

Getting online: barriers and successes for the provision of online learning during the January 2021 Tier 4 lockdown

A briefing from the Children's Commissioner for Wales,
January 2021



Introduction

This report provides a snapshot of the digital divide from the perspective of schools and colleges in Wales in January 2021, during a lockdown that has seen school and college buildings close to all except the children of keyworkers who require childcare to carry out essential roles and learners whose additional support needs mean they should be prioritised for attendance. However, schools and colleges have not been 'closed'. Instead, as well as providing care for children and young people attending in person, they are providing distance learning to all of their learners. Much, but not all, of this provision relies on children and young people having digital resources and the support and confidence of their parents to enable them to access the learning.

In January, the Commissioner and her team noted that there were still concerns being reported in the media and to our office about children lacking digital devices and broadband or data to access their learning. Whilst we were aware that the Welsh Government and local authorities were auditing the level of provision and need across Wales, the results were unlikely to be published in the near future and therefore we decided to gain a picture of need by going directly to head teachers and college principals.



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Summary

This briefing reports on the findings from a snap survey — held over 8 days - of 167 head teachers and college principals (Heads) in Wales in January 2021, during a Covid-19 lockdown which has meant that school and college buildings are closed to all but vulnerable learners and the children of key workers. Most teaching and support is being carried out using blended methods, including online teaching. The survey asked Heads and Principals about the digital needs of their learners and barriers to delivering distance learning.

The results indicate a wide variety of circumstances among the schools and colleges that responded. Social barriers including low confidence, time and skills amongst parents for supporting their children and, in some cases, low engagement from families, were reported by many settings to be as important as a shortage of devices and broadband.

In more than half of settings over 90% of learners have access to a digital device, and in a quarter of schools and colleges *all* learners are reported to have access, but 12% of schools had at least 20% of learners without access. Colleges reported a range of 0-20% of learners without access to devices. Having shared, rather than exclusive, access to a device is common with more than half of learners sharing access in 36% of schools or colleges.

A wide range of barriers were reported, with the most common being that families had not been in contact with the school or college to make arrangements regarding digital access (which had occurred in 49% of settings), while 42% of settings did not have enough devices. In more than 52% of schools and colleges there were some households without access to the internet and in 46% there were some households with insufficient data allowances.

Free-text comments from Heads reveal that many have experienced success in engaging learners through employing a wide range of methods, including ensuring families have digital equipment, using a mix of live teaching and pre-prepared lessons to accommodate sharing of devices, and delivery of hard copy materials. Confidence and skills amongst staff to deliver blended learning has increased but at some cost to wellbeing amongst some due to the stress of rapidly changing requirements. Several expressed exasperation at physical barriers, including slow delivery of equipment from central government, despite funding being prioritised early in the pandemic, plus pressure from the public and media to deliver live lessons, which are reported to not always be in the best interests of learners.



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Methods

A short survey was developed and piloted with a head teacher before being shared via our schools network, and with support from Regional Education Consortia, Teaching Unions and local authorities. All Directors of Education were asked to share the survey with their schools and colleges. Many did, although two responded saying that they were already collecting this data and would share the findings with us in due course, rather than ask their Heads to complete further surveys. The survey was open for 8 days in mid-January 2021.

The survey provided the opportunity for school and college leaders to provide additional free-text comments and many took up this opportunity. An inductive approach was used to code and analyse these comments into key themes and they are used in this briefing to provide context for the statistics provided, as well as providing a deeper understanding of schools' and colleges' current efforts and the barriers they face.

167 school and college leaders in Wales from 19 local authorities responded to the survey and we are very grateful to them for taking the time to do this in the midst of a very challenging period. 162 respondents were from schools, representing 11% of schools in Wales¹. Thirty respondents were secondary school head teachers, representing 16% of secondary schools in Wales. There were 125 Primary school respondents (10% of primary schools), and the remaining seven school respondents were 3-18 schools, PRU and special schools. Five colleges responded, of which at least 2 were multi-campus colleges with campuses in several local authorities. This represents 38% of FE Colleges in Wales. We were pleased to have responses from schools/colleges across 19 out of 22 local authority areas. It should be noted that responses from settings in Rhondda Cynon Taf, Powys and Wrexham account for just over half of the responses (53% or 87 responses).

