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National overview of practice in remote learning

Local authorities

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Introduction

In December 2020, the First Minister announced that most children and young people would learn remotely, rather than in school buildings, until Monday 18 January 2021. On 4 January 2021, the First Minister confirmed that school buildings would close to the majority of children and young people, until at least 1 February 2021. On 19 January 2021, it was announced that this period of remote learning was to be extended until at least 15 February 2021. These arrangements remain under regular review.

In January 2021, the Deputy First Minister requested that HM Inspectors of Education (HMIE) develop a national overview of practice in the delivery of remote learning through engagement with local authorities, schools, parents, and children and young people. These reviews will continue throughout the period of remote learning.

The purpose of this national overview is to:

- Learn what is working well and share this widely to celebrate success and support consistency in the quality and effectiveness of delivery of remote learning.

- Surface the challenges and/or issues so that these can be addressed, either locally or nationally, as appropriate.

- Identify what further assistance is required to continue to improve the delivery of remote learning so that relevant support can be provided at local and/or national level.

The overview also provides an opportunity to learn from evidence about the delivery of high quality remote learning in the current context to help shape how we deliver remote learning experiences beyond Covid-19.

This report is the first in a series of weekly overviews of practice in remote learning and focuses on local authority planning and guidance. It contains comments made by local authority representatives during discussions with HM Inspectors and examples to help illustrate some of the work taking place.

2. Approach to engagement with local authorities

During the week beginning 11 January 2021, HMIE reviewed local authority planning and guidance for remote learning and engaged in professional dialogue with all local authorities about their approach to the delivery of remote learning. Local authorities were asked to identify key staff to engage in this discussion. This engagement enabled HMIE to:

- draw out common themes;

- exemplify approaches being used to address local need including local authority support; and

- identify further support needs and any areas for improvement required.

3. Findings

Local authority plans and guidance for remote learning

"Schools are using their previous experience well from the first school closure to develop positive strategies for remote learning."

In March 2020, local authority officers and practitioners across Scotland had to respond quickly to ensure children and young people could continue learning at home and in hubs during the initial Covid-19 lockdown. The system shared a common goal in supporting children and young people to learn, keep safe and be healthy. The situation demanded an increase in the pace of change and decision-making, and called upon all to increase and improve skills and confidence in accessing and using digital tools and platforms. Local authorities and practitioners learned much along the way, as they acted to find solutions to ever-changing situations and challenges.

January 2021 continues to present challenges to the system as local authorities strive to ensure all children and young people access and engage in high quality remote learning. It is clear that local authorities have built on what they have learned, and have used the experience to support professional learning and reflection, and consider new ways of working. During the summer months, local authorities had developed plans as a contingency should provision of blended learning be required. This required collaboration within and across school communities and careful contingency planning to ensure agile and flexible arrangements for the provision of learning at all levels. Approaches to remote learning build on these plans and experiences.

"We can build on the message that remote learning is good, it's here to stay and we want to get better at it."

All local authorities have developed clear, high-level plans and guidance for remote learning that reflect their individual context and take account of local circumstances in both urban and rural settings. Some plans were updates of the local phasing delivery plans of June 2020.

Local authorities have shared these plans with schools and outlined clearly their expectation that individual schools use the guidance to develop their own planning of remote learning. They have set expectations that individual schools will design and deliver remote learning to reflect their own context and needs of learners. Local authorities used regular headteacher meetings and communications to emphasise these expectations. All local authorities had also shared their plans directly with parents and carers, often in the form of a parental letter, or online statement.

West Lothian Council told us about their remote learning guidance:

"We feel that we have developed a clear and helpful remote learning guidance document ensuring that there is a single point of reference for all staff. The guidance document clearly outlines Local Authority expectations, offers exemplars, and signposts practitioners to areas of further support or professional learning. Account has been taken of the secondary, primary and ASN contexts. This further enhances opportunities for practitioners to develop high quality remote learning opportunities."

At the time of engagement, all local authorities had not yet reviewed their plans against the recently published Education Scotland Remote Learning Guidance (8 January 2021). However, it is worth noting, that the majority of plans and guidance already reflect the themes outlined in this guidance. Most incorporate guidelines on pedagogical approaches, in addition to guidelines on the safe use of internet, mobile technologies and electronic communications.

