

Witness Name: Anwen Orrells

Statement: No.1

M08-LAPOW-001

Exhibits:AO 1/1 to AO 1/20

Dated:20 June 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

MODULE 8: WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANWEN ORRELLS

I, Anwen Orrells, Head of School Improvement and Learning at Powys County Council
("Local Authority") will say as follows;

Part A - Introduction

1. I make this statement (M08-LAPOW-001) in response to a written request made by the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry, dated the 13 May 2025.
2. In preparing this statement, I have considered the Rule 9 request from the Inquiry and will focus on the matters relevant to this module and set out in the request, unless and where it has been necessary to refer to events outside the date range.
3. As the Inquiry will appreciate, the Local Authority holds a vast number of documents. To assist me in preparing this statement, the Authority has undertaken searches or internal databases in order to identify documents which may be relevant to the issues to which this witness statement relates. I can confirm that I was not in post during the specified period, and I have relied upon documentation/information known and made available to me.
4. The period referred to in the Request is from the 1 January 2020 to 28 June 2022 and therefore I have focused my response to that specified period.
5. I was appointed Head of School Improvement and Learning on the 10 June 2024, I am responsible for the following;
 - Leadership and management of the following corporate portfolios:
 - Primary, special and secondary school improvement

- o Curriculum for Wales and national reform including Digital Competency Framework and Wellbeing
 - o Subject advisory work including Additional Learning Needs (ALN) advisory support and Areas of Learning and Experience (AoLE) leads
 - o 14+ Education, Youth Service, Careers and Adult Education
 - o ALN statutory support, systems and processes
 - o Behaviour and Children Looked After /Vulnerable groups
 - o Safeguarding, governance and compliance
 - o Education Welfare Officers (EWO) / Elective Home Education (EHE) / Community School Agenda
6. The key responsibilities of my role are as outlined in paragraph 5 above. However, during the specified period I was a Challenge Adviser and then appointed as Service Manager for Education Support Services within the school service. As a Challenge Adviser my main responsibilities was to support schools in raising standards. During Covid-19, as a team, we supported schools to move their teaching online and share guidance and effective practice on how best to support learners academically and their well-being. The School Improvement team produced weekly professional development newsletters to schools, detailing approaches to distance learning and highlighting resources to support these approaches. The Interim Chief Education Officer, then becoming the Director of Education during the specified period was Lynette Lovell. Lynette Lovell has since left the Authority by way of retirement in March 2024.
7. Powys is the largest county in Wales covers 5,200km², and has a population of around 133,891. Our largest locality is the Welshpool and Montgomery area. Powys is a rural county.
8. The latest CIW Inspection for Powys Children's Services was undertaken as a "Joint Inspection of Child Protection Arrangements" alongside Powys Teaching Health Board and Dyfed Powys Police (AO1/1 INQ000647339). The inspection found that Safeguarding organisations in Powys have systems and arrangements in place for effective joint working when children are considered at risk of abuse or neglect.

Part B – The Pandemic response of Childrens Services locally and in conjunction with Welsh Government

9. As at January 2020 the local authority did not hold a specific plan for the delivery of education across the county in the event of a public emergency or pandemic situation.
10. During the specified period a Business Continuity Plan was developed to support delivery of education during the pandemic. The objective of this plan was to maintain or recover the critical services and activities within the Education Service of Powys County Council in the event of a major disruption. The aim was that the plan would assist the service in ensuring that it was fully prepared to cope with any incident that may arise and providing a continued education and place of safety for the learners, staff, and visitors. (AO1/2- INQ000647324 & AO1/3- INQ000647328) The plan was maintained and updated throughout (and beyond) the pandemic. In addition, individual schools were supported to develop business continuity plans for their individual settings.
11. I am led to believe that the local authority was provided with 3 hours' notice of the UK Government's decision to close schools as announced on the 18 March 2020. The Interim Chief Education Officer had a phone call with Steve Davies, the Director of Education at the Welsh Government at 10am on 18 March 2020 informing of the closure of schools ahead of the formal announcement by the Education Minister. The announcement that schools in Wales would close by Friday 20 March 2025 at the latest, was issued shortly after 1pm on 18 March 2020.
12. The local authority commenced planning for the possibility that schools would have to close, at pace and immediately upon notification received from the Welsh Government on the 18 March 2020. The local authority commenced this planning utilising the guidance provided by Welsh Government.
13. No planning was undertaken prior to the 18 March 2020, as no prior notification was provided of possible school closures.
14. Wales moved to increased restrictions ahead of Christmas and to alert level 4 on 26 December 2020 with schools returning to operations in a phased approach between 4 and 18 January 2021. Notification was provided via email to the Interim Chief Education Officer from Welsh Government (Kirstie Williams MS Minister for Education) on the 4 January 2021 (AO1/4 – INQ000647330)
15. On the 31 December 2020, the local authority sent a letter to all schools in Powys for onward transmission to parents/carers outlining the arrangements for January 2021 (AO1/5 – INQ000647332).