70% of settings responding to this survey were English-medium, 22% Welsh-medium, 8% bilingual, dual-stream or English with significant Welsh provision.

¹ [Schools' census results: as at January 2020 | GOV.WALES](#)



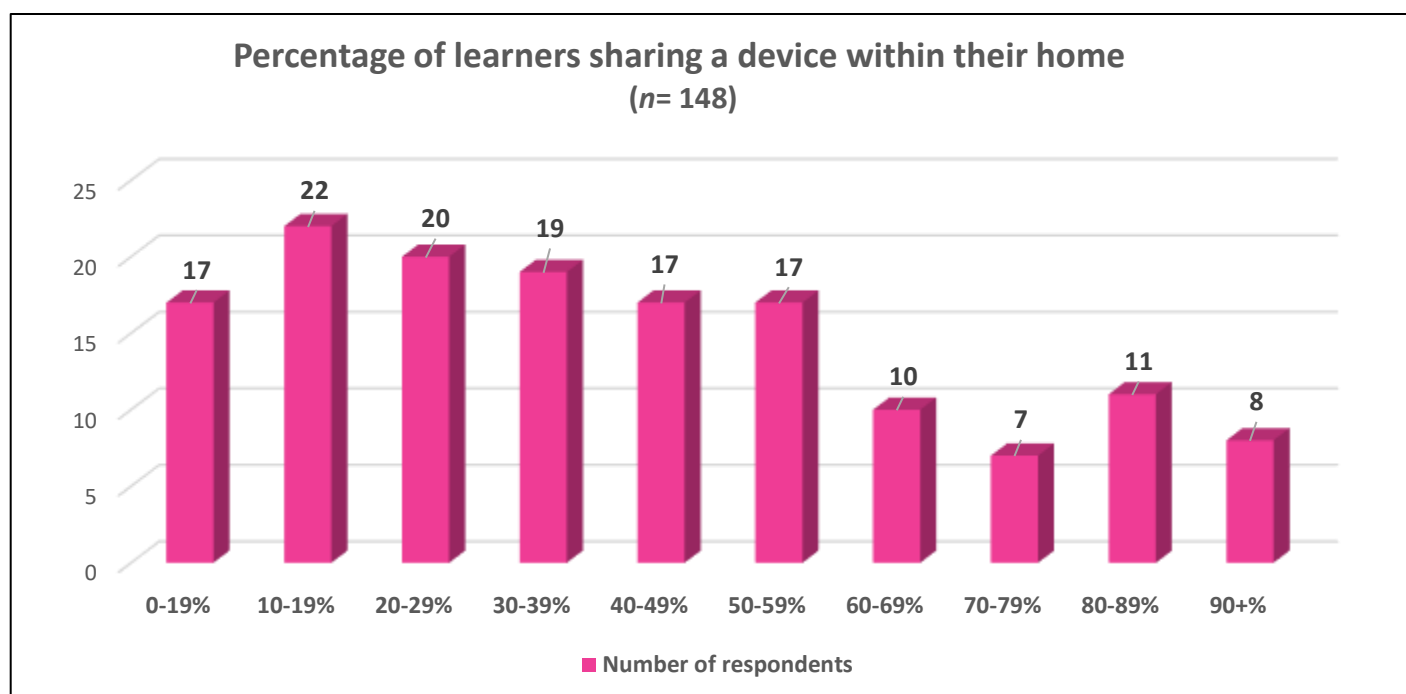
Quantitative findings

How many learners do not have access to a digital device?

