

Dear Greg and Ian

During the early autumn term, the Welsh Government asked us to undertake a review of local authorities and regional consortia's work in supporting their learning communities in schools and pupil referral units (PRUs) during the period from March to October 2020.

This letter outlines the outcome of this work in ERW. The content of the letter is based on virtual meetings with officers, as well as information from a sample of schools and PRUs in the local authorities across the ERW region. We have also considered the supporting documentation provided by ERW officers and the feedback from surveys of school/PRU leaders, governors, teachers and support staff, parents and pupils. We have referred to the outcomes of the surveys where relevant, although the surveys were mainly be used to inform the national report which was published on our website on 15 January. Here is a [link](#) to that report.

We would like to thank your staff for giving of their time to discuss their work with us and for providing additional information on request.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Meilyr Rowlands".

Meilyr Rowlands
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

The regional consortium's work to support its schools and PRUs March - August 2020

Leadership and collaboration

At the start of the pandemic, ERW was a partnership of six local authorities, but Neath Port Talbot withdrew on 31 March 2020 having served a 12-month notice period. Neath Port Talbot continued to receive a small number of services from ERW where these related to national programmes, such as the NPQH, but otherwise ERW stopped providing school improvement services to schools in Neath Port Talbot after March. This letter focuses primarily on school improvement services provided by ERW's central team during the pandemic to Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Powys and Swansea.

Three of the remaining five local authorities served notice to leave ERW on 31 March 2021. This has inevitably caused uncertainty for staff this year and restricted ERW's ability to replace staff that have left. The managing director of ERW at the start of the pandemic retired in May 2020. His deputy took over as the managing director, and he then retired in August 2020.

We are mindful that ERW has a significantly different operating model compared to the other regional consortia. In particular, the challenge adviser¹ role is carried out by staff employed and deployed by individual local authorities, and local authorities also choose to provide additional school improvement services.

During the pandemic, the strength of this operating model has been the close working relationships that challenge advisers in each local authority have with other education services locally, which has enabled a joined up approach to supporting schools. However, because school improvement services are being provided from two different sources in the region – the local authorities and ERW – there is a risk of different advice being given and a risk of duplication in work.

Throughout the period, those leading ERW have sought to support the wellbeing of ERW staff, and ensure that ERW's resources have been used to support schools in the region with issues relating to the pandemic as well as with their ongoing school improvement priorities. ERW's leaders have held regular sessions online with staff to keep everyone up-to-date with the impact of the pandemic on ERW and to explore together how to best support schools. ERW's leaders also made sure that staff had access to personal support through Pembrokeshire's human resources (HR) service, as they have lead responsibility for HR for ERW.

ERW provided regular updates about the support they could offer to schools and PRUs in the region through email, social media and direct contact from their own staff and through local authority advisory staff.

¹ We use this term because it is used in the National Model for Regional Working to define a particular function. Staff carrying out this role may have different titles locally.

The lead local authority director of education has provided valuable support and operational guidance to ERW's leaders during the pandemic on behalf of the five local authorities. The managing director provided useful reports on ERW's support for schools to the Executive Board and Joint Committee, though there has been limited critical analysis in either board of how well ERW has supported schools through this period.

Promoting learning

During the late spring and early summer terms, officers in ERW allocated a significant proportion of their time to working with national projects. This included jointly authoring a range of helpful support materials to complement the national Continuity of Learning Plan.

Members of the ERW team made considerable contributions to guidance on hardware and the use of digital tools including to support school business. Officers compiled a range of beneficial publications for the region in conjunction with local authorities. The publications explained clearly different teaching and learning models that might be adopted for distance or blended learning across all key stages and phases along with complementary guides for parents. To accompany these guides, officers from the region also produced a series of webinars on a range of relevant topics including the use of Hwb tools, supporting transition and connecting with Foundation Phase learners. These webinars included cameos from schools within the region and attracted a large number of viewers from within ERW and across Wales.

