

## **National overview of practice in remote learning**

Approaches for providing learning  
for children and young people  
with complex learning needs

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## 1. Introduction

HM Inspectors of Education (HMIE) have been engaging with local authorities, schools, parents, carers and children and young people since January 2021 to provide a national overview of how remote learning is being delivered in schools across Scotland. The purpose of the national overview is to outline what is working well, and identify the challenges and what further support is needed to continue to improve the delivery of remote learning. In the initial phases of the national overview, six [reports](#) were published. These focused on planning, guidance and delivery of remote learning and how schools and local authorities are taking forward the expectations and entitlements outlined in the [remote learning guidance](#) published on 8 January 2021. The final report of this phase summarised what we have learned so far about what is working well in remote learning across Scotland and where there remains scope for reflection and improvement.

Phase three of the national overview focuses on taking a closer look at particular themes emerging from evidence published in previous reports. This report focuses on approaches taken by local authorities and schools to provide learning for children and young people with complex learning needs during the period of remote learning. Given the emphasis on complex learning needs, this report focuses on the approaches used to provide learning for children and young people with multiple learning needs and who are at the earliest stages of cognitive and all round development. It highlights examples of practice which illustrate what is working well in schools within five local authorities. The report includes comments made by school leaders and educators during professional dialogue with HMIE and detailed case studies to help illustrate examples of strong practice.

## 2. Approach to engagement with local authorities

HMIE engaged in professional dialogue with 17 schools in five local authorities which had been identified by local authority staff as exemplifying successful approaches to providing remote learning for children and young people with complex learning needs.

Professional dialogue with local authorities, school leaders and teachers focused on their approaches to providing learning for children and young people with complex learning needs. This aimed to:

- exemplify the steps local authorities and schools are taking to provide learning for children and young people with complex learning needs and to help overcome challenges.

This report contains case studies from some of the local authorities and schools involved. Additional case studies and supporting documentation will be published on national overview [‘Sharing what’s working well’](#) section of the Education Scotland website.

### 3. Findings

During this period of remote learning, it is recognised that high numbers of learners with complex needs access in-school learning either full-time or for part of their week. This report focuses on the experiences of those undertaking remote learning.

#### **Local authority approaches to improve experiences for learners with complex needs**

“National and local advice have been particularly helpful in ensuring quality, consistency and effectiveness of remote learning. In my authority, the autonomy given to headteachers has enabled me to make local decisions to support all children, particularly those with complex needs and their families.”

Through regular contact with schools, local authorities understand the challenges schools are facing and provide additional guidance and support to help address these. Headteachers report that they feel empowered by their local authorities to make decisions and implement strategies and approaches to best meet the needs of learners with complex needs. This includes, for example, considering the right balance of activities, and designing learning pathways to meet the needs of individuals. Whilst nationally provided digital hardware has been welcomed by schools, most identified challenges in installing specialised applications as a barrier to meeting learners’ needs. Local authorities have helped schools overcome these barriers through providing support from digital support staff to source alternative software which can be downloaded onto devices.

Local authorities have provided a range of professional learning opportunities to enhance the skills of staff. Opportunities to improve digital literacy skills have helped staff to better support learners with complex needs. For example, staff in one local authority have worked in partnership with CALL Scotland<sup>1</sup> to improve their knowledge and skills in the use of assistive technology. Staff have used this assistive technology to support children and young people with complex needs, including those with visual or hearing impairments. This has led to children and young people being more engaged in learning.

“The learning curve has been exponential since March for all staff. It’s been a long journey and we have undertaken a huge amount of professional learning to support this. Our buddy system and accessing support from mainstream colleagues as well as the local authority digital team have been really helpful.”

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<sup>1</sup> CALL Scotland is an organisation, primarily funded by the Scottish Government, which helps children and young people across Scotland to overcome disability and barriers to learning.

### Professional learning to support transitions

Orkney Islands Council recognise that transitions can be extremely challenging for children and young people with complex learning needs, particularly around the uncertainty of new environments and relationships with others. As a result of Covid-19, transitions for some learners have increased as they move between in-school learning and remote learning experiences. To support staff to minimise any negative impact of transitions, Orkney’s Educational Psychology Service (EPS) has created a programme of professional learning specifically tailored to supporting transitions for children and young people with complex learning needs. The EPS has trained staff in the use of Zones of Regulation. This approach centres on the use of low arousal interaction supported by visuals and appropriate devices. The use of Zones of Regulation has been effective in helping children and families to cope well with key transitions as a result of lockdown.