A few local authorities had acted promptly to raise awareness of the updated national guidance and to share the expectation that school leaders would use the guidance in their ongoing review of provision for remote learning. Local authority officers note that practitioners have demonstrated a positive commitment to doing things differently and this has created opportunities to develop new ways of working.

Access to remote learning

"We have moved 5 years forward in the last 10 months in terms of progressing digital learning."

"Remote learning offers us new, and for some pupils, sometimes better ways of learning and teaching."

All local authorities have taken steps to improve children's and young people's access to remote learning. A few previously had very well developed implementation plans to increase individual learner access to digital tools and devices. These local authorities were well-placed to respond quickly to the need to support online and remote learning.

All local authorities provide access to platforms for online remote learning. These vary across Scotland. Almost all local authorities use Glow with schools accessing a wide range of online resources such as recorded lessons, exemplar material and additional support needs resources and materials. Local authorities report that data indicates that these resources are being used by increasing numbers of class teachers to shape learning activities. A few local authorities have developed local digital platforms, including virtual learning environments and virtual schools or academies. These are providing learners with the opportunity to access learning at times that best suit them and allow for reinforcement and extension of learning.

West Dunbartonshire Council told us about their virtual campus:

"Our virtual campus has been up and running for a number of years and has been part of the digital improvement strategy since 2012. As a result, staff have access to a wide range of resources and lessons they can use to support remote learning. All staff, parents and children are familiar with the virtual campus as they have been using it as part of their learning for some time. We believe the range of lessons and activities within the campus are of high quality and linked clearly to appropriate age and stage of children. For example, reading lessons are indicated with a colour to ensure children and parents access material at an appropriate level of challenge for their children. The range of material ensures children have access to a broad general education across the curriculum."

The Highland Council told us about the Highland Virtual Academy:

"At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, The Highland Council recognised the need to focus on the health and wellbeing of children, young people and families. As a result, the Highland Virtual Academy was reconfigured to provide remote learning and bespoke support for children and young people who find it challenging to engage with their own school and with learning at home. The Highland Council utilised Covid-19 Recovery Funding to deploy an experienced headteacher, a principal teacher and 12 FTE primary and secondary teachers to staff the Virtual Academy. An online referral system is in place for schools across Highland, where teachers who have concerns about pupils not engaging in remote learning. At present, around 100 children and young people attend the Highland Virtual Academy daily, with numbers rising."

All local authorities have considered issues of digital inequity and have used their resources to support access to digital tools and Wi-Fi for learners. Local authorities have provided many learners with personal devices. All have utilised additional funding, from both Scottish Government and council budgets, including the Digital Inclusion Grant to purchase digital tools for learners and staff. In a few local authorities, effective partnership with colleges and universities, and local businesses has supported the provision of refurbished digital devices.

All local authorities are experiencing challenges in relation to the sufficiency and supply of information and computing technology resources, including devices and Wi-Fi access for learners and staff. Local authorities are aware that, in some cases, children and young people have access to only a single, shared device within the home, which is supporting the learning

of a number of children. In a few local authorities, a number of teaching staff do not yet have access to appropriate digital resources, including laptops, to support remote learning.

The demand for devices has increased significantly and local authorities are making every effort to procure and supply devices as quickly as possible. Local authorities welcome the additional funding made available to them for staffing and equipment, however, many are encountering difficulties in sourcing and purchasing IT devices, and are also experiencing delays within the supply chain. This is impacting on the ability of local authorities to ensure equity of access to digital resources for all children and young people.

Digital connectivity is a challenge in a number of areas, and in particular the most remote and rural localities. Poor bandwidth and digital infrastructure, and unreliable connectivity for teachers and children and young people are limiting access to online approaches to remote learning. Where this is an issue, and where children and young people cannot access devices, local authorities are taking steps to ensure learners acquire resources to support learning at home. This includes delivering learning packs to children's homes, providing a safe 'collection point' in school buildings and leaving resources for pick up locally.

Engagement with parents and carers

"We accept that we are working with a spectrum of parental perceptions, including those who expect a full curriculum experience to be replicated remotely."