Early on in this phase, officers set up a website that offered information and links regarding distance and blended learning. This drew together a vast amount of guidance and suggested reading from a diverse range of international research as well as relevant local documents. These ranged from world-renowned education commentators such as Michael Fullan and John Hattie to local authority exemplar policies and examples from schools within the region. Nearly all schools and PRUs were very appreciative of these pointers, although a few school leaders told us that they felt overwhelmed by the volume of information being shared by the consortium, the local authority and nationally, and relied on peer school leaders or local challenge advisers to help them filter out approaches that may be most suitable for their schools.

The cross-region group that addressed the challenges associated with Welsh language skills for all learners was chaired by officers in ERW. Within the region, resources and support for teachers were pulled together into one central online space making it easy for practitioners to access. School leaders and local authority officers commended the valuable support and resources that were shared, including a 'time capsule' project that encompassed Welsh language materials, digital learning and a focus on wellbeing.

Cameo: Supporting Ysgol Gyfun Ddwyeithog Y Preseli to promote the use of Welsh at home

A minority of pupils come from non-Welsh speaking homes and the school acknowledged the importance of promoting and maintaining the language in the home. The school has had a particular focus on oracy in the school's development plan. ERW officers supported teachers to experiment with 'Flipgrid', a digital tool in which learners can video their responses. The school has used this successfully as one way of reinforcing the language.

The secondary school support specialist subject team focused on improving classroom teaching, distance learning and middle leadership. Staff in the team supported schools, PRUs and networks of schools with advice on planning and professional learning. Most secondary schools in the region commented positively on this useful aspect of ERW's support. In particular, they commended the work of the English, Welsh and science teams, who held regular network meetings that covered the needs of schools across the region as well as sharing helpful resources. Headteachers commented that network meetings also benefited the wellbeing of staff, particularly those in small departments.

ERW has a dedicated team to support schools and PRUs to prepare for Curriculum for Wales. During this period, staff in the team contributed to national work, but also continued to support schools in the region. The team shared an online professional learning resource entitled 'Principles for Excellence'. This resource is intended to deepen teachers' understanding of the 12 pedagogical principles included in the Curriculum for Wales guidance. Along with many of the other ERW resources, 'Principles for Excellence' has been shared regionally and nationally and has links to Welsh Government projects such as 'Talk Pedagogy' and the national approach to professional learning. In addition, the team continued to support the 'Transforming Your Curriculum' programme which is available directly to schools through 'Dolen', ERW's digital platform.

During this period, the professional learning needs of schools and PRUs regarding learning were very much focused on how to develop teachers' expertise in distance learning in order to engage with pupils and have the support of parents. ERW shared guidance to support schools to run their own effective professional learning online. Much of the work planned with schools, including the National Professional Enquiry Project, Building Research Capacity Projects, Lead MAT Schools Enquiry Project and Post-16 Enquiry Project, were largely delayed until the autumn, although ERW colleagues were available to support colleagues to plan ahead for the following term. National leadership programmes were delivered remotely alongside regional colleagues wherever possible.

Supporting vulnerable learners

ERW contributed significantly to the development of national guidance for schools and PRUs on supporting learners' wellbeing as part of Welsh Government's

Continuity of Learning programme. On the back of this national guidance, ERW developed helpful resources and offered valuable professional learning in two particular themes: staying connected and being active.

For the 'staying connected' theme, ERW provided webinars on how to use platforms on Hwb to encourage collaboration. Special schools and specialist settings were offered training in the use of Flipgrid. Over 60 practitioners took part and subsequently used the tool to engage with their learners and keep learners connected with each other. On request, a session was also provided for speech and language staff in one local authority, and they then used Flipgrid as the platform for their work with individual learners. A [website](#) was developed to support the ongoing use of Flipgrid in the region as a tool to keep staff and learners connected, including case studies from schools.

For the 'being active' theme, ERW developed a [website](#) that signposted schools and PRUs to existing resources and activities that would be particularly suited to encouraging physical activity during lockdown. These resources matched to key areas of physical development and were designed to help learners develop the confidence, competence and motivation to be physically active.

To help schools prepare to reopen in June, ERW developed a series of supporting activities based on a trauma-informed approach, given that the lockdown period will have had the characteristics of a traumatic event for some learners. Professional learning was offered to schools on relationship-based play within the restrictions due to COVID-19. ERW commissioned two video resources with Professor Neil Frude, focused on staff wellbeing and managing anxiety in children and young people. These videos have had over 150 views.