It is positive to note that 101 responses (60%) indicated that fewer than 10% of their learners were without access to a device, with 44 responses (26%) indicating that all their learners have access to a device. However, twenty schools (12%) indicated that they have more than 20% of learners without access to a device. FE colleges reported a range of 0-20% of learners without access to a device.

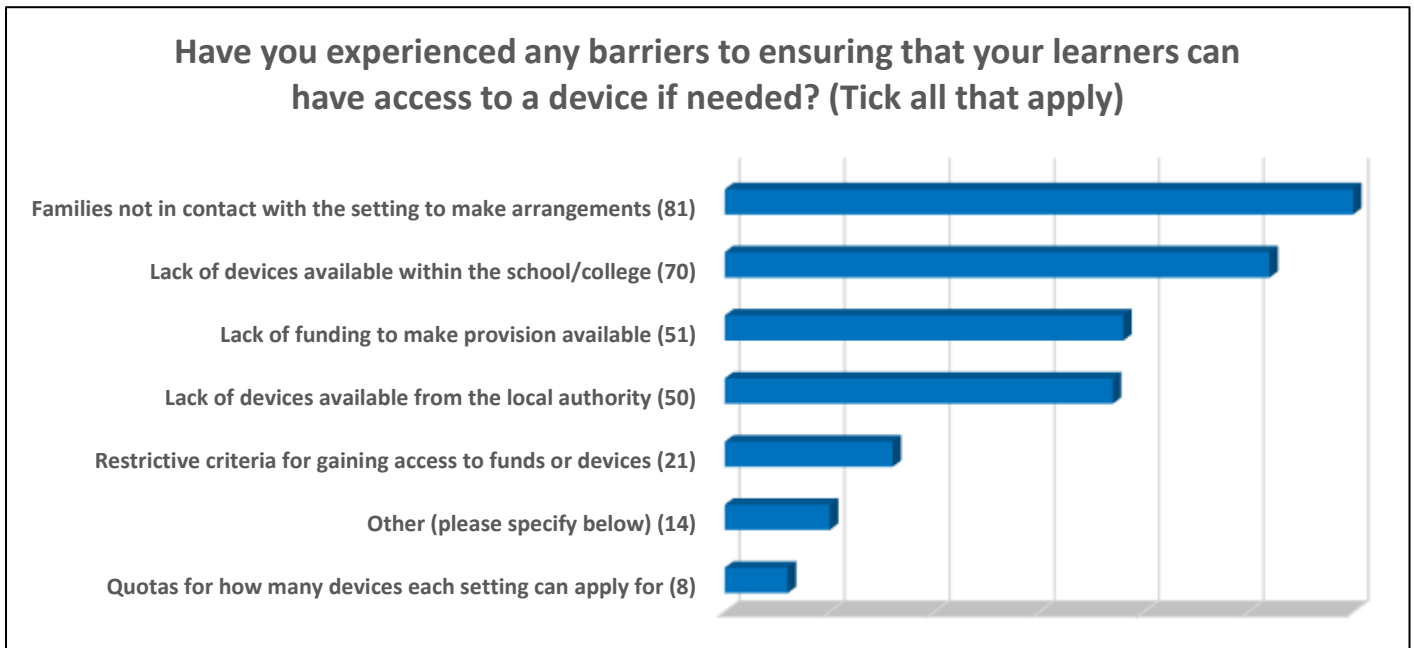
How many learners are *sharing* access to a digital device?

The majority of responses indicate that some proportion of their learners are sharing devices, so although there is access, it is on a shared basis. Only two responses indicated that devices weren't being shared within the family. The table below shows the wide range of circumstances in Wales's schools and colleges with 95 (64%) having fewer than half their learners sharing a device whereas in 53 (36%) schools and colleges more than half of learners share a device. 148 respondents completed this question.

