a concern that more young people will be at risk of disengaging as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. It is important that learners who have disengaged, or who are at risk of disengaging, and who are transitioning into post-16 settings, are identified and supported into a positive destination (whether education, employment or training) through the [Youth engagement and progression framework](#). Where schools and settings have concerns about learners making a positive transition into education, employment or training, they should flag this up with the local authority engagement and progression coordinator and Careers Wales, so that appropriate support can be put in place.

Social distancing

The [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#) provides information on social distancing. The overarching messages are around:

- minimising contact between individuals wherever possible
- reducing the number of contacts between learners and staff
- keeping contact groups for both learners and staff apart where possible.

The guidance goes on to state that for younger learners the emphasis will be on separating groups, and for older learners it will be on [social distancing](#).

The concept of 'younger' and 'older' may be generally more appropriate for mainstream settings. For learners with SEN, for example, these concepts may be less helpful. Settings, therefore, need to use their personalised knowledge and update risk assessments to inform their planning for individual learners, including, for example, those learners who present challenging and complex behaviours.

The [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#) draws attention to the importance of minimising contacts and mixing between groups of people. This concept needs full consideration also when considering the needs of learners with SEN, while delivering a curriculum that is broad and balanced. Schools and settings should take steps to limit interaction, sharing of rooms and social spaces between groups as much as possible.

Settings should consider the use of 'consistent, small contact groups', particularly for learners that cannot socially distance from staff or from each other.

Transport

Guidance for local authorities, schools and settings is provided in the [Operational guidance for schools and settings from autumn term](#). For the majority of learners, including those from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, the general transport arrangements put in place for all learners will be appropriate. However, for some learners, in particular those with SEN, there will be additional considerations. The latest version of the operational guidance acknowledges this and provides further advice.

The use of personal protective equipment

The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) by staff should be based on a clear assessment of risk, taking into account each individual setting and the needs of the individual learner. The [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#) provides clear guidance on the use of PPE for different scenarios. This includes a link to the [Health and Safety Executive website](#) that provides information on the use of PPE in health and social care and non-healthcare settings.

The use of PPE with some learners, especially those with SEN, should be carefully considered and risk assessed by the school or setting.

Due to the individual needs of some learners, it may be the case that specific types of PPE will need to be used at different times of the day and for different activities. Settings must make clear the agreed arrangements for the use of PPE for each individual learner, which should be noted in their individual learning plan to ensure all staff are aware and use of PPE is consistent for individual learners by all staff.

The well-being of learners should be considered when deciding whether face coverings should be worn. Individuals who may find it difficult to use face coverings, e.g. some learners with SEN, should not wear them as it may inadvertently increase the risk of transmission. How a learner is likely to respond to the use of face coverings by others should also be considered, as should any potential impact on the development of speech, language and communication, particularly in the Foundation Phase.

When considering the use of masks, schools and settings will need to take careful and risk assessed decisions on individual circumstances, taking into account the needs and preferences of both individual learners and staff.

As noted in the operational guidance, the National Deaf Children's Society has considered [the impact of face masks on deaf children](#).

Exclusions

Exclusion should only be used as a last resort. Where exclusion cannot be avoided, the Welsh Government guidance [Exclusion from schools and pupil referral units](#) sets out the support schools, settings and local authorities must put in place for all learners who have been excluded from school and from pupil referral units.

The guidance is clear that other than in the most exceptional circumstances, schools and settings should avoid permanently excluding learners with statements of SEN and should make every effort to avoid excluding learners who are being supported through School Action or School Action Plus, including those at School Action Plus who are being assessed for a statement.

Schools and settings should also be particularly sensitive to exclusion issues where looked after children are concerned. Schools and settings will need to try every practicable means to maintain the learner in school and should seek local authority and other professional advice as appropriate.

The exclusion process

The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a number of implications for the exclusion process, due to the difficulties associated with holding pupil discipline committees and independent appeals panels. Consequently, in some instances, there have been delays in completing the exclusion process and in finding alternative placements for permanently excluded learners.

New regulations to make changes to some procedures that must be followed in the event of an exclusion are being prepared. The intention of the new regulations is to give greater flexibility to schools and settings, parents/carers and local authorities during a COVID-19 outbreak. They will apply to all maintained schools and settings. Separate guidance will follow to coincide with the regulations coming into force.

It is essential that for those learners who were permanently excluded prior to or during the lockdown, the local authority in which the learner lives makes arrangements as quickly as possible for the learner to continue in suitable full-time education, where it was not possible for the local authority to arrange an alternative placement during the lockdown period. The local authority would have been responsible for ensuring continuity of learning for the learner during the lockdown period.

Avoiding exclusions and referrals to EOTAS

There is potential for an increase in challenging behaviour among learners who attend mainstream education. This will be particularly the case for those learners who were finding it difficult to engage with education before COVID-19 and who may struggle to adapt to the change in routine, including the more structured routines and expectations in relation to learning and behaviour, on a return to school.

Understanding the cause of the behaviour change can be a starting point to supporting the learner to modify and regulate their behaviour.

Schools and settings should consider adapting their behaviour policy to take into consideration the potential impact of COVID-19 on learner well-being and behaviour. This does not mean lowering general expectations in terms of standards of acceptable behaviour. Rather, schools and settings should continue to focus on the

needs of individuals, providing support as necessary, and ensure policies reflect the requirement for understanding and flexibility.

Schools and settings should also consider seeking advice from the youth service, which has expertise in dealing with young people with challenging behaviour, and which is already used under the [Youth engagement and progression framework](#), to support young people who are most at risk of disengaging.

Further information about behaviour management in classrooms is available for [primary schools](#) and [secondary schools](#).

Summer 2020/21 examinations

The Welsh Government believes it is in the best interests of those learners due to take their exams in summer 2021 to do so, with some adaptations to recognise the loss of learning and teaching time that the lockdown has caused, as a result of which course content may not have been fully covered.