16. The local authority was more experienced at mobilising support for schools, learners and their families during the lockdown period in January 2021, compared to the closing of schools in March 2020, as highlighted in the Q4 Schools Service Activity Report – April/May 2021 (AO1/6- INQ000647333). For example:

- At the beginning of the spring term 2021, all schools moved to remote learning provision. On 22 February 2021, foundation phase pupils returned to face-to-face learning. On 15 March 2021, key stage 2 and year 11 and 13 pupils returned to face-to-face learning in schools and other year groups experienced wellbeing sessions in preparation for the full reopening of schools on the 12 April 2021.
- Pupil attendance figures for Powys schools remained strong at 94.3% over the spring term, with 18.3% receiving face-to-face learning and 76% engaging in remote learning.
- At the start of the lockdown period, there were 880 Powys families without digital devices, and 500 families did not have, or experienced, connectivity issues. To address this, by May 2000, over 800 families were supported through the loaning of digital devices for learners to access online learning over the spring term. Nearly 400 mobile Wi-Fi devices were distributed to families to help them overcome connectivity issues.’ However, due to the mobile phone connectivity black spots across rural areas of Powys, some families found that the mobile Wi-Fi devices did not work for them. Learners from these families were encouraged to attend the Hubs so that their well-being and education could be supported.

17. At this point, the local authority and schools were working together to share best practice for teaching and learning. For example, in January 2021, Ysgol Llanfyllin presented to all headteachers in Powys, providing an overview of the expectations of, and the practicalities of delivering, online learning (AO1/7 – INQ000647334).

18. Internal Education structures remained the same, however, significant collaborative working between Schools Service officers, school leaders, and key internal and external partners including Union representatives, enabled emergency childcare to commence in Powys on 27 March 2020, just one week after the notification of the closure of schools from Welsh Government. The Director of Education reported to the Scrutiny Committee on the 20 July 2020 (AO1/8 – INQ000647319).

19. In addition, I am informed Schools Service, Children’s Services, the Commissioning Team and other key partners, worked together to ensure that emergency childcare provision was also available for pre-school children.

20. This collaboration saw a range of key guidance documents developed and shared with schools, including:
- Health and Safety Toolkit for the re-opening of Powys Schools for September 2020 (AO1/9- INQ000647336)
 - Returning to School Advice and Guidance v13 21.07.2020 (AO1/10- INQ000647314)
 - Risk Assessment COVID (AO1/11- INQ000647315)
 - POWYS V3.2 – Coronavirus RA Sep 2020 (AO1/12- INQ000647316)
21. I was informed that Powys County Council implemented “Gold” and “Silver” internal command groups. The “Gold” group included the Corporate Director (Children & Adults), Chief Executive, Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Head of Financial Services, Corporate Director (Resources and Transformation), Corporate Director (Economy and Environment) and the Civil Contingency Officer. The “Silver” group included the Heads of Services for Adult Social Services, Children’s Services, Commissioning and Schools Services

Part C – Child Protection and harm to children during the pandemic

22. During the period stated, provision was initially through Hubs, as per the direction from the Welsh Government. The local authority used the guidance provided by the Welsh Government ‘Guidance for hubs and schools: provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children’, which was issued in April 2020.
23. The guidance states *‘For the purpose of provision in schools and/or registered childcare settings, vulnerable children include those with a social worker and with Statements of special educational needs. The most vulnerable of these should be prioritised by local authorities according to children with most need for the provision. For the purpose of the provision, those who have a social worker include children with care and support or support plans, children on the child protection register and children who are looked after.’* (AO1/13 – INQ000081020)
24. In a report to Cabinet dated 16 April 2020 (AO1/14- INQ000647318) entitled ‘Joint working in Powys to support and monitor vulnerable learners during the Covid-19 emergency’, it was outlined that: *‘The Schools Service has been working closely with Children’s Services and health professionals to identify vulnerable learners, and to ensure that those learners are tracked and supported. Schools and Schools*