The guidance has influenced senior leaders in their approaches to designing learning opportunities, developing individualised packages of support and in how they approach staffing allocations to meet needs. They have redistributed specialist support for learning staff to work intensively with identified learners during this period of lockdown. This extra input is leading to children and young people being well prepared to returning to in-school learning.

Transition guidance is centred on the wellbeing of children and young people and the formation of positive relationships with parents. This has been especially useful during the period of lockdown as staff with specialities, for example, in autism or communication, work closely with families using video-conferencing to reinforce school programmes and help with self-care.

### Management of resources to meet individual needs

“We have been given no other choice over the past year, but to relentlessly focus our collective efforts on grasping more and more opportunities to ignite creativity and support leadership at all levels and ‘out of the box’ thinking - particularly around finding alternative and innovative solutions together in breaking down potential barriers to learning. One such area of innovation has been around the ongoing, creative use of digital technologies, to support learning and teaching.”

Local authorities and schools describe the progress they have made in ensuring that children and young people with complex learning needs have access to appropriate resources. Schools have provided individual learners with assistive technology, communication aids and digital equipment to support their specific communication needs and to interact digitally during learning. In some secondary schools, tablets with appropriate digital applications have replaced many specialist aids for communication and learning. For example, support has been provided for some learners and their families to access speech and language therapy, communication and physiotherapy exercises digitally. In order to increase opportunities for learners with complex needs to interact with their peers, children in one school have been provided with wireless switches and dongles to allow them to play specific learning games together. For some learners with visual or physical needs, access to learning via tablet or laptop display is challenging. To overcome this, in one secondary school, projectors and screens were sent home to enable learners to take part more effectively in online lessons. These approaches have increased engagement in learning and have enabled individual learners to make better progress.

Schools recognise that there are children and young people with complex needs who do not learn best through digital approaches. For these learners, physical packs containing tactile, sensory resources and learning aids have been developed and distributed. In one primary school, staff have worked closely with a communication support teacher to develop practical, visual and pictorial resources to aid improved communication. This includes visual timetables and social stories to support children and young people to make sense of their learning at home.

“Teachers know the children in their class very well and have used this knowledge to develop resources which can support parents to work with their child at home. Following feedback from parents, teachers refine and develop these resources approaches further to meet the needs of families.”

Case Study – Linburn Academy, Langlands Academy and Ashton School, Glasgow City Council

### Shared online hub to allow staff to share resources

Supported by their local authority, a group of schools for children and young people with complex learning needs created an online hub to support remote learning. Staff in these schools recognised the challenges in identifying appropriate resources and activities that parents could use easily to support learning at home. Working together, staff across these schools shared learning activities in music, art and physical education. These provided learners engaged in remote learning with a wider curriculum offer.

## Case Study – Linburn Academy, Langlands Academy and Ashton School, Glasgow City Council – continued

Staff in one school recognised the challenges parents faced in delivering physical education. They created and shared imaginative and enjoyable learning activities that were inclusive for children and young people with specific communication and mobility needs. Sharing these creative learning activities and resources has led to more children and young people engaging in high-quality physical education lessons across all three of the schools.

Teachers across the three schools report that the hub has supported them to plan and deliver high-quality learning experiences across all areas of the curriculum. Parents report that they are able to deliver these lessons at home and often enjoy participating in the tasks and activities alongside their child. The provision of these higher quality learning activities has had a positive impact on children's and young people's motivation and engagement with their learning.

The creation of the hub has resulted in improved collegiate working and collaboration among teachers and within the senior leadership teams. Senior leaders have developed opportunities for weekly meetings across the schools to share information related to remote learning and, most recently, the phased return of learners to school buildings. This has led to a shared approach across each of the schools built on previous successes and lessons learned from the previous lockdown.

## Personalised approaches to meet individual learning needs

“Not all children who have been learning at home have had a negative experience; many children and young people with autism spectrum disorders, and their parents, have reported improved mental health and better learning outcomes as a result of remote learning. How do we learn from this? How can we effect change in schools to ensure that all learners find school to be a positive experience?”

Schools plan learning for individuals, based on their own needs and interests, and according to targets in their individualised plans. This includes ensuring the appropriate balance of live and recorded lessons alongside independent and group-based learning appropriate to their individual needs. For example, some learners with complex needs need regular short episodes of learning and therefore, timetabled live learning does not best meet their needs. Others need familiar routines, to hear familiar voices and to work with known trusted adults. In one local authority, a flexible learning

individual pathway approach, originally developed to support disengaged learners, is being developed further to support learners with complex needs.