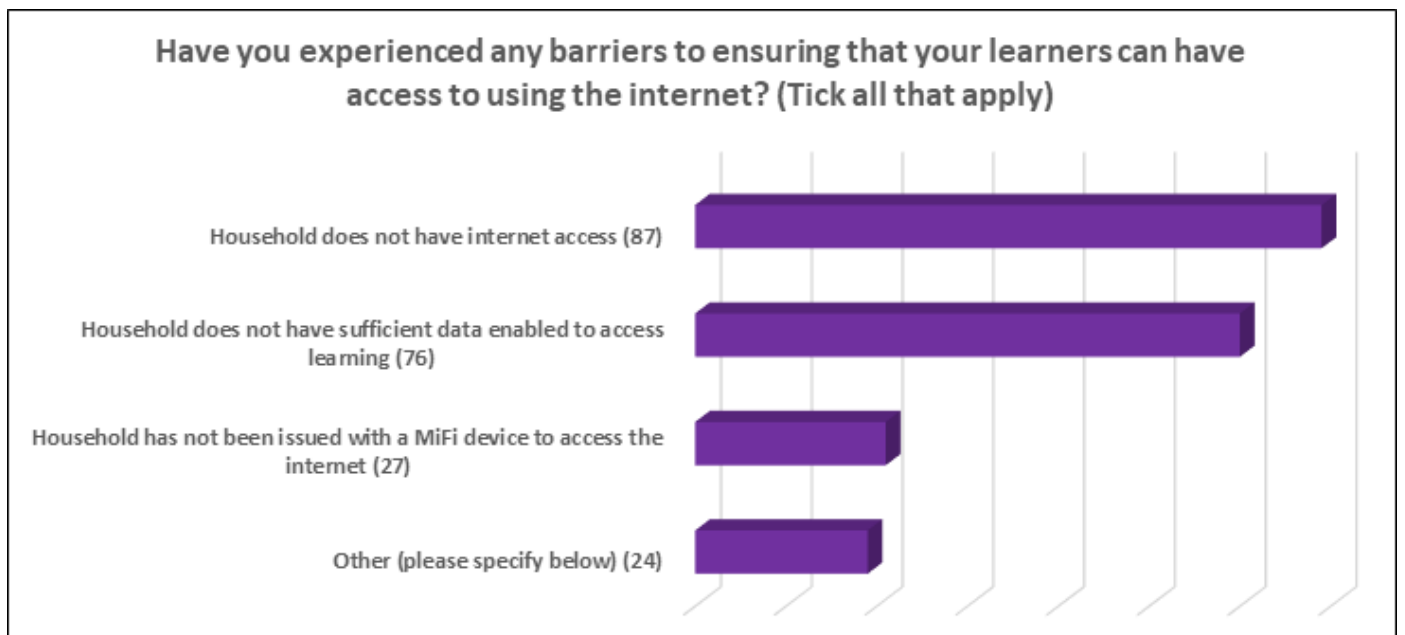


We asked about any barriers preventing learners having access to a device if needed, and the responses indicate that the most frequently cited concern was families not being in contact with settings in order to

arrange for provision to be made (81, or 49% of all settings), followed by a lack of devices available (71, or 42% of all settings).



We also asked about barriers to accessing the internet, and 87 of the 167 respondents (52%) indicated that some of their families do not have internet access, while 76 (46% of the 167 respondents) reported that some of their households have insufficient data to access learning.



In respect of the two local authorities that responded to us via email:

- One indicated that, in the first national lockdown, they had identified and provided for around 1,340 digitally excluded learners (this included 560 without suitable internet access). A similar audit was undertaken in this lockdown, and a further 798 learners were identified (of which 143 require internet access at home). Plans are in place to make provision for those learners.
- The other local authority reported that their position in January is that they have been able to supply all devices and Wifi to all learners who need them. 'Engagement is above 95% across the authority and our colleagues in the welfare services are supporting where needed so that no learner is left isolated. The high schools are leading the way with online live learning and primaries are providing a new curriculum style menu of engaging activities blended with basic core subject work.'