Service staff are maintaining regular contact with those learners they believe to be vulnerable. Whilst it isn't possible to categorise all of these learners by particular labels, it includes (but is not limited to):

- *Children/families supported by Team Around the Family;*
- *Children/families supported at the level of Care and Support;*
- *Children on the Child Protection register;*
- *Children Looked After;*
- *Children with disabilities;*
- *Children with Statements of Special Educational Need (SEN), or with lower levels of ALN/SEN;*
- *Children with Hearing or Visual Impairments (Sensory Support Service are maintaining regular contact);*
- *Children who are Young Carers;*
- *Children with other wellbeing needs;*
- *Children with Statements of SEN who are on roll at a maintained special school;*
- *Children on roll at the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU).*

In addition, schools (and Schools Service staff) have identified those learners from their rolls who they consider to be vulnerable, but who may not fall within the official definition given by Welsh Government.'

25. A further report from the Director of Education to Scrutiny Committee (**A01/8** – **INQ000647319**) highlighted; *Significant collaborative working between Schools Service officers, school leaders, and key internal and external partners including Union representatives, enabled emergency childcare to commence in Powys on 27th March 2020, just one week after the notification of the closure of schools from Welsh Government. Powys provided 16 Emergency Childcare Hubs (ECH) and also established two dedicated Emergency Childcare Specialist Hubs (ECSH), sited within the special schools to support our most vulnerable learners. The total weekly numbers of children accessing the hubs have ranged between 148 – 245 over the period of provision.'*

26. Following direction from the Welsh Government, from the 29 June 2020, the existing hubs reverted to providing childcare for the children from their own school as they were also providing 'Check In, Catch Up and Prepare' wellbeing sessions for their pupils. Further significant work was also undertaken to ensure that an additional five

hubs were opened in leisure centres across the county, to meet the anticipated increase in key workers requiring care for their children.

27. The Schools Service, Children's Services, the Commissioning Team and other key partners worked together to ensure that emergency childcare provision was also available for pre-school children. Between 23rd March and 29th June 2020, 28 settings were open to support the children of key workers vulnerable children. During this period 271 pre-school children per week accessed emergency childcare provision.
28. On 9 July 2020, the Minister for Education announced that schools and settings would return to full capacity from 1 September 2020. In August 2020, the Welsh Government issued '*Guidance for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners*' (AO1/16 - INQ000081386) which supplemented 'guidance found in the *Operational guidance for schools and settings from the autumn term and Guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term, providing specific advice for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners*'. This guidance informed the local authority's approach to supporting disadvantaged learners upon their full return to school in September 2020.
29. Further guidance was issued by the Welsh Government on 27 January 2021, which was further updated on 9 February 2021 – '*Operational guidance for schools and settings to support limited attendance: How school and other providers can make their sites safe for staff and learners during limited attendance*'. (AO1/17 – INQ000647321) This document provided a range of guidance in respect of school attendance for the partial opening of schools as of the 22 February 2021, including who would be able to access onsite provision, which included vulnerable learners, however, it did note that '*[l]earners who are self-isolating should not attend school. Clinically vulnerable learners are also not advised to attend school.*'
30. The specific section in the guidance on vulnerable learners stated that:
- 'Schools and settings are expected to allow vulnerable children and young people to attend. Parents and carers of vulnerable children and young people are strongly encouraged to take up the place. If vulnerable learners do not attend, schools should:*
- work together with the local authority and social worker (where applicable) to follow up with the parent or carer to explore the reason for absence, discussing the*

school's concerns using supporting guidance considering the child's circumstances and best interests

• work together with the local authority and social worker (where applicable) and other relevant partners to encourage the child or young person to attend educational provision, particularly where the social worker agrees that the child or young person's attendance would be appropriate'.