Schools describe how staff are deployed to provide targeted support for those learners who have the most complex needs. As a result of intensive support with individuals, support for learning staff are able to monitor how well learners are coping with different online environments. Through this, they can determine how well children and young people are engaging in learning, and report on progress. Support for learning staff describe how they coach and mentor some older learners to support them to meet a range of personal targets. In one school, following live learning input from teachers, learners and support staff engage in individual or small group work in a virtual breakout space. This replicates the physical classroom where one-to-one support and group work are an important part of consolidating learning. Teachers report that this approach enables them to better assess how well learners are understanding the learning and to provide support in a way which is tailored to their needs. Schools report that more targeted approaches like this, are helping children and young people with complex learning needs make better progress with their learning than during the first lockdown.

Most staff in schools describe how tailored approaches are enabling learners to improve communication skills. For example, approaches such as storytelling through the medium of a puppet show have helped learners better engage online. Although a range of approaches are being developed to provide individualised learning, some schools report that evaluating the progress of learners with complex needs during remote learning remains challenging.

“Some young people in school have really benefitted from this period of lockdown in regards to their learning. Many of our young people who have been accessing school have thrived in the quieter environment with less transitions. We need to learn from this moving forward. We have seen real progress in some of our learners over the lockdown periods.”

#### Case Study – Kingspark School, Dundee City Council

##### Supporting P1 learners

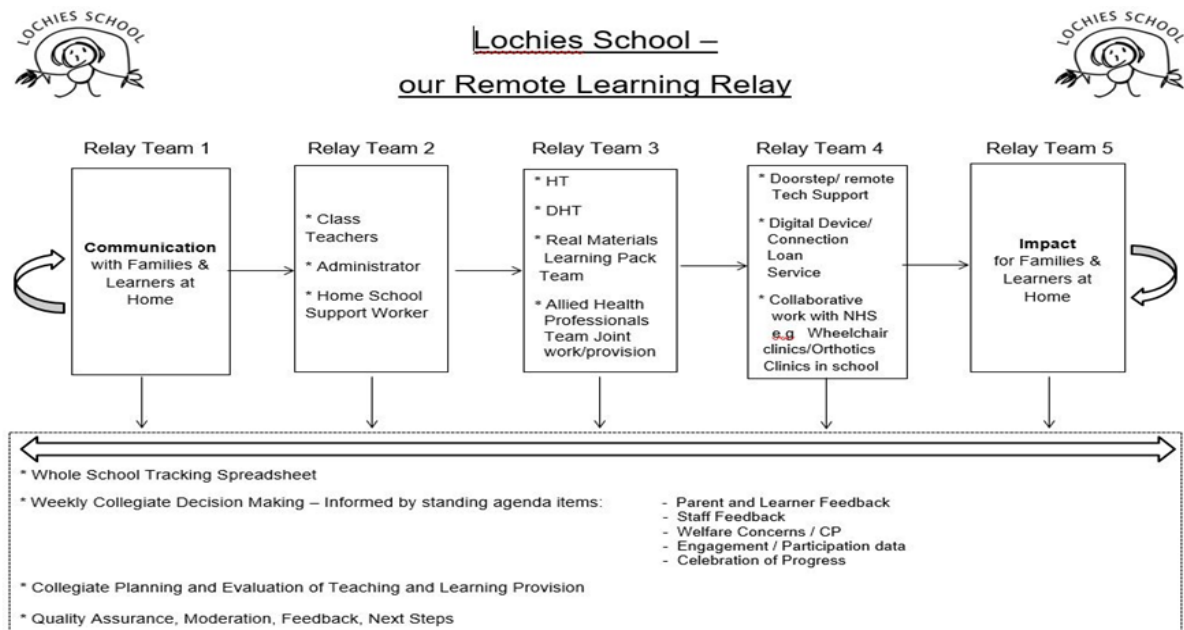
Using their knowledge of the individual needs of learners, teachers use a variety of remote learning activities to engage children fully in their learning at home. Children respond very well to carefully planned live and recorded learning sessions. Live sessions enable teachers to check in on their learners and families, talk through expectations for the day and ensure that children are happy, safe and ready to learn. This reduces anxiety amongst learners who require routine and structure to their school day.