Different considerations will apply depending on the subject and type of qualifications, so Qualifications Wales has published regulatory requirements linked to a special condition enabling WJEC to make adaptations on a subject-specific basis following consultation with practitioners^{1,2}. This will allow learners the opportunity to demonstrate their ability, while recognising the disruption there has been to their learning and teaching. It will also provide teachers more time to deliver content, making the best use of the time available when schools and settings resume at full capacity, while ensuring the qualifications remain valid and meaningful.

In considering the adaptations that will be made for each qualification, WJEC will ensure the approach minimises bias and that it complies with the existing access and reasonable adjustment requirements specified by Qualifications Wales.

To further support learners due to take their exams next year, they will be a priority cohort for support via the Recruit, recover and raise standards – the accelerating learning programme – as will vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

Well-being support for learners due to take exams in summer 2021, who may feel under particular pressure, will also be crucial.

Video-conferencing and live-streaming

Through Hwb, the digital learning platform for Wales, learners and practitioners from maintained schools have access to a range of online learning tools such as Microsoft

¹ Requirements for Adapting Assessments for GQ Qualifications (GCSE, GCE and Welsh Baccalaureate Skills Challenge Certificate) in 2021.

² Special Conditions: adapting assessments for GQ qualifications in 2021.

Teams in [Microsoft Office 365³](#) and Google Meet in [G-Suite for Education](#). Using Microsoft Teams and Google Meet applications through Hwb can provide an interactive experience and an opportunity to collaborate and engage in a safe and accessible way.

Safeguarding is an integral principle of digital learning. The safety and welfare of learners is paramount and takes precedence over all other considerations.

The Welsh Government guidance [Live-streaming safeguarding principles and practice for education practitioners](#) provides advice on how video-conferencing and live-streaming can be used safely and securely.

The guidance may also be of use to other practitioners such as therapists, educational psychologists, special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs)/ additional learning needs coordinators (ALNCOs) and advisory staff that support learners.

The guidance was originally published in May 2020, during the period of school closure, when most practitioners were working from home. It has been updated to reflect instances where practitioners and learners are in the classroom.

Peripatetic staff

Wherever possible, the school or setting should facilitate the ongoing support for learners provided by peripatetic staff. This will be particularly important for learners with **Special educational needs** but will also have a wider impact on the learning and support of all learners. For example, partner services are essential in the effective delivery of personal and social education (PSE). Schools and settings should consider alternative delivery methods, such as external practitioners live-streaming presentations into the classroom, providing appropriate safeguarding measures are put in place.

Local authorities should provide advice to schools in their areas to ensure a consistent approach across the local authority area and that the provision for learners across the local authority is equitable in this regard.

Participation

Participation has important links with well-being and serves to meet children's rights to participate in decision-making in their school or setting. It is important, therefore, that schools and settings facilitate the continuation of participation arrangements. It is also essential that all groups of learners, including those from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, can take part.

³ hwb.gov.wales/support-centre/hwb-services/microsoft/office-365

Schools and settings will need to consider a range of arrangements for facilitating participation from September 2020. Arrangements often involved meetings between groups of learners from different year groups. This approach may not always be possible throughout 2020/21, therefore, alternative models may need to be implemented, e.g. using suggestion boxes, online voting, setting up year-based participation groups or using tools available on Hwb.

Provision of food and drink in schools for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners

The [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#) reminds local authorities of their legal duties with regard to provision of food and drink.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged learners may require additional support to access food and drink in school, and local authorities should consider the needs of all learners when making arrangements for catering provision. Additional needs will vary considerably and may include issues around physical access, difficulties with communication, and allergies or special diets. These needs may be made more acute because of specific arrangements and controls put in place as a consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak. The individual needs of learners should be considered and support measures put in place.

Learning guidance

On 13 July 2020, the Welsh Government published [Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term](#). The guidance applies to all schools and settings in relation to learning from September 2020.

The guidance provided in this document is supplementary and both documents should be read alongside each other. This section relates specifically to the additional considerations relevant to supporting the learning of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

The [Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term](#) advises schools and settings that they need to prepare for a range of scenarios from September 2020 and facilitate learning that is flexible enough to respond to changing conditions.

The priorities for learning should be based on the principle that:

- the health and well-being of learners is paramount
- all learning should be purposeful
- learners should have the opportunities to develop skills that are relevant to them across a broad and balanced curriculum
- the curriculum, delivery and support should ensure that learners make progress that is appropriate to their needs
- schools and settings should work in partnership with parents/carers and where appropriate other professionals.

The [Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term](#) is clear that well-being is a pre-requisite for learning. The experience of lockdown and not attending a school or setting for some months is likely to have had an impact on most learners to some degree, which may not be known for some time. As a consequence of their particular needs and pre-existing barriers to learning, it is possible that learners from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups will be hardest hit in terms of the impact on their well-being. The [Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term](#) notes that learners who are not content, safe and secure will not learn effectively. It highlights that practitioners will need to have particular regard for learners who are not able to attend a school or setting at any point in time and how they can be supported remotely. It also provides information on developing and strengthening partnerships with parents, carers and learners. Further guidance on supporting the well-being of all learners can be found in the [Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term](#).

The Welsh Government has also developed a new whole-school approach framework designed to help schools review their well-being arrangements and to develop plans to address any areas for improvement and to build on their strengths. Specifically the framework will support:

- the positive mental health and emotional well-being of all learners and staff
- the development and embedding of best practice
- consistency and collaboration between schools and partners
- activities such as training and awareness.

The [new framework was published for consultation](#) on 8 July 2020; the consultation will close on 30 September 2020.

All learners who face barriers to learning benefit from approaches, both teaching and support, which are based on a secure understanding of the needs of the learner. This has not changed. Settings will need to consider whether the needs of learners, in terms of well-being and learning more widely, have changed and will need to make suitable adjustments to accommodate these. Settings will already be used to working with a range of professionals, such as school counsellors, CAMHS practitioners and youth workers, which are able to provide specialist advice, support and guidance.