All local authorities acknowledge that engagement with parents and carers is an important feature of supporting learning and health and wellbeing and report that this has improved since the previous lockdown. Local authorities are clear about their expectation that schools are in regular contact with parents about arrangements for remote learning. They are finding parental expectation regarding both remote learning and in-school attendance challenging. For example, local authorities report an increase in the number of vulnerable children and children of key workers who are attending school. Local authorities also highlight that some parents expect remote learning to mirror their child's in-school experience.

Local authorities are acutely aware of the pressures and demands on families as lockdown continues. For some this may be related to unemployment or working from home. For other families they may not feel confident in supporting their child's learning at home.

All this can combine to create unrealistic expectations of remote learning. The management of parental expectations is an ongoing issue that local authorities are taking steps to address through regular communication and awareness raising.

All local authorities describe the range of partners involved in supporting the work of schools to meet the needs of families and children and young people during remote learning. Most local authorities have been proactive in developing effective partnership approaches to support wellbeing and safeguarding. They have made good use of services such as educational psychology and community partners to provide online support and clear signposting to advice and guidance for practitioners, children and young people and their families. This includes guidance for staying safe online, coping with bereavement and loss and support for children with additional support needs. Other examples include initiatives such as, a helpline for parents and parental support groups to help parents deal with conflict around home learning, and other challenges as a result of the pandemic.

Dumfries and Galloway Council told us about their approaches to engaging with parents and carers:

"Our teachers issue learning plans and weekly overviews of learning in order that children, young people and parents know what learning is planned. This is helping children and young people to engage in planning their own learning and enabling parents to give support where they can."

Professional Learning

"Let's not waste a crisis! There is a healthy appetite across our schools to see where remote learning can go next. I am so impressed by the creativity and innovation our staff are showing in their daily interactions with learners."

Local authorities note that experiences during the previous lockdown required them to act promptly to upskill staff. Practitioners have participated in self-evaluation activities to reflect on their skills and further training needs. For example, a group of local authorities has been participating in a digital skills needs analysis. Local authorities report that most practitioners used the period of time between lockdowns to take stock and evaluate their own and children's experiences of remote learning.

All local authorities have offered ongoing professional learning activities for staff to support the development and delivery of remote and digital learning. This includes the provision of local authority and locality wide professional learning opportunities and signposting staff to online learning and resources. There has been an increased focus on 'how' to deliver good quality learning, rather than 'what' is delivered. In some local authorities, a dedicated team has responsibility for taking forward this work across the local authority. In addition, some local authorities have local school 'champions' who support staff in the use of digital technologies to further develop learning and teaching. While a range of different approaches have been put in place, local authorities acknowledge that some staff feel that they do not yet have the necessary skills and confidence to deliver remote learning effectively. The use of remote learning technologies and pedagogies by staff is variable as a result.

Dundee City Council told us about their approach to supporting schools with digital aspects of remote learning:

"The Dundee Digital Learning Team (funded by the Scottish Attainment Challenge) has played a critical role in supporting schools and placing learning resources on GLOW. It has also set up a useful Dundee Digital Learning Hub. This is a public facing portal for parents which includes advice on the available learning platforms. The team is able to respond to individual schools and support council wide developments."

Glasgow City Council shared with us the range of resources available to staff to support professional learning and the delivery of remote learning:

"All schools have access to Glow and are using the wide range of resources provided by our teams across the city. These include online support, recorded lessons and exemplars from the English as an Additional Language Team, Glasgow Dyslexia Service support materials, Glasgow Improvement Challenge resources, curriculum frameworks, planners, STEM daily challenges, Glasgow CREATE online expressive arts and music tuition."

Local authorities reported that staff welcome the sign-posting of suitable teaching and learning resources and approaches to remote learning and would appreciate further support for providing remote learning for children and young people with additional support needs, and the most vulnerable young people or those experiencing mental health issues.

Local authorities would benefit from access to examples of highly effective practice in remote learning and associated professional learning opportunities about what is working well and why. Many local authorities have identified that staff would benefit from sharing of practice in relation to assessment, and tracking and monitoring of children's and young people's learning, so that they can ensure learners are making progress. They acknowledge that more needs to be done to track learners' engagement in learning as a foundation for evaluating the success of remote learning strategies.