## Case Study – Kingspark School, Dundee City Council – continued

Recorded lessons enable teachers to meet the individual needs of learners well. As a result, learners’ engagement in literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing sessions is consistently high. Teachers also offer a variety of social activities for children and parents focusing on life skills, arts and crafts, and outdoor learning. The effective use of online games, sensory stories, videos and links to learning broadcasts are capturing the interests of children and broadening their learning experiences. Children are supported to keep in touch with school life and maintain a sense of school community through, for example, online assemblies, a signing choir, and Hot Chocolate Friday. Staff often use a doorstep, socially-distanced talk-and-teach session to provide personalised learning activities for each child. Children enjoy these one-to-one sessions and spending time with their teachers and other staff. The school feels these arrangements and maintaining of relationships will support learners to cope with change and prepare them for successfully returning to in-school learning.

## Case Study – Lochies School, Clackmannanshire Council

### Planning, delivering and evaluating remote learning





## Case Study – Lochies School, Clackmannanshire Council - continued

The school has developed a framework ‘Lochies Remote Learning Relay’ which is helping the school to plan, deliver and evaluate the effectiveness of its remote learning offer. The approach is centred on the child and has a clear focus on providing learners with the opportunity to maintain where possible familiar daily routines with known adults. The headteacher deploys staff effectively to take leadership roles in the process. This ensures that each stage of the planning and delivery of learning is well structured, relevant and meaningful. Learning also takes account of learners’ preferred methods of learning and family circumstances.

Teachers are supported well by teams within the ‘Lochies Remote Learning Relay’ to communicate effectively with families in the way that is best suited to their needs and gather evaluations of learning. This allows teachers to respond to learner needs and personal circumstances and to overcome any potential barriers to learning. As result, learners are engaging well and families have been able to maintain positive and trusting relationships with the school.

Assessing progress and setting next steps in learning is a key step in the framework. Robust systems are in place to track and monitor engagement and participation across the week. High quality and focused professional dialogue with staff teams, combined with feedback received from parents and carers, is helping teachers to plan next steps in learning. It also supports senior leaders to monitor the effectiveness of the approaches to meet learner needs.

## **Working with parents to support children’s and young people’s learning**

“Feedback and learning taken from the last lockdown allowed me to greatly improve on all aspects of supporting families this time around. Our home learning was much more accessible and responsive to the progression and needs of both individuals and their families.”

Schools recognise the challenges faced by some parents in supporting their child at home including a lack in confidence in how to help their child access learning digitally. In addition, schools report that during this period parents have limited access to respite opportunities and out of school activities. This adds to the level of stress on many families. Ensuring parents can access support which, in turn, will help them to support their child with learning, is a priority in all schools. In some local authorities, family support workers are taking steps to support parents; while in others, schools have deployed staff with specialisms in, for example autism or communication, to work

directly with parents. Some schools have made use of online platforms to provide translations of resources and spoken videos. For example, in one local authority, this has included translating remote learning activities and guidance documents into British Sign Language.

There are examples of schools deploying support for learning staff to work with parents to explain ways to support their children with learning or help address challenges to using technology. This support is provided either remotely or through socially distanced discussions if it is safe to do so. Schools describe how these approaches have helped parents to improve their own skills as well as supporting their child's learning at home. Local authorities highlight that the use of videoconferencing has supported improved relationships with learners and with their families. In one local authority, this is a positive impact of Covid-19 which senior officers propose to continue post-pandemic to further increase parental involvement with planning and reviewing individualised targets.

Staff gather feedback from parents to help them understand the particular challenges faced when supporting their child's learning at home. Staff use the feedback to: adapt learning tasks; help parents to review their child's progress; and give guidance and advice. Many schools maintain a daily schedule during remote learning that is as close as possible to a child's or young person's usual timetable. This supports children and young people to maintain a familiar routine during a time of change, and continue to make progress in their learning. Schools have also found that providing parents with information which was personalised to their child has helped. They have also commented that relationships with parents have been strengthened as a result of more regular, high-quality and personalised communication.

#### Case Study – Alloa Academy, Clackmannanshire Council

##### **Approaches to support learners and their parents through increased communication**

Alloa Academy's Extended Additional Support Needs Faculty has been creative in its approaches to support learners and their parents during the period of remote learning. One key step taken by the school has been to significantly increase the regularity of communication with learners and their parents. Young people respond very well to regular phone calls, check-in sessions and physically distanced doorstep visits. Maintaining relationships with teachers reduces young people's anxieties around remote learning. It is enabling them to participate fully with live and recorded lessons resulting in high levels of engagement in learning.