If practitioners identify that a learner would benefit from additional support for their learning or for their well-being this support should be put in place. If the learner has a learning plan, e.g. a personal education plan (PEP) or an individual education plan (IEP), this additional support should be noted in the learner's plan. The existence of a learning plan, however, is not a prerequisite for additional support – decisions should be based on the individual needs of learners.

The Welsh Government has introduced the Recruit, recover and raise standards programme for 2020/21. Additional support via this programme should be considered for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners. Further information on this programme is provided in 'Recruit, recover and raise standards – the accelerating learning programme'.

The local authority and/or school or setting should engage with parents/carers and provide clear information on how learning will be maintained in cases where the learner is unable to attend due to medical, health-related or other issues. This information should include details on any curriculum resources including specialist equipment and/or technology, approach to teaching and how this will be delivered, and the level of care, support and guidance to be provided by the setting or others.

The views of learners, where practicable, and their parents/carers should be considered when making decisions that affect them. The Welsh Government is committed to ensuring the rights of children and persons with disabilities and consulting with them helps give real effect to children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), in particular to the right in Article 12 for those who are capable to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them. Consulting children and their parents/carers is also more likely to lead to better decisions and provision agreed as being effective.

Now more than ever, the importance of person-centred practices for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged groups of learners cannot be underestimated. Local authorities, schools and settings will have been developing learners' participation through [person-centred practices](#). A key feature of the use of person-centred practices is that learners have the opportunity to express what is, and is not, working for them and what support they need.

Estyn has worked with the Association of Directors of Education in Wales (ADEW), the regional consortia and diocesan authorities to produce [advice on how to continue with school and PRU business](#). This advice usefully captures principles for using technology and highlights practices adopted by schools and settings.

Specific considerations

Special educational needs

Learners with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) and the local authority duty to comply with the statement

The ability of the local authority and/or school or setting to fully meet the educational requirements contained in the statement of SEN is likely to be dependent on many factors within the current context.

Many learners with SEN may not have been attending their usual setting. This may have made it difficult for local authorities and schools and settings to secure the range of provision for those learners both with, and without, statements of SEN. Schools and settings will have maintained contact with parents/carers during this time and should have been providing parents/carers with learning and support materials, resources and advice. However, it is recognised that while families are often best placed to understand the needs of their child, parents and carers are not professionals and many have experienced difficulties in meeting their child's learning needs during the period of school closures.

The local authority and/or school or setting, should work with parents/carers, learners and, where appropriate, other agencies, to explore and agree any contingency arrangements which need to be put in place to amend provision set out in a statement as a result of COVID-19, should local or national lockdowns be required.

The Minister for Education has the power to amend, temporarily, the statutory duties of local authorities. The use of temporary notices has not been used in this context. The statutory duties of local authorities, in respect of SEN are, therefore, unchanged.

The local authority still has a duty to arrange the special educational provision specified in the statement.

[Support that learners with SEN receive from teaching assistants, support assistants, specialist education services and/or therapists](#)

Learners with statements of SEN must continue to have their needs met. Local authorities must ensure that the special educational provision specified in the statement is made by the school or setting.

However, it is recognised that due to COVID-19, support systems may not currently be operating as they normally would. For example, staff in local authorities, schools and settings and local health boards may have been redirected to other priorities within their services, and some staff may be subject to self-isolation.

There are many examples where local authorities, schools and settings, and partner agencies have worked creatively to provide practical and flexible approaches, including providing services remotely; this should continue, wherever possible and appropriate.

As noted above, allied health professionals, such as speech and language therapists, physiotherapists and occupational therapists, may have been using the [NHS Wales Video Consulting Service](#) rather than meeting clients face-to-face during the lockdown. However, this support should be able to return to face-to-face from September 2020 subject to appropriate risk assessment. The learner's school or setting will be able to provide specific information on the provision of teaching/support assistants and therapists.

Where learners benefit from using hydrotherapy pools, an individual risk assessment should enable the practitioner to establish whether the learner can be on their own in the pool. If they need assistance, then ideally this should be from outside the pool, or, if not possible, with physical distancing in place or use of appropriate PPE. A risk assessment should be done in each individual case.

Local authorities, schools and settings must continue to ensure the individual needs of learners are fully considered. In determining appropriate follow-up, including advice, support and guidance, the needs of individual learners remains the primary consideration. Provision too must be based on individual need. It is not appropriate to apply 'blanket policies'. Local authorities, schools and settings must be mindful not

to restrict the access to professionals that learners with SEN may benefit from. To do so could be a breach of statutory SEN duties.

The [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#) clarifies expectations in relation to the role of staff and movement between schools and settings. In addition, Welsh Government guidance for [live-streaming](#) provides advice on engaging remotely. This may not be appropriate for all learners and should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

There is a clear expectation that services for learners with SEN must be maintained.

Reviewing the statement of SEN

The duty on local authorities to review statements of SEN has not changed. Statements of SEN are reviewed at least annually. There are examples where local authorities and schools and settings continued with this arrangement remotely during lockdown. There may have been delays in obtaining the necessary advice from professionals during lockdown. However, finalising these reviews and completing any that were unable to commence during the period of school closure should be prioritised in September 2020 to ensure the impact on learning and support is minimised. Specific consideration of the impact of COVID-19 should form part of statement reviews during the next academic year.

The SEN statutory assessment process

The duties of local authorities and schools and settings in relation to statutory assessment remain in place as do the timelines.

Learners with individual development plans (IDPs) or individual education plans (IEPs) and special educational provision

The new [additional learning needs \(ALN\) system](#), which involves learners with ALN having individual development plans (IDPs), is not yet in force. Some local authorities and schools and settings have begun to use IDPs, although statutory requirements relating to them do not yet apply. Some local authorities have, however, prepared IDPs with the agreements of parents/carers.