Children's and young people's engagement and participation

All local authorities are committed to ensuring that all learners engage with remote learning opportunities and participate in high quality learning experiences. Learning from the previous lockdown, local authorities feel better equipped to record and monitor online engagement.

The various digital platforms in use offer a range of analytical tools, enabling local authorities to track and monitor learner engagement. Local authority officers are cautious about being overly reliant on quantitative data and continue to evaluate the reliability of the information gathered. They recognise that simply being 'logged on' does not necessarily reflect participation or quality of learning. Local authorities have identified the need to ensure schools monitor engagement and participation across cohorts of learners to identify key groups for targeting support and action. This includes children and young people with additional support needs and other barriers to learning.

Local authorities also highlighted challenges in ensuring appropriate provision for pupils with additional support needs and for those in the early years given the significant levels of support required to access resources and activities.

Aberdeen City Council told us about their success in monitoring learner online engagement:

"We have improved our expertise in using the analytics that their chosen digital platform provides, in order to inform decision making at strategic level. Interpretation of the data allows central staff to pinpoint where support for remote learning is needed, and also where innovation is evident. Through our effective use of analytics and available data, education officers monitor on a daily basis the usage and engagement of remote learning across the authority. We are pleased that daily figures routinely demonstrate around a 95% pupil engagement across all schools. In one day this week, over 6000 individual posts to our learning platform were recorded. The analytical data can also be used at cluster, individual school, class and pupil level."

An important feature of engagement with learners is regular direct contact from staff with individual children and young people. This sustains and builds on relationships between home and school, and offers opportunity to monitor the health and wellbeing of learners. A number of local authorities describe a range of daily or regular 'check in' approaches being used by schools. However daily contact with learners is not yet a consistent feature of practice across all local authorities.

Almost all local authorities report that they are concerned about the impact of school closures and remote learning on young people's access to learning and teaching leading to certification in the senior phase. They advise that many secondary teachers are concerned, particularly about how to generate appropriate assessment evidence from young people in the senior phase during periods of school closure. Local authorities also indicate that teachers are concerned that current arrangements are having a negative impact on the motivation of young people in the senior phase to engage fully in remote learning.

Aberdeenshire Council told us about an example of how one secondary school manages check ins, illustrating how the school is responding to guidance:

"In Banff Academy, all teachers have pastoral responsibility for a small 'squad' of young people. Each teacher knows the learners in their squad well, and has daily check-ins with the group. Each morning begins with the squad meeting face-to-face online. This provides an appropriate means for daily registration, but also helps to foster a sense of community and belonging which is very important for the morale, motivation and mental wellbeing of learners. These 30 minute sessions at the start of each day allow teachers to have oversight of each learners' remote learning programme over time, and also provides a safe space for young people to discuss any concerns or key issues that affect them."

Interactive learning

"Staff are not only flying the plane, they are building a new aircraft."

"What we are learning about remote learning will follow on from the pandemic."

Whilst it is recognised that remote learning will not replicate face-to-face in-school teaching in style, approach or duration of delivery, there is an expectation that children and young people experience regular high quality interactive learning and teaching using technology or other remote methods. This should comprise a balance of 'live' learning and independent activity. In emerging good practice, timetables include a range of 'live' learning, recorded lessons and tasks and activities for learners to complete independently or collaboratively with their peers, increasingly across all areas of the curriculum. All local authorities outlined how they are providing a range of home learning materials with hard copy packs available to supplement online learning.

Local authorities acknowledge that whilst many children and young people have access to 'live' learning within the remote learning offer, this is not yet consistently available to all. For example, local authorities report that many teaching staff in primary schools are regularly using technology and applications such as 'seesaw', and 'class dojo' to engage children remotely. These approaches are received positively by children and families, however the software tools do not offer the facility for 'live' learning. Local agreements between a number of local authorities and professional associations is resulting in 'live' learning only being provided on a voluntary basis. Overall, there is more work to be done to ensure that children and young people experience a balance of live and independent learning activities that will support progress in their learning.