The regional consortium's work to support its schools and PRUs from September 2020

Leadership and collaboration

Due to the potential dissolution of ERW in March 2021, no managing director was appointed for September 2020. Instead, two senior members of staff have undertaken roles as chief officers since September. These changes of leadership have occurred during what was already a very difficult time due to the pandemic. Since the two chief officers took up post in September, they have continued to work closely with local authorities and schools across the region.

ERW's chief officers have provided continuity in ERW's approach to supporting schools. The chief officers have provided a useful report on ERW's support for schools in the first few weeks of the autumn term to the Executive Board and Joint Committee, which also covered plans for the rest of term and beyond.

ERW has continued to provide regular updates about the support they could offer to schools and PRUs through their usual communication channels, and helpfully refined these in response to constructive feedback.

Staff in ERW are working in very challenging circumstances, attempting to adapt to support schools through the pandemic while not knowing whether ERW – and their own jobs – will exist beyond March 2021. The chief officers, backed by the lead local authority director, have been understanding and supportive, and provided suitable direction for ERW's work in the short term.

The lack of a plan for school improvement services in south west Wales from April 2021 is a significant concern. Local authorities have understandably prioritised their response to the pandemic. However, elected members and senior officers across all local authorities in the region have been too slow to ensure that there is a clear vision and plan for how high quality school improvement services that meet their needs will be provided to schools and PRUs from April 2021.

Our survey of school leaders in the region in October found that they were less positive about the support they received for learning from ERW compared to the views of leaders about their consortium in two other regions, and similar to the views in the other region. We have had concerns about the governance of ERW for some time before the pandemic and noted these in previous letters to the Joint Committee. It is unclear whether the negative feedback from school leaders reflects specific concerns about ERW's response to the pandemic or their own general concerns about ERW.

Promoting Learning

Officers in ERW continued to support schools with digital learning in the autumn term. They ran a series of webinars for primary, secondary and special schools and PRUs that give an overview of the tools available through Hwb to support blended and distance learning, complementing their earlier work. The sessions included specific themes for school leaders, such as what to consider when experiencing individual year group isolation. These webinars also included recordings and live discussions with school leaders from around the region, which school leaders found reassuring when considering how best to implement their own plans. In addition, the team shared online safety and self-review tools, as well as curriculum support for specific areas, for example, to develop teachers' practice with coding. A Google Classroom, set up specifically for teaching assistants to develop their online skills, has attracted over 200 participants.

Staff who support Welsh language development have maintained regular contact with schools. In order to sustain learner engagement, a range of useful new resources have been created. These include 'Welsh heroes' Top Trumps, a Starter Iaithe Calendar, Seren and Spark video clips for GCSE Welsh and GCSE Second Language Welsh along with a book of PISA style reading exercises for first and second language learners. There has been further development of the Ap Iaithe and a 'Videoscribe' resource on the history of the Welsh Language. These helpful resources have been promoted across ERW's own digital platforms. In addition,

there are two specific networks on Hwb (ERW – Welsh and ERW – Second Language Welsh) where secondary teachers can find a wide range of resources. More recently, two national platforms have been created – Y Pair (Welsh Secondary Resources), and Y Gist (Welsh Secondary Second Language Resources). ERW specialists have contributed to the development of both platforms.

The secondary specialist subject team have continued to refine their offer. A key source of support for schools and PRUs are the subject online network meetings, which have been well attended. All agenda items are linked to common school priorities and developed in conjunction with subject middle leaders. Example of areas of focus include leadership after lockdown, effective teaching and learning in the 'new normal', and qualifications 2021. The teams have also offered guidance to schools on how they might best use the 'Recruit, recover, raise standards: the accelerating learning programme' (RRRS) grant for specific subjects, in conjunction with local authority challenge advisers.