Qualitative Findings

A mixed picture is reflected in the free-text comments provided by Heads, with some noting that they had been able to supply all learners who needed it with devices and MiFi dongles, while others outlined a number of barriers and frustrations. The comments overall provide a rich picture of their efforts, successes and struggles in ensuring that their learners and staff are connected digitally in order to continue with their learning while the majority of pupils are asked to stay at home.

We were particularly struck by the huge and varied efforts schools and colleges reported making to provide for the varied needs of their pupils, to try to get them all online and to provide appropriate lessons and wellbeing support using a wide variety of methods. It was clear that many felt that media portrayals and public perceptions misunderstood the efforts being made, and that while live lessons are an important part of a mixed offer, they are by no means always the most effective way to meet learners' needs throughout the day.

Supply of devices

Free-text comments support the quantitative findings that some schools and colleges have been able to meet all of their identified need for digital devices. Successes in doing so included having enough equipment in-house, using college and school budgets to buy in extra supplies and good quality support from the local authority and through government funding.

"We have provided devices to all family who have requested them".

"We have now had sufficient numbers of laptops to ensure every household has access to ICT equipment"

"We have issued 1000 laptops to learners. We have additional devices to give to learners if necessary. We have budgeted for 1800 learners out of 4450 learners enrolled at the college"

"Mae'r awdudrod lleol wedi bod yn effeithiol iawn o ran cyflewni dyfeisiau a sicrhau fod gan bawb gysylltiad i'r we." ["The local authority has been very effective in providing devices and ensuring that everyone has an internet connection. "]

One school noted that they have physically delivered devices to children's homes where parents have been unable to collect them.

However, a number of significant challenges with ensuring there is enough supply remain. This includes the sheer level of need in areas of economic deprivation. There was some frustration expressed at the slow speed of supply to schools after placing orders months before with the Welsh Government or their local authority. A number of respondents commented that while they recognised the Government had

made funding available, the actual supply process had been slow. Although many spoke about excellent support from their local authority, there were also small numbers who felt that their local authority support had been poor, with slow turn-around of reconfigurations or repairs to devices.

"We placed a very large order using Welsh Government Grant funding for IT equipment... This order was done very early in the Autumn term and we are still waiting on this to arrive and not sure what is happening with this process."

"The Government gave all schools an impressive sum of money to purchase devices but these have been delayed in their delivery"

It was also noted by a number of respondents that some local authorities had prioritised certain groups for devices, due to the high demand. Priority groups, at least initially, included those on free school meals and older pupils in both primary and secondary schools. Where decisions have been taken to prioritise certain groups, it is likely that this is individual school or local authority policy, as this is not part of the criteria from Welsh Government's provision of funding for devices.

Increased demand

Many respondents noted that in the current lockdown, supply needs had increased considerably. This was due particularly to increased expectations of the educational offer, including far more live lessons, meaning that sharing devices was now more problematic. Many noted that secondary school pupils having all-day live lessons meant that their primary school siblings may have to wait until later in the day to access a device, effectively making it very difficult to offer more than short live sessions during the school day for these younger pupils without supplying more devices. An increasingly sophisticated educational offer also meant that access via mobile phones is less satisfactory in the current lockdown.

"We purchased extra chromebooks and have lent these out to families who don't have a device, but many children are sharing devices with siblings or parents working at home. Parents report that secondary pupils are being required to attend live distance learning sessions which leaves little time for them to supervise younger siblings."

Broadband and data

- Poor quality internet in local area

Although a few respondents said that there were no internet issues affecting their learners, several schools report issues with poor broadband and signals in their area:

"The internet connection in our area is very slow and weak. Most pupils are not connected to fibre optic. I have been supplied with MiFi devices that could be provided to families, but the mobile signal is poorer than the broadband, so these have been of no use. This does restrict the way that learning can be provided and the accessibility of it."