Local authorities report that the pace of change to remote learning delivery has been and continues to be, very challenging for staff. They are aware that some teachers are finding it very difficult to navigate their way through the plethora of resources and support available and describe feeling overwhelmed. In turn, all local authorities express concern that the stress levels of teaching staff have increased since the previous lockdown, with many teachers caring for or home schooling their own children whilst continuing to deliver remote learning to their pupils. Overall, there is a view that there is more angst within the teaching profession and that teachers are more anxious than they were during the previous lockdown. As a result, all local authorities are taking steps to support the wellbeing of teaching staff.

South Ayrshire Council told us about arrangements in Kyle Academy and Troon Primary School:

> "Kyle Academy has high expectations of all learners to engage and participate in remote learning. They offer a structured day with three double length sessions per day for senior phase pupils and six sessions per day for the broad general education. Flexibility is key with the provision of a mixture of live and recorded lessons as well as independent activities. The school has a consistent approach to monitoring engagement and following through on those not engaging. A series of online one to one sessions, and groups, for vulnerable learners has been arranged to ensure engagement.
>
> Troon Primary School staff are providing a range of live and recorded lessons. They are encouraging children to return their work for feedback. Staff engage regularly with parents to ensure the school meets the needs of children and their families. As a result parents are supportive of their approach to online learning."

Assuring high quality remote learning

Local authorities are clear about the expectation that schools will deliver high quality remote learning at a local level to meet the needs of their children and young people. All local authorities can describe how they are supporting and encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice and adapt their approaches to remote learning accordingly. However, overall, approaches to assuring the quality and delivery of remote learning are not yet fully developed.

Prior to Covid-19 most local authorities had well established, ongoing approaches to ensuring the quality of provision across their schools and settings. It is recognised that the demands of supporting schools during the pandemic has had an impact on the capacity of centrally based staff to sustain their normal support and challenge roles. Nevertheless, it is essential that mechanisms are in place to assure the quality and delivery of remote learning by schools and that the needs of every child and young person are met.

A few local authorities have already adapted their existing quality assurance processes to have a clear focus on ensuring that high quality remote learning and teaching is experienced by all learners. However, most local authorities acknowledge that further work is needed to ensure a consistent approach to the delivery of high quality remote learning across all schools and by all teaching staff.

Glasgow City Council told us about their approach to quality:

"We continue to raise expectations of quality. Our next step in the coming week is to carry out a deeper dive into provision in each school. Quality Assurance of what is being delivered is critical in ensuring we have consistently high standards for the entitlement for each individual child and young person. Link officers will be leading this work and we will be gathering in the findings which will allow us to be in a better position to target support."

Renfrewshire Council told us about their approach to assuring quality of remote learning:

"Education Managers meet fortnightly with headteachers which provides a helpful platform for sharing of effective practice, and for collaboration and problem solving. All of the Education Managers have visited their schools twice since August, either in person or virtually, with a clear focus for the purpose of each visit. The first focused on wellbeing of staff and learners, and the second focused on attainment and achievement and how prepared schools were for remote learning. Discussions about approaches to quality assuring remote learning, teaching and assessment is underway and this will be a focus of the third visit due this term."

A number of local authorities have identified a need for support in relation to quality assurance and evaluation of remote learning experiences. In addition, whilst the range of support available to headteachers is acknowledged and welcomed, a few local authorities feel that staff in central support roles would benefit from access to similar support which is tailored to their roles and responsibilities in supporting quality and improvement in remote learning.

4. Recommendations

- **Ensure local authority planning, guidance and delivery for remote learning is updated to reflect the entitlements and expectations published on 8 January 2021.**

- **Provide further professional learning for staff in local authorities and schools with a particular focus on the pedagogy of remote learning.**

- **Continue work to ensure equitable access to digital devices and online access for learners and staff.**

- **Provide ongoing communication and engagement with parents about what remote learning is and the approach being taken by local authorities and schools to ensure a shared understanding.**

- **Continue to provide health and wellbeing support to learners, parents and staff.**

- **Develop and implement, at pace, approaches at local authority level to assure the provision of high quality remote learning delivered by individual schools.**

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