Many learners with SEN do not have statements. They should have an individual education plan (IEP). Both IEPs and IDPs should outline the needs of the learner and what steps the school will take to meet those needs. A mainstream maintained school's governing body must use their best endeavours to secure the special educational provision required by a learner with SEN⁴.

The ability of local authorities and schools and settings to fully meet the needs of learners with SEN, whether they have a statement or non-statutory plan, may have

⁴ Section 317(1)(a) of the Education Act 1996.

been affected during the period of school closure. In September 2020, the local authority and/or school should consider the needs of individual learners, including any direct impact as a result of COVID-19, to determine what support the learner needs for the next academic year in terms of their well-being and wider learning. This review and determination of support should be documented in the learner's plan.

[Respite provision for learners with SEN](#)

There are examples where maintained special schools and settings have increased and extended their respite provision. It is important that the local authority provides clear information on the availability of respite provision at this time.

[Rights to appeal decision regarding SEN](#)

Parents/carers and learners still have the same rights of appeal. In the first instance, parents/carers should seek to resolve concerns directly with the school and/or local authority. Local authorities are obliged to make arrangements for parent partnership services. These provide parents/carers with advice and information relating to SEN. In addition, local authorities must make arrangements for disagreement avoidance and resolution services and independent advocacy services. These should be known to parents/carers. Parents/carers and learners who have a right to appeal to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal Wales (SENTW) can still make appeals.

[The Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales \(SENTW\)](#)

The Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales (SENTW) is an independent tribunal. It deals with appeals against certain decisions about a child or young person and their education. It also deals with discrimination claims of unfair treatment in school in connection with a disability.

The statutory functions of SENTW have not been amended by the Coronavirus Act 2020.

The over-riding objective is that SENTW deals with appeals and claims fairly and justly.

The President of the Tribunal has various case management powers set out in the [Special Educational Needs Tribunal for Wales Regulations 2012](#), in accordance with the overriding objective.

[SENTW's website](#) provides useful material on their role, including the decisions that SENTW can consider, and a range of information and resources for parents/carers, children and young people, and local authorities.

It is in the best interests of children and young people and their parents/carers that where possible any queries or disputes in relation to SEN are resolved promptly and locally, e.g. at school or local authority level. Local authorities, schools and settings,

and parents/carers need to work in partnership. Parents/carers are advised to contact their education provider in the first instance.

The Welsh Government publication [Information for Parents and Carers of Children and Young People who may have Special Educational Needs](#) provides guidance aimed at helping parents and carers understand the support that is available for them, including the role of parent partnership services. Each local authority in Wales is required to provide advice and information about SEN matters for learners with SEN and their parents/carers⁵.

[The Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal \(Wales\) Act 2018](#)

Local authorities, schools and settings, further education colleges (FEIs) and health boards have been busy preparing for the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018. The system created by the Act is not yet in force. The system created by the Act is due to commence on a phased basis from September 2021.

Learners educated other than at school (EOTAS)

[Returning to education](#)

While all learners will have been affected by not attending their school or setting during the lockdown, the impact on EOTAS learners is likely to have been more significant due to the vulnerability of this group of learners. Impacts could include:

- interruptions to education
- increased anxiety
- increased behavioural issues.

These are discussed in more detail below.

Other negative consequences might have included changes to routine, sleep and lifestyle pattern, disengagement from learning, loss of motivation and/or loss of confidence. Schools and settings should be mindful of these in considering what support is required for learners from September 2020.

EOTAS provision is diverse and includes both academic and vocational education such as GCSEs, ASDAN Youth Achievement Awards and Duke of Edinburgh's Awards.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, settings such as PRUs, independent schools and settings and FEIs may have been able to provide online learning and/or education packs for learners to continue their education. COVID-19 presented significant challenges for some types of EOTAS settings to provide resources for learners to

⁵ Section 332AA of the Education Act 1996.

learn from home, due to the practical nature of their education. Consequently, some EOTAS learners are likely to have experienced a more significant interruption to their education than their peers during the COVID-19 outbreak.

As well as the challenges associated with providing some EOTAS learners with resources to continue their education, education could have been interrupted due to learners disengaging from education or from learners not having an education placement during the COVID-19 outbreak. This is particularly the case for learners who were excluded just prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Local authorities would have faced considerable challenges in finding alternative education placements for learners during the outbreak and it is likely these learners will have experienced an interruption to their education.

Addressing interruptions to education

In September 2020, when settings are open to all learners, local authorities will need to work with providers to prioritise ensuring plans are put in place for all EOTAS learners to resume their education. Where local authorities directly provide services, such as home tuition, the local authority should review learning plans.

Local authorities should prioritise learners who did not have an education placement during lockdown due to, for example, being excluded prior to lockdown. Local authorities should ensure these learners are found a placement during the first weeks of the autumn term. Learners themselves should be involved in the decision-making process, with their views taken into account in placement decisions.

Increased anxiety

The social and emotional disruption caused by the pandemic and the subsequent closures of education settings is likely to have increased or exacerbated anxiety and other mental health issues. This is particularly the case for some EOTAS learners who cannot attend mainstream school due to experiencing anxiety or mental health issues. EOTAS learners may, for example, have felt happier at home during lockdown and feel reluctant about returning to their setting or may feel increasingly anxious about returning to their setting due to becoming disconnected from their setting as a result of their attendance being disrupted.

Addressing anxiety

Local authorities should work with providers to put in place transition plans for EOTAS learners who are anxious about returning to their setting to ensure they are supported through the transition back to their setting and do not disengage from education. There are various services within local authorities who can advise on transition planning, including the education welfare service, the counselling service, the youth service, and the local authority engagement and progression coordinator.