31. In the initial period of the pandemic, when there were Childcare Hubs, the local authority and schools followed the guidance issued by the Welsh Government and identified children 'with a social worker and with Statements of special educational needs. For the purpose of the provision, those who have a social worker include children with care and support or support plans, children on the child protection register and children who are looked after.'
32. In addition, Schools Service and Childrens Services, working in collaboration with Health colleagues, identified vulnerable learners that required contact.
33. For the return to school in September 2020, the local authority and schools' approach was informed by the range of Welsh Government guidance, including Guidance for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners', which was issued in August 2020.
34. Hubs were provided with lists of vulnerable children, as outlined in the Welsh Government guidance 'Guidance for hubs and schools: provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children', which was issued in April 2020.
35. In addition, schools (and Schools Service staff) identified those learners from their rolls who they considered to be vulnerable, but who may not fall within the official definition given by Welsh Government. The Emergency Childcare Specialist Hubs were in two of our special schools. The children attending those Hubs were pupils registered at the schools.
36. The local authority used the guidance provided by the Welsh Government 'Guidance for hubs and schools: *provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children*', which was issued in April 2020 and the '*Guidance for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners*', which was issued in August 2020 in connection with who might fall into this category.

37. There were existing records of children who had 'a social worker included children with care and support or support plans, children on the child protection register and children who were looked after' as well as those 'with Statements of special educational needs. Therefore, these were combined to identify which vulnerable learners should be offered a place at a Hub.
38. I am informed that the local authority monitored the vulnerable children attending Hubs or school. For example, when the Hubs were open, Children's Services and the Schools Service were aware of which learners were Children Looked After (CLA), and those who were on the Child Protection (CP) Register. Each hub had been provided with the list of children who were within their hub's 'catchment' who were CLA or CP. This list was monitored and updated, where necessary on a weekly basis by the Schools Service and re-distributed to the Hubs.
39. Between 23 March and 29 June 2020, the total weekly numbers of children accessing the hubs ranged between 148 – 245 (including the children of critical workers). This was 1-1.6% of statutory school aged learners, based on the PLASC figures of January 2020. The majority of these children would have either been children of critical workers and / or those identified as vulnerable children.
40. In addition, 271 pre-school children per week accessed emergency childcare provision. This equates to 28% of the pre-school children that were registered for a place in January 2020 (including the children of critical workers), however, it is noted that some of the children accessing the Hubs may not have had a registered early years place. The majority of these children would have either been children of critical workers and / or those identified as vulnerable children.
41. 73.9% of learners attended school during the autumn term of the 2020-21 academic year. This was lower than the all Wales average of 78.6%.
42. 28.7% of learners attended school during the spring term of the 2020-21 academic year (including the children of critical workers). This was higher than the all Wales average of 24.7%. The majority of these children would have either been children of critical workers and / or those identified as vulnerable children.

43. 90.1% of learners attended school during the summer term of the 2020-21 academic year. This was higher than the all Wales average of 88.6%.
44. Schools and the local authority followed the steps as outlined in the various operational guidance documents issued by Welsh Government. The local authority provided schools with a range of guidance during the pandemic period, for example, they provided schools with a simple guidance document on attendance, that was underpinned by the Welsh Government guidance (AO1/18 – INQ000647322)
45. The local authority and schools consistently encouraged vulnerable learners to attend school. For example, the local authority shared Return to School Guidance with all schools for the return on 8 January 2021(AO1/19 – INQ000647323)
46. Guiding principles were included within the document and it included the Welsh Government FAQ dated 5 January 2021 but also included position statements for Powys. This document included a Powys protocol for 'seeing' all pupils.
47. The local authority and schools had existing requirements to record children who fell within one or more vulnerable group. These include, but are not limited to children looked after, learners eligible for E-FSM, learners with additional learning needs (ALN), learners educated other than at school (EOTAS), and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Therefore, the identification was already in place to ensure eligibility to attend school. The Local Authority held this data and information as part of their internal management information system.
48. I am informed that a meeting to discuss the visibility of children known to the Childrens Services and Education Service took place in January 2021. A list was created highlighting those children who were Elective Home Education (EHE) or with low attendance at school. For children on the school roll, there were some who had not been seen for some months.
49. Some of the families had engaged with the schools but via telephone contact, Headteachers were advised that children needed to be seen in addition to the telephone contact. They were also notified that additional funding could be made available and utilised to support schools to physically see those children. The funding of IT equipment was also discussed to support those families who had such

issues. There was also funding available to support with families experiencing domestic violence.