Subject teams have produced a range of resources to exemplify what effective distance, blended and classroom learning looks like in each curriculum area. There is a strong emphasis on the depth and breadth of subject content and skills progression at key stage 3 and 4 as well as post-16 learners. In addition to this advice and guidance, the secondary team have made 'response packs' available for individual subject areas that have been well received. These digital packs provide around a week's worth of material for key stage 3 and 4 pupils who have to self-isolate and cannot attend school. The packs are editable, and classroom teachers can amend and alter them to meet their needs.

Cameo: Supporting the teaching of science at Dylan Thomas Community School

The school reflected that on returning to school it was very difficult to plan how to carry out practical activity safely. The headteacher told us that the ERW subject teams shared clear and helpful guidance which reassured teachers in these subjects. For example, the ERW science team gave examples of online sites that included video demonstrations of experiments, and a wealth of useful and engaging resources that teachers could use for distance learning.

The Curriculum for Wales team has developed a set of programmes to explore the conceptual model of the curriculum which can be used virtually, or when the situation will allow it, in person. These are accessible via a dedicated area of the website and enable schools to access support for developing pedagogy, assessment and progression. There are also engagement workshops for each of the six Areas of Learning and Experience. The resources are designed to be used in conjunction with the professional learning approaches developed locally and nationally.

To support schools to develop their approaches to a Curriculum for Wales, ERW, in collaboration with higher education institution (HEI) partners, has put in place several professional learning networks (PLNs), each with a specific focus on pedagogy and

the six AOLES. The team also supports schools and PRUs with include the National Professional Enquiry Project, Schools as Learning Organisations, National Pedagogy Project and Professional Learning Journey. To complement the national agenda, Lead Enquiry Schools will support new Partner Enquiry Schools to explore themes such as Pedagogy and Learning, Re-Imagining Schooling, Inclusion and Assessment. The online launch event for these networks had around a hundred attendees. Staff from schools who are participating in these networks have taken part in a half-day introduction to coaching and mentoring session alongside challenge advisers from local authorities in the region. Despite this work being in its infancy, officers have helpfully built in evaluation activity, adopting the Kirkpatrick model to assess the effectiveness of these networks over time.

Leadership programmes have largely been on pause so far this term but recruitment has continued and many new cohorts have started recently or will begin after Christmas. Officers have adapted materials so that they are suitable for use in blended and online delivery, for example in the Middle Leaders Development Programme that began in November. This particular programme also includes 72 supplementary places for Additional Learning Needs Co-ordinators, funded by the ALN transformation grant. The full range of programmes are all scheduled to resume during the autumn, along with support for NQTs, which this year will include teachers recruited as a consequence of the RRRS grant.

Supporting vulnerable learners

For the start of term, ERW commissioned Professor Robin Banerjee to deliver professional learning to develop staff understanding of self-efficacy and connection as key to supporting wellbeing. Dr Carol Harper was commissioned to provide a session on 'Trauma-informed Schools: Back to School Training'. Around 100 schools engaged in each event. Professor Banerjee's session was recorded, and this recording has since had over 150 views.

Headteachers in Powys, for example, have told us how that the training and support materials for all staff on dealing with trauma-related issues have been very valuable this term as pupils returned to school. In particular, headteachers commented on how such training could be easily accessed by all staff and how it enriched their discussions on how to support anxious or vulnerable pupils.

Further beneficial professional learning during the autumn term to promote wellbeing and support vulnerable learners has focused on supporting adopted learners, looked after learners, learners with adverse childhood experiences and learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Many of the sessions have been recorded and are being made available to schools and PRUs through ERW's website.

ERW has usefully set out how its professional learning offer can support schools in making good use of their 'Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards' grant from Welsh Government.

ERW has commissioned Challenging Education to lead professional learning through the year to promote equity in education called 'Thinking Differently for Disadvantaged Learners'. This involves half-termly live professional learning events that are recorded to make them accessible to all. In addition, ERW is supporting 14 secondary schools across the region, working with consultants from Challenging Education, to participate in a 'Raising Achievement of Disadvantaged Youngsters' programme that is designed to radically change their approach.

ERW has commissioned Hafal to provide training on resilience for 3 members of staff from each secondary school to support learners in Years 10-13 to prepare for examinations or assessments. In the Spring term, ERW has planned accredited training on 'emotion coaching' that will enable participants to train their colleagues.