Communication and conversations will be critical to supporting learners throughout the transition process. Staff should encourage learners to discuss their questions and concerns. Learners should recognise that it is normal that they may experience

different reactions and be encouraged to talk to staff if they have any questions or concerns, especially around COVID-19. Information should be provided in an honest, developmentally appropriate manner.

Increased behavioural issues

EOTAS provision is necessarily different to mainstream education and, while concerned with educational progress, providers focus on helping learners address and overcome barriers which are preventing them from accessing mainstream provision and from participating in education. Learners attend EOTAS for many reasons, including having challenging behaviour associated with, for example, having social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD).

There is potential for an increase in challenging behaviour amongst EOTAS learners due to experiences during COVID-19. It is also possible that some learners who had been making progress with behaviour prior to COVID-19 may now need further support due to not having the structured routine and support provided by their setting during lockdown. Settings should consider amending their behaviour policy to take into account the impact of COVID-19 on the well-being and behaviour of learners. Risk assessments should also be undertaken, as appropriate.

It may be necessary for settings to put in place pro-active strategies to support learners, and to adapt responses to challenging behaviours to take account of the disruption that has been experienced and to give learners the support they need to transition back into their setting. Settings should also work with other agencies to ensure that learners can access mental health support and counselling, as appropriate. Settings may find these [case studies](#) useful in developing arrangements for the next academic year.

Learners from low-income families

It is at the core of our education system that learners from low-income families achieve their best educational outcomes. Eligibility for free school meals (eFSM) is used as a proxy indicator for deprivation. We have seen some important progress over recent years, with learners from disadvantaged backgrounds achieving improved educational outcomes. However, most of these learners are still not achieving their full potential. The COVID-19 outbreak risks undoing the progress made over recent year.

Learners from low-income families may need a range of support from September 2020 to process, and recover from, not attending school during lockdown. This may include support for their mental health and well-being, as well as additional support with their learning.

Ensuring learners from low-income families actively re-engage in education when they return to their school or setting may be a challenge. Consideration of needs on an individual learner basis should be undertaken at the start of the autumn term and an individualised programme of support and intervention should be put in place.

Schools and settings may need to consider how they can adapt existing parenting or family learning programmes to better support parents/carers to support their child's learning.

The Welsh Government's key programme for supporting disadvantaged learners is the [Pupil Development Grant \(PDG\)](#) which is at a record £100 million for 2020/21. This year, schools and settings have been provided with greater flexibility in terms of the use of the PDG, so that it can be targeted to address local need in the context of COVID-19. Priorities might include, for example, ensuring practitioners receive refresher professional learning on trauma-informed practice and/or adverse childhood experiences (ACE) awareness, or additional focus on the 'tracking' of learner progress to help the learner progress to the next stage of their learning.

Schools and settings should continue to consider how to implement effective practices to support learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, and this should be at the heart of school development planning. The Welsh Government continues to advocate the use of the [Education Endowment Foundation's Teaching and Learning Toolkit](#) to support planning. The Education Endowment Foundation has produced a range of resources to support practitioners tackle the attainment gap, which are specifically relevant to the COVID-19 context.

Estyn has also produced a range of best practice reports to support schools and settings, including one on [supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable learners](#).

The PDG strategic advisers based in each regional consortia are the point of contact for all schools and settings on effective and evidence based approaches for supporting learners from low income families. They can provide support and guidance on:

- appropriate interventions based on the latest evidence
- using whole-school approaches
- the benefits of tracking
- supporting evaluation of current practices
- facilitating regional support networks.

In the current circumstances more than ever, the strategic advisers can support schools and settings to ensure the best use of their PDG allocations to support disadvantaged learners as we move into the new academic year.

Cost of the school day

Given the current challenging economic circumstances for many families, and the likelihood of this deepening over the coming months with significant increases in the number of families in receipt of benefits anticipated, it is essential that schools and settings consider 'the cost of the school day' when planning their core business and activities or events.

Children in Wales has produced a [suite of guides](#) for schools and settings covering key aspects in addressing the cost of the school day, including understanding the causes and impact of living in poverty, food and hunger, and school uniforms.

Schools and settings should be mindful when setting their uniform policy for the 2020/21 academic year as many disadvantaged families may not be able to afford additional items of clothing. Further guidance on school uniform is provided in the [Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term](#) and in the [Statutory guidance for school governing bodies on school uniform and appearance policies](#).

The Children's Commissioner for Wales' [resources](#) are a tool for learners, staff and governors of schools and settings to map the costs that might be difficult for children and families to afford – both over the course of the school day and over the school year. The resources can support schools and settings to find practical solutions to reduce the cost of the school day.

Care-experienced learners

Many care-experienced learners, including looked after children and adopted children, will have found lockdown difficult. Due to lockdown measures, some children will have had limited face-to-face contact with their birth families and their support network, including social workers. For some families, lockdown will have put pressures on foster placements leading to placement breakdowns. For some children, lockdown measures will have made it difficult to maintain contact with friends and these relationships will now need to be re-established.

These circumstances may have resulted in care-experienced children feeling isolated and contributed to increased trauma and attachment issues. Many schools and settings have received trauma and attachment training, which is invaluable in being able to fully support care experienced learners. Further information on trauma and attachment is provided in the [Operational guidance for schools and settings from autumn term](#).

All maintained schools and settings in Wales must have a designated person for looked after children with responsibility for promoting the educational achievement of looked after children. Essentially, the designated person is responsible for ensuring the needs of looked after children are met within the school or setting. A key part of the role is working with others to ensure the well-being of looked after children is monitored effectively and their welfare needs are addressed.

Every looked after child should have an effective personal education plan (PEP), which should describe what needs to happen to help them reach their full potential. While it is recognised there will be practical implications in the delivery and review of PEPs during this current time, the local authority should continue to work in partnership with the learner and the school (especially the designated person), to develop and review the PEP in light of any changed circumstances, so that it fully reflects the needs of the learner, remains up to date and is implemented. PEPs and

guidance are available from the local authority looked after children in education (LACE) coordinator.