50. Regarding Elective Home Education (EHE), the service undertook work to identify when each child was last seen but this was a difficult task as some children had never previously attended school. Some children had been home educated for many years and some had recently transferred to EHE. The Education service saw an increase in children who chose elective home education following the first lockdown

51. Education packs for home schoolwork were in place to support learning during lockdown.

52. As of 1 April 2020, Powys had a total of 13 emergency childcare hubs open to serve each school cluster, and 2 emergency childcare specialist hubs which served the special school and PRU learners. The mainstream hubs were open 8am to 6pm, 7 days a week, including Easter and bank holidays. The specialist hubs were open term time and had a different attendance model: there was a rota for children and young people to attend, to ensure that there were sufficient staff with the correct training to meet needs. The vast majority of attendees in the mainstream hubs were key workers' children. Efforts were made to contact families with children on a Child Protection plan to promote the offer and highlight the benefits of children attending. Every hub had social services, Xenzone counsellor, ALN and Challenge Advisor link persons, known as the team around the hub (for the specialist hubs, the ALN link was the ALN Managers). Sports Development Officers were also linked to each hub.

Part F – Access to Play

53. The local authority restricted access to public outdoor spaces, either fully or partially, by closing play areas.

54. In line with Welsh Government guidance, I am informed that Powys County Council closed and secured all 58 play areas which it managed on 23 March 2020. These were reopened in a phased manner following the easing of Welsh Covid-19 restrictions on 20 July 2020, the play areas in the county were reopened (following safety inspections) in a phased manner and where necessary some items of equipment were removed in order to maintain social distancing. All play areas in the

county were reopened by 24 July 2020 and remained open for the remainder of the pandemic.

55. To better protect children's safety and wellbeing in the event of a future pandemic, Powys local authority has evaluated that children should all be 'seen' from the outset of any lockdown situation.
56. Further and in the initial stages of the pandemic, when the Emergency Childcare Hubs were in place some children found it difficult to attend an unfamiliar setting, therefore in the second lockdown period, hubs were made available in each individual school. As a result, and due to the changing COVID restrictions, more pupils attended childcare hubs in their own schools.
57. When considering Continuity of Learning, Blended Learning and Remote Learning, certain areas were identified by the Director of Education – Education Response to Covid-19 and Lessons learnt – (AO1/20 – INQ000647327) as areas to develop in order to improve learning through blended learning. These included:
- connectivity for a few pupils in remote areas
 - maintaining engagement of all pupils
 - supporting parents to support their children's learning
 - developing the use of live lessons and on-line synchronous teaching.
58. In terms of *Check In, Catch Up and Prepare* in July 2020, effective consultation with headteachers, governors, officers and key partners, including Unions, using the statistical modelling available at the time, ensured that the needs of Powys learners were prioritised ensuring that:
- learners were brought back into carefully managed school environments after an unprecedented length of detachment from schools.
 - multi-agency support for our most vulnerable learners and those with SEN / ALN continued to adapt responsively to the needs of our learners to ensure appropriate support, for example as part of the Team Around the Cluster model.
 - continued close work with all key partners provided additional emergency childcare capacity in July 2020 to enable schools to maximize the number of '*Check In, Catch Up and Prepare*' sessions for their learners and assist residents to return to work.

- October 2020 half-term was extended by an additional week, which proved a prudent decision and provided an appropriate firebreak given the rise of coronavirus cases during the autumn 2020-21 term.'

59. When considering support for vulnerable learners across the pandemic, a '*Team Around the Cluster*' model was developed by the Local Authority, ensuring that a range of professionals were linked to each school cluster to provide key support to learners. This approach was 'instrumental in ensuring that as many children as possible in Powys were 'seen' throughout the pandemic.

60. I am led to believe that the Authority acted swiftly and decisively in its response to COVID-19, ensuring that appropriate community-based support was in place for the children and young people of Powys. Initially this was achieved through three key multi-agency working groups. The three groups consisted of: emergency childcare provision, continuity of learning and learner/staff wellbeing.

61. Through consistent and effective leadership, the local authority achieved the following:

- Powys committed to exceeding the expectations placed on it and had consistently gone above and beyond the requirements of the nationally issued guidelines and directives;
- Effective stakeholder engagement and communication;
- Increased and embedding use of technology enhanced collaboration and stakeholder engagement in decision making;
- Collaborative and robust decision by leaders taken at pace;
- Learner wellbeing underpinning all strategic decision making;
- Extensive multi-agency collaboration resulting in consistent approaches across Powys;
- Officers producing clear guidance for schools and parents;
- Appropriate delegation of tasks and responsibilities;
- Improved working relationships and collaboration with school leaders'

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true, I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest believe of its truth.

Signed

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Dated 20/06/2025 (Updated 07/08/2025)