## Case Study – Alloa Academy, Clackmannanshire Council – continued

The faculty manager provides a monthly newsletter for parents. These newsletters highlight useful webinars from third sector providers and other resources to help parents to support learning at home. Staff also make good use of social media platforms to share video clips and other useful information. As a result, young people are participating well in tasks and activities and parents feel empowered to support learning at home and provide useful feedback to teachers on how well the learning is being understood.

The school has recognised that a number of children and families for whom English is an additional language need specific support and communication from staff. Children and their families have received individualised support from the school including communication aids, visual prompts, translated resources, digital apps and access to third sector specialist partners. As well as supporting parents to participate in their child's learning, this approach has also encouraged many families to engage more in their own learning of English language. Effective partnership working with colleagues in Community Learning and Development and Housing is also supporting families to overcome community and financial issues allowing them to focus more on supporting their child's remote learning.

## Partnership working

“As educationalists, the experience of living through a global pandemic has brought with it many professional challenges. Equally however, it has created many opportunities for schools to reflect, evaluate and continually adapt their approaches towards working in a wider range of ways than we possibly did before. We can continue to engage and communicate with our pupils and within our own staff teams, but also with our families, our wider community and partner professionals.”

Schools describe how they have continued to work effectively with a range of partners to reduce barriers to learning and improve access for children and young people with complex learning needs. There are examples of partnership with allied health professionals and medical staff. For example, children in one primary school are now able to meet safely with allied health professionals to access 'wheelchair clinics' set up within the school. Senior leaders report that this is ensuring that individual health and wellbeing needs and postural requirements are met. Third sector partners are working alongside schools to provide a range of outdoor learning opportunities to support learners with complex needs and their families. These range from activities to develop citizenship and life skills to working with yoga therapists, visiting chef and the Youth Music Initiative.

In one local authority, educational psychology staff have been working closely with partners specialising in autism spectrum disorder. 'Talking mats' have been used with parents, children and young people with complex learning needs to explore how to overcome challenges. In another example, educational psychologists meet regularly with senior leaders to discuss the support requirements for individual learners engaged in remote learning. This results in a joined-up planning approach to meet individual needs.

As well as speech and language therapists providing support to families remotely, staff in one school undertook professional learning to become speech and language partners. This has enabled staff to continue to deliver speech and communication programmes for learners on a more regular basis. Schools report that families value this extra support.

#### Case Study – Perth and Kinross Council

##### **Community Link Workers**

The local authority is ensuring that children and young people with complex learning needs are continuing to access support from partner agencies during this period of remote learning. Community link workers have been allocated to work with identified children and young people with complex needs throughout the pandemic. This has ensured that children and young people continue to mix safely with adults and their peers across a range of settings, including outdoor spaces. Ensuring all risk assessments were completed collaboratively has supported parents to engage positively with these activities. As a result, children and young people are engaging very well with a range of outdoor learning activities. For those learners with the greatest level of need, sensory communication sessions are supporting them effectively to continue to develop their communication skills.

## **Emerging strengths in the approaches taken by local authorities and schools to provide learning for children and young people with complex learning needs.**

- **Local authority support, good quality professional learning and ongoing reflection is resulting in improved approaches to meeting the needs of learners with complex needs.**
- **Schools exercise autonomy in allocating resources to provide personalised approaches to meet individual learning needs.**
- **Schools have taken positive steps to increase engagement with and support for parents of children and young people with complex learning needs.**

## **Areas for improvement in the approaches taken by local authorities and schools to provide learning for children and young people with complex learning needs.**

- **Continue to improve approaches to assessing learning and evaluating the progress of learners with complex needs.**
- **Ensure a focus on planning for transitions to reduce any anxiety and support change.**
- **Learn from their experiences of remote learning to identify what has worked successfully that could be continued post-pandemic to support learners with complex needs.**

The following standard Education Scotland terms of quantity are used in this report:

Almost all	91%-99%
Most	75%-90%
Majority	50%-74%
Minority/less than half	15%-49%
A few	less than 15%

Education Scotland  
Denholm House  
Almondvale Business Park  
Almondvale Way  
Livingston EH54 6GA

T: +44 (0)131 244 4330

E: [enquiries@educationscotland.gov.scot](mailto:enquiries@educationscotland.gov.scot)

[www.education.gov.scot](http://www.education.gov.scot)

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