While many learners will have struggled during this period, it's important to note that for some the experience will have been a positive one. Some learners may have engaged better with their learning through a distance model and some, including care-experienced learners, have thrived from a personal and well-being perspective, e.g. as a consequence of spending more time with their families or foster families and building secure attachments. We must recognise, learn from and build upon the positive experiences and aspects. However, a positive experience may also mean some learners will be reluctant to return to school for this reason and may need support to overcome this.

Young carers

Young carers may be concerned about returning to school. They may worry about how the person they care for will be supported while they are in school. They may also be concerned about transmission of the virus and the risks of taking the infection home to parents/carers, siblings or other family members who are unwell or who have care and support needs that make them vulnerable to illness or infections.

They may have experienced an increase in caring responsibilities during the pandemic; either in the number of hours they are caring, the type of tasks they have been carrying out or in the number of people they are caring for. This may mean that a young carer has not been able to fully engage in home learning and has fallen behind in their studies, which may cause anxiety about returning to school. Increased caring responsibilities may also have made it difficult to maintain communication with friends or wider support networks.

We know that many children and young people don't identify themselves as being in a caring role, or they don't tell school staff that they are a young carer. Schools and settings can help young carers understand their rights under the [Social Services and Well-being \(Wales\) Act 2014](#). All young carers have the right to a carers' needs assessment. This is not dependent on any individual they are caring for having a local authority needs assessment and identified care and support needs. In November 2019, the Welsh Government published a [short guide](#) to carers' rights, recognising that local authorities, schools and settings may require support to improve their understanding of the needs of young carers.

The Welsh Government has funded [Carers Trust Wales](#) to produce guides and lesson plans, which will be launched in September 2020. Also, in 2019, Estyn published the thematic review [Provision for young carers in secondary schools, further education colleges and pupil referral units across Wales](#). Schools and settings may find this useful in planning support for young carers in the new academic year.

Young carers and their families should be encouraged to discuss concerns about returning to education with their school or setting and any other agencies working with the family. A multi-agency approach could be beneficial in finding ways to

support a return to school. Schools and settings could also offer information about the help and safeguarding plans they have put in place to protect their learners and the support in place to help young carers with their studies on returning to school.

More generally, a young carer can access a range of online information and advice, or other forms of support, which can include local authority young carers' services. Information about how to access these can be found on their local authority website or by calling their local authority. Contact and website details of all local authorities regarding carers services and support is also available via [Meic](#), the national young people's support service. Young carers can also access support via local or national carers' organisations such as [Carers Trust Wales](#) or [Carers Wales](#), or a local carers' centre.

Learners from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities and those who have English or Welsh as an additional language (EAL/WAL)

Learners and families from (BAME) backgrounds may have concerns about their increased vulnerability to COVID-19 and the potential risks associated with their child returning to school. In particular, the learner taking the infection home to family members who may be vulnerable to illness or infections.

Where learners have English or Welsh as an additional language (EAL/WAL) they may not have used their language skills during the lockdown period and they may have lost confidence. This might lead to anxiety or disengagement from school.

Parents/carers of learners with EAL/WAL may not have the English or Welsh language skills to support their children's distance learning. There can be particular challenges engaging with families with low levels of literacy or with EAL/WAL. This may have been exacerbated by a lack of access to easy to read text or audio information.

[Guidance for parents/carers](#) has been published and is available in a range of languages.

Access to materials in home languages can be an issue. Some local authorities have developed guidance for schools and settings to emphasise the barriers that learners with EAL/WAL face at such a challenging time. This includes guidance on suitable websites to promote learning, banks of resources to download, and support for schools and settings in using visual and audio resources. It reminds staff of the importance of encouraging families to use home language for learning where skills in English or Welsh are not well developed. There are examples of local authorities having bilingual staff in place providing support and feedback for learners in their home language where needed.

Learners with EAL/WAL may need extra support with learning and to refresh their language skills when they return to school. We must reassure learners and their families and give them the confidence they will receive all the help and support they need on return to school.

During this period, local authority minority ethnic achievement services have been working with schools and settings, learners and their families to support learners and their families and share good practice across their local authority areas. In some local authorities, staff report that three-way calls between families, schools and settings and the EAL/WAL services have proved beneficial. They have helped to ensure parental understanding of how they can best support their children's learning and get access to resources.

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners

Anecdotal evidence from local authority Gypsy Traveller service providers is that there has been a higher level of disengagement of these learners during lockdown. Issues they cite are concerns about exposure to the virus, a lack of access to learning materials and late acquisition of digital equipment and connectivity.

With regard to delays in access to digital devices and connectivity generally, local authorities have worked hard to supply equipment and internet access for these groups. However, a minority still report that the quality of ICT equipment, internet access and the low technical competency of some learners and their families continue to be barriers to learning.

For some families, particularly in the Traveller community, digital technology may not be a chosen method of interaction. It is best therefore, to include a mix of media that matches the needs of the learners and their families. We know in many instances, work packs were provided to learners during lockdown.

There is also a possibility that low literacy levels among some parents/carers has meant they are unable to support their child's learning. Culturally, there can be a low level of confidence in education based on parents'/carers' own experiences.

Building better relationships with these groups is key to understanding why education is not a priority for some learners and their families, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. There can be a lack of mutual understanding between schools and settings, and families which may challenge learners' engagement and attainment. These include cultural barriers where families may not understand what schools and settings expect, while schools and settings may not understand the extent of support families may need.

In the best-case scenarios, there is a well-embedded multi-agency approach to supporting individual families and learners in these groups. Where this is the case, schools and settings and support services have continued to build on already well-established relationships.

Beginning in September 2020, the Gypsy Traveller Forum – the Welsh Local Authority Gypsy Traveller service provider network – is planning a task and finish group to share good practice and develop strategies to re-engage Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners and their families in education post-lockdown.