"Poor connection in mountain areas locally"

- Data deficit

A number of respondents stated that it was unfair that children in England had better deals than children here in Wales on free data for educational materials. This referred to a BBC story that ran while the survey was open². It should be noted that one broadband supplier, BT, contacted the Commissioner after this story to explain that there was a real desire to support children equally across the UK and they were taking steps to ensure this happened.

"A number of our learners live with grandparents or other family members who do not have unlimited data and they are having to borrow or share devices or tether/hotspot to complete work. We would really value access to educational websites and tools like Google G Suite and Google Classroom being exempt from mobile data caps for as long as the pandemic impacts severely on schools. It's hugely unfair that advances have been made in England with this. We also have a diverse blended learning offer (ranging from live lessons, to prerecorded explanations, to written material) however some of this is very data hungry."

"There is very poor connectivity in the area, lots of parents have pay as you go phones and are on very low incomes, therefore pupils at times cannot access anything until the parent has put more credit on their phone"

"From a schools perspective it is absolutely vital that not only all households but all pupils have access to appropriate devices and effective internet connection. We are a secondary school that serves a very socially and economically deprived area with around 35% of pupils being eligible for Free School Meals. The lack of devices and connectivity has had a huge impact upon the remote learning provision that we have been able to put in place. A huge amount of staff time and money is been spent on producing hard copy resources and packs and distributing them to the digitally excluded and our online learning programme has been hampered due to the amount of pupils who are still digitally excluded. Regardless of the COVID pandemic this aspect has to be a top priority for Welsh Government and would be huge step forward with regards to narrowing the poverty gap and opportunities."

Home environment

Many Heads took the opportunity to explain that connecting with learners is not simply a matter of having equipment and broadband but that social factors play a huge role too. Some excellent support from families was noted but many commented on a range of issues, including parents' or carers' lack of IT or education skills and confidence, families not responding to multiple and varied attempts at contact, difficulty in maintaining routines, and parents juggling homeworking and multiple children.

The following quotation illustrates the range of circumstances children in one school may face:

"A variety of circumstances in varying homes - some access the internet via their phone (often with limited data) whilst other families have devices for each child in the house."

The following quotations list the range of challenges families face in some of the schools in more socio-economically deprived areas. There were many more quotations making similar points:

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-55666647>

“Even when we get devices to homes, where there is overcrowding of homes it is really difficult for children to have quiet access. Electricity costs can be an issue, as well as families which struggle to create a routine. We have families of up to 8 children, some secondary, some primary. It is very difficult for adults to manage the day to enable children to access appropriately. Some parents also have poor literacy/ numeracy and ICT skills and struggle to help and support the learners. Some parents won’t encourage children to engage even where we have provided devices, support and internet connection.”

“Teachers are working extremely hard to engage children and are doing so through daily online learning and at least weekly phone calls. We also provide printed copies of the activities for those families who prefer paper copies of the learning. We are in a deprived area (74% EFSM³) and a significant barrier for some children in our school community is that some parents don’t support or encourage them to engage with their online learning. We try to overcome this through regular phonecalls to parents, and encouraging the most vulnerable to attend school.”

Some Heads noted that engagement had increased in the current lockdown compared to last spring, but others stated that it had deteriorated with many parents feeling stressed about issues including loss of income.

“Anodd cael cyswllt gyda rhai cartrefi. Dim ymateb gan y plentyn na’r rhiant” [“Getting in contact with some households has been difficult. No reply from the child or the parent”]

“Many families are showing much more stress in parents in this lockdown compared to the last one. We are having increased numbers requesting places in school and many more families admitting their struggles.”

While most barriers relating to parental engagement related to lack of confidence or lack of response, small numbers also mentioned some parents having unrealistically high expectations of all-day live lessons, for example. One Head noted that they had even had parents monitoring and interrupting lessons for secondary pupils, something that was particularly disconcerting for newly qualified teachers.