Children at risk of harm, abuse or neglect

Learners will have encountered different experiences and home environments during lockdown and all staff should be reminded of their safeguarding duties within the statutory safeguarding guidance for education settings [Keeping learners safe](#) and under the [Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#).

The role of the designated safeguarding person (DSP) will be vital and all staff and learners should be informed of who the DSP is and how to contact them. Accessing a trusted adult, or the DSP, may be more difficult with efforts to minimise contact so schools and settings should consider how learners can talk to them privately. [Guidance for education settings](#) is available.

At the early stages, schools, settings and children's services should continue to work closely together to ensure every child and family has the support needed. Local authorities will already have a range of working practices in place to ensure that safeguarding partners can work together to keep learners safe. There is an opportunity now for these working practices to be further consolidated.

The Welsh Government has produced [guidance](#) to remind practitioners working across agencies of their responsibilities to safeguard learners and to support them in responding to concerns about learners at risk. The guide links to, and should be used with, the national [Wales Safeguarding Procedures](#).

Preparing for a further lockdown or blended learning approach

Many uncertainties face the education system as we prepare for the next academic year.

The UNCRC's right to an education applies without exception, regardless of the scenario or any barriers to learning faced by individuals. A further lockdown or a period of blended learning does not absolve local authorities of their duty to provide a suitable education. However, it is recognised that the duty may need to be implemented differently for some learners for periods of time.

Local authorities, schools and education settings should prioritise preparation for potential further national or local lockdowns to seek to ensure as little disruption as possible to the learning of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups.

Many schools and settings, including special schools and PRUs, provided a valuable service for vulnerable children and the children of key workers during lockdown.

As part of their planning, local authorities must now consider how they will continue to provide education and wider support for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners should there be future local or national lockdowns. This should include keeping schools and settings open. As part of this planning, local authorities need to consider how best to deploy resources, creatively and flexibly to meet the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, and their families. The Welsh Government recognises that any such response needs to be based on appropriate public health advice.

In planning arrangements for potential future lockdown, local authorities should reflect on the arrangements put in place during the previous lockdown, including strengths and areas for improvement, and feedback received from parents/carers and learners. Other sources of feedback and intelligence may also be available, e.g. from Estyn and the Children's Commissioner for Wales.

The [Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term](#) sets out expectations around contact with learners and duration of learning should there be a future lockdown or implementation of some form of blended learning approach. It is clear that all learners should be:

- contacted regularly to 'check in' – this will provide an opportunity to check on the safety and well-being of the learner, as well as to explore their learning experience and consider possible additional support
- provided with the duration of learning time they would have received were they in their school or setting, regardless of whether or not some of their learning is taking place at home or elsewhere – there will be exceptions to the implementation of this expectation, however, it should be the starting position for all learners.

The public health situation will continue to be carefully monitored over the coming months and this guidance will be kept under review. Further, additional guidance will be provided, if necessary.

Ensuring continuity of learning

Schools and settings are expected to plan for a number of scenarios for the 2020/21 academic year. This is to include any future lockdown situation. The learning and well-being needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners must be considered fully as part of that planning process.

Local authorities, schools, settings and partner agencies have shown great resilience to date. There have been many examples of creative and flexible ways of working. Local authorities, schools and settings will have identified aspects of their approaches that have worked well and those that may require refinement.

The Minister for Education is clear that the priority for all education settings, as they increase their operations and as they prepare to welcome learners in September 2020, is the well-being of its learners.

Estyn has recently published a suite of reports that provide a brief overview of how education settings have supported learners' well-being and learning. Separate reports are available on approaches from [primary schools](#), [secondary schools](#), special schools and [pupil referral units](#).

In addition, [Insights into how independent schools and specialist colleges have responded during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) highlights the approaches taken by this diverse sector in supporting learners during the pandemic. The Estyn report presents a number of cameos that profile the work undertaken in relation to adapting learning, supporting transition, developing learners' skills and establishing routines to assist in reducing anxiety.

The above publications complement Estyn's report [Learner resilience - building resilience in primary schools, secondary schools and pupil referral units](#). The report recognises the vital role that schools and settings have in supporting the mental health in building resilience of children and young people. The report may help education providers in considering relevant approaches.

The Education Endowment Foundation has produced guidance on [Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools](#). The guidance aligns well with the Welsh Government's ambition for inclusive education and [Education in Wales: Our national mission, Action plan 2017–21](#). The report states very clearly that 'learners with SEN have the greatest need for excellent teaching and are entitled to provision that supports achievement at and enjoyment of school'.

The guidance provides useful materials on engagement with parents/carers, SEN misconceptions, high-quality teaching, and plotting overlapping needs.

Local authorities should consider what support schools and settings need in order to ensure the continued learning of children and young people facing significant barriers to learning. This may be necessary, for example, to ensure learning objectives within statutory or other education plans are met, e.g. statements of SEN, IEPs or PEPs. Specialist staff in local authorities may be well placed to identify any gaps and provide schools and settings with advice on how to adapt their approach, including resources to better meet learning needs.

Local authorities, schools and settings should engage with parents/carers in order to ensure continuity of learning. The information gathered from this engagement can be used in discussions between the local authority, school or setting, and staff from other agencies, to ensure the work set and support provided meets the needs of learners.

Schools and settings must ensure that any learning materials are appropriate to the needs of learners. They must use their in-depth knowledge of learners to provide high-quality, differentiated learning activities and experiences for learners. Schools and settings must also give careful consideration to the appropriateness of remote or blended learning activities. Additional support should be provided to enable access to learning. Alternatives may include schools and settings providing materials via mail, post or hand-delivery. However, it might be that a multi-agency approach is required in order to support the continued learning of some individuals.

Local authorities, schools and settings should also review the availability of technology, equipment and other resources that may support learners with learning at home or elsewhere.