Provision for learning at home

In the responses it was notable that schools and colleges that responded to this survey have worked hard to develop their online and distance learning and support offer. A wide range of methods are being used to engage learners, including live and pre-recorded lessons, activities via online platforms, hard copy packs of material delivered to the home, wellbeing phone calls and encouraging more vulnerable pupils to attend school.

The following are examples, but there were many similar quotations:

“Mae HWB a TEAMS wedi bod yn arbennig, felly diolch LLC. Mae dysgu arlein yn ystod yr ail cyfnod clo wedi bod yn llwyddiannus. Rydyn nawr yn cynnig 2 sesiwn y dydd yn ogystal a chynnig sesiynau ymarfer corff byw tair gwaith y dydd a sesiynau canu/meddylfryd o dwf ddwywaith. Rydyn wedi gallu cynnig sesiynau byw i blant ADY a phlant targed yn iaith a Mathemateg yn ogystal a wedi cynnig sesiynau lles i grwpiau bychain o blant. Rydw i’n hynod hapus gyda adborth rhieni hefyd gyda canran uchel iawn yn ymrwmo i’r gwersi byw ac mae’r holiaduron yn dangos bod y disgyblion a’r rhieni/gwarchodwyr yn hapus iawn. Mae’r plant Gweithwyr allweddol a’r plant bregus hefyd yn ymrwmo i’r gwersi byw o’r

³ eFSM refers to Eligibility for Free School Meals

ysgol.” [“Hwb and Teams have been amazing, so thank you Welsh Government. Online learning during the second lockdown has been successful. We are now providing two sessions a day, as well as providing live PE sessions three times a day, and singing/growth mindset sessions twice. We can provide live sessions for ALN pupils and target pupils in language and maths, and we have provided wellness sessions for a small group of children. I’m very happy with the feedback from parents as well, with a very high percentage committing to the live lessons, and the questionnaires showing that the pupils and parents/carers are very happy. Key workers’ children and vulnerable children are also committing to the live lessons from school.”]

“We have developed our online learning as the months have gone on based on Parent Surveys, discussions with staff and pupils. We believe we now have an effective Blended Learning offer for all pupils which has excellent engagement. All staff offer support for all families who require additional support with online learning.”

Pros and cons of live lessons

Many respondents took the opportunity to comment on the pressures to provide ‘live’ online lessons when this may not be the right method for engaging learners, unless as part of a mixed approach. Reasons included learners sharing devices and not being available at the time of the lesson, and some pupils finding it easier to understand when they can rewind videos or look through supporting written information. Some benefits of live lessons highlighted include the possibility for interaction and the benefits to wellbeing for pupils when they can interact with the teacher and classmates.

The following sums up issues, which were raised by a number of respondents:

“Parents are accessing more copies of paper packs this time around. Recorded lessons have been very well received and in my opinion have greater worth and are easier for parents to manage than live streamed lessons, which are very time restrictive. Parents like the ability to be able to rewind and have a point explained again and visit a lesson when it suits them to be able to support it. Live streaming prevents that and can mean that several children in the same family are all in need of the parental support at the same time. Live streaming has its benefits in terms of checking up on children and they like the interaction, but responses from our parents are that they prefer the recordings. Differentiation is also easier with recordings. Pupils are less likely to say they don’t understand during a live streamed lesson than they would be in class where it may be done more discreetly.”

Several Heads feel that the public perception of live lessons doesn’t necessarily meet the reality of what is best for pupils and are frustrated by the public debate, as illustrated by this quote:

“It is somewhat frustrating that those with a media presence, the press, and some politicians are heavily promoting live lessons as a gold standard when the research and evidence simply does not support this and there is far more nuanced and context specific approach needed - in terms of the subject, curriculum and group.”

Several respondents comment that it is not appropriate for foundation phase pupils to be spending a lot of time every day on screens, although several mention that they do regular online ‘check-ins’ with the youngest pupils. The following quote made us smile:

'Team meetings with Reception - hilarious!'

Frustrations about media portrayals and public perceptions

Frustration about public perceptions is not solely related to live lessons, but also to a misunderstanding of the sheer hard work that has gone into educational provision since the start of the pandemic. The following was echoed in several responses:

"It does frustrate the staff when the media paints a picture of lazy teachers and school staff. Our staff are doing everything in their power to provide a rich, mixed diet covering a range of subjects and activities. They provide a range of lessons using different pedagogy. We have live lessons, prerecorded introductions, daily live catch ups for well-being purposes, and to address any misconceptions from previous lessons. There is independent work, live spelling and times table tests plus other curriculum lessons and activities. Staff are working harder than ever. Teachers don't want praise for doing their job; teaching isn't a job, it is a vocation. My staff want to do their best for each and every child whether that is having your class in front of you or teaching remotely. However, teachers, support staff and schools generally do not deserve the constant scrutiny and criticism they face in the media."

Some of this understandably has an impact on staff wellbeing:

"It is absolutely almost impossible for teaching staff to carry out online learning, work in the school based provision, conduct live lessons, provide feedback on children's work, work in the school based provision - my staff are working until VERY late each evening to ensure all this is done.... There is only so much force an elastic band can take before it snaps."

"This time around, I really do worry for the well-being of staff who are trying to juggle it all"

Staff skills and resources

"Staff and Students have become more confident with online learning - there are still issues with a minority of staff adopting new ways of working"

Another respondent said there were still training needs — but the general picture of the free text comments is that staff have developed the skills over the last few months and are able to offer a rich diet of blended learning.

Some mention staff connectivity at home and lack of equipment, at least initially, as being an issue, along with juggling their own caring responsibilities.

"Ffactor allweddol arall yw prinder offer i staff ac mae hyn yn cael effaith arwyddocaol ar y ddarpariaeth. Mae'r cyfarwyddyd yn parhau i staff beidio defnyddio dyfeisiadau eu hunain ac felly rhaid blaenoriaethu offer i staff addysgu Cymru." ["Another key factor is the lack of equipment for staff, and this has a notable effect on the provision. The instruction persists that staff should not use their own devices, and so we must prioritise equipment for Wales' education staff."]

Conclusion

This report demonstrates that a digital divide remains in Wales for learners, although this is much more significant in some schools and colleges than others. While huge efforts have been made at a national, local authority and school or college level to get devices and data/MiFi to learners there remains some frustration at the supply of devices after need has been established many months before.

It is also clear that social factors are hugely important in understanding the barriers to engaging children and young people in online learning. Many parents lack time, skills, confidence or even physical space to have all of their children learning at once via 'live' lessons, in addition to challenges of shared devices, lack of data and poor connections. Some families are reported to not engage at all in online learning and there will be many factors associated with that.

Schools and colleges who responded to this survey report huge efforts to provide a varied and engaging educational and support offer, with the strain of rapid changes in expectations reported to be showing amongst some staff. There are frustrations about 'live' teaching being expected by the public and media as a 'gold standard' when it is only one tool for effective learning at this time.

Suggested improvements

1. Local authorities and Welsh Government should consider the findings of this report alongside their own current audit to ensure remaining local devices supply issues are resolved without delay.
2. Whilst acknowledging efforts in rolling out Mifi devices, gaps remain. To ensure Wales-wide coverage, Welsh Government should progress with urgency their discussions with major UK mobile and broadband providers so that offers to English counterparts are extended to learners in Wales.
3. Whilst there are clear immediate improvements required, Welsh Government should work on improving connectivity, access to digital devices and digital skills and confidence amongst parents and carers across the country for the longer term. Education relies on learners being able to study independently at home and the pandemic has reinforced social and educational inequalities. Digital inclusion is one of the routes towards ensuring that every child has an equal chance to reach their full potential.

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