The 'check-in, catch-up and prepare' sessions will have helped schools and settings review any outstanding accessibility issues their learners are experiencing, including access to digital tools. Support has been made available via local authorities, including £3 million additional funding from the Welsh Government, to specifically address the issue of access to hardware and/or internet connectivity. We are aware that considerable efforts have been made by local authorities, schools and settings to address these needs. We expect any such residual access issues will be quickly resolved as we move towards full operation and all learners to have full and equitable support for learning in the autumn.

Some learners may ordinarily have access to specialist equipment, toys and other resources. Local authorities, schools and settings should use their in-depth knowledge of learners and plan to ensure that learners are not disadvantaged should their return to school be part or full-time, or during any future lockdown situation. Specialist staff may coordinate this and provide ongoing support to learners and their parents/carers.

Multi-agency working

The importance of multi-agency working and partnership at this time cannot be underestimated. It is especially the case in terms of the effective support of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, e.g. where there may be a role for social care or specialist services in supporting the learner.

Innovative ways for ensuring multi-agency working will be required in the event of another lockdown. This was demonstrated during the recent period where schools and settings were closed to most learners, e.g. with multi-agency meetings and support for learners moving online, and will need to be built upon should another lockdown be implemented.

As a result of COVID-19, health practitioners may have been redeployed to other areas of work within the health board and this could feature more acutely if there is a significant increase in transmission rates in the future. Wherever possible, contact should be maintained with local authorities, schools and settings, and learners and alternative support arrangements discussed and agreed as appropriate.

Statutory assessment/annual review process

Wherever possible local authority officers, schools and settings, and multi-agency partners continued the SEN statutory assessment and annual review process remotely during lockdown. This included the work of local authority special educational needs panels. Educational psychologists and others, where they were able to, undertook assessments and consultations online. It is recognised that this will not always be possible, as some assessments or consultations require face-to-face contact or use of specialist equipment. Local authority specialist officers worked remotely to provide ongoing advice, support and guidance to schools and settings, learners and their parents/carers, e.g. mobility officers worked alongside school staff to identify adjustments needed to meet the needs of learners.

Where legislation requires meetings to be held in relation to SEN, or other barriers to learning, they do not have to be held in person. Those responsible for arranging meetings should consider other ways of holding them, e.g. virtually. But in doing so, they will need to have regard to the importance of the parents/carers, and where appropriate the learner, being able to meaningfully participate. Their preferences for how meetings are held should be sought and taken into account.

Schools, settings, local authorities and their partners may wish to consider whether elements of these adaptations and innovations could be adopted generally as part of standard working practices. In any event, these sorts of adaptations will need to be implemented again should there be a further lockdown.

These principles apply beyond SEN. They should also be considered, for example, in the context of care and support plans and/or PEPs.

Working with parents/carers

Ongoing contact with families will be essential in the event of a further lockdown. It may be appropriate for individual members of staff to be allocated responsibility for ensuring that contact with parents/carers is maintained. Local authorities and/or schools and settings should keep in touch via telephone, e-mail, letter and/or by meeting online. Local authorities should also consider setting up designated helplines for parents/carers. In some situations, and where they are within the normal realm of practice in the circumstances, it may be appropriate for staff to deliver learning resources and equipment and to keep in touch by making socially distanced and safe visits to the home.

During the previous lockdown, some local authorities and/or parent partnership groups produced bespoke information packs or resources for parents/carers. These focused on a range of issues including supporting parents/carers in developing their child's understanding of the current situation, establishing routines, reducing anxiety and supporting the return to school transition. Some local authorities made these available directly to parents/carers and placed them online, including via social media. Schools and settings may have created virtual tours and shared these online to assist the transition process.

Many organisations, including local authorities, provided information and resources via their websites. Learning Disability Wales, for example, have produced a range of [easy-read materials](#) on COVID-19, including on well-being and mental health.

There is also a wealth of information and resources available on Hwb, which practitioners may find helpful in informing their engagement with parents/carers in the event of another lockdown.

Annex: Recruit, recover and raise standards – the accelerating learning programme

Context

During the crisis, it became clear that many learners suffered negative impacts in terms of their progress in learning, some heavily so. Evidence from a range of reliable sources, including those focusing on Wales, suggest that most, or all, learners have been affected, and that the most vulnerable have been affected the most.

Affected cohorts

The most affected cohorts currently appear to be:

- learners preparing for national examinations in the forthcoming academic year
- vulnerable and disadvantaged children
- Year 7
- Reception
- all other learners.

This summary is in line with the findings of many other countries and territories with similar characteristics to Wales, and will inform the priority groups we expect to be addressed by the work we do. We should note, however, that there will be individuals not in these groups who will need support.

The investment

Our response to this situation is to dedicate financial resources to the creation of new capacity in the system. The investment amounts to almost £29 million between September 2020 and August 2021, and will be enough to grow capacity in the system by around 600 teachers and 300 teaching assistants. Alongside this, we will use our current investment in professional learning, digital infrastructure, connectivity, devices and content to enrich the experiences schools and settings make available to learners.

Curriculum for the accelerated learning programme

Curriculum reform remains our central priority for education in Wales. It is essential that all our work with the education system in the context of COVID-19 aligns with international best practice, which is also the basis of our curriculum reform proposals. Our focus for the coming year will be:

- literacy, numeracy and digital skills within a broad and balanced curriculum
- development of independent learning skills
- supporting and engagement through coaching.

This focus will be particularly relevant for the priority cohorts. We will work closely with Qualifications Wales to ensure our approach to curriculum and learning is consistent with and promotes the credibility and validity of the 2021 exam series.

National framework, local realisation

We will not impose a rigid formula for how to respond to the situation at local level, but provide a framework and guidance that schools and settings, local authorities and regions can make use of in developing the plans, approaches and solutions their local communities and young people need.