

Safeguarding

At the time of inspections, the arrangements for safeguarding in most of the schools in which safeguarding was inspected reflected, or reflected broadly, the guidance from the Department of Education (DE). In three schools, safeguarding was evaluated as being unsatisfactory. Subsequently, the issues were addressed and in all three settings, the arrangements for safeguarding improved to reflect broadly the guidance issued by DE.

Lessons learned during the Covid-19 response, including a focus on remote learning: March – June 2020

Access to school

When lockdown was introduced, only a small number of schools opened within the first month. The schools reported that they feared pupils would catch Covid-19 and parents/carers preferred to keep them at home. In the schools which did not open from March 2020, the staff worked on producing learning tasks for online access and for paper-based activities to distribute to pupils. In addition, to facilitate safe returns to school, staff began the work of individual risk-assessments for all pupils; some of these took considerable time and involved seeking multi-disciplinary information. Social Services and the Education Authority (EA) participated in joint meetings to support the process of returning pupils safely to school. By the end of June, almost all special schools were open with a reduced number of pupils; those pupils attending continued to access, and make progress in appropriate learning activities and well-being programmes. Most schools which provide for pupils with severe learning difficulties have traditionally provided summer-schemes. In 2020, almost two-thirds of special schools provided a summer-scheme and up to one-third of pupils enrolled in the individual schools attended. This provision enabled many pupils to meet with their peers and enjoy suitable recreational activities in a safe environment.

Case study 1: Enabling pupils' attendance through appropriate risk assessments

One school made arrangements within the first week of lockdown, to facilitate pupil attendance, and a small number of pupils accessed school safely with the numbers attending rising as time progressed. The measures taken to facilitate the pupils' return to school included immediate and purposeful communication with parents and the Education Authority's services to plan for, and co-ordinate, crucial aspects including health and safety and transport. In addition, there was dynamic risk-assessment and comprehensive planning to meet the holistic needs of pupils and staff. The school leadership prioritised raising staff awareness around Covid-19, agreeing strategies for working safely with pupils, and the deployment of available staff. The school engaged

with local businesses to supply PPE prior to it being made available to all schools and worked with the relevant Health Trust services to enable the attendance of vulnerable pupils for whom school attendance was appropriate.

The impact of the school's comprehensive planning and actions was that parents/carers were reassured of their children's safety when in school, and pupils were able to attend school as soon as individual arrangements were finalised.

Learning resources

Schools planned for and provided a combination of appropriate in-school and remote learning and well-being programmes, matched closely to each pupil's needs, circumstances and interests. Targets cited in the pupils' Individual Education Plans (IEP), including those linked to formal accreditation, continued to inform programmes. Teachers reported that the pupils found some IEP targets difficult to complete in the home environment and so a wider range of activities and supporting resources were developed for each individual pupil's circumstances.

Meeting individual need

Within the confines of Covid-19 guidelines, staff endeavoured to continue to meet the holistic needs of their pupils as fully as possible, both within school and remotely. A key feature of this provision was the collegial and creative approach of class teams to plan for and deliver individualised programmes. The school leaders reported that staff involved in remote learning worked diligently to develop creative approaches to engaging pupils at home, and the pupils enjoyed a range of exciting and fun learning activities. Schools used a variety of well-established online learning platforms to enhance their teaching and communication with pupils and parents. All schools reported providing learning tasks on paper and/or through online access appropriate to individual pupil need and taking account of the support available at home. Schools loaned out some of their computers, and provided help and support in their use in the home.

Case study 2: Supporting families

Most of the children who attend the school have severe and complex learning needs. The school had no parental requests for places at the beginning of the lockdown period. However, by mid-April, the school identified those pupils and families most in need of additional support at this very challenging time. Initially, the school enabled a small cohort of parents and children to use their playground; this quickly increased due to the needs of families to the point that 22 pupils from 20 families were supported in school. The school, throughout lockdown, stressed the importance of connecting to every pupil through a variety of methods best matched to engaging the pupils and supporting their parents or carers. One of the key outcomes for the school leadership during this period was the strengthened relationships not just with the pupils' parents but also with their wider family circle. Weekly zoom assemblies attracted 200-250 live

viewers and up to 6,500 views afterwards. An important feature for many of the pupils was being able to watch the assemblies multiple times, for example, celebrating the achievements of their friends on School Sports Day. Despite so many pupils being at home, videos were recorded of sporting challenges, including a staff competition. During this time, the school delivered 7.00 pm story-time sessions for the pupils. These were recorded by the teachers in their own homes, often with assistance from their children, and were extremely well received by the pupils and their families. At a time when routines and structure were impeded for many of the pupils a bank of stories was created that could be viewed multiple times by the pupils.

Online teaching for all classes included the teacher reading a story, leading to an activity, and interacting with all pupils for three tasks each day; these were based on communication, functional numeracy and at least one other topic. Teachers received and shared video evidence of pupil learning and carrying out set activities. Visual schedules, based on both school and home activities, were shared with parents, with instructions and examples included. Staff made sensory packs to support parents at home, based on the pupil's sensory profile and home packs were developed for those who benefit from Attention Autism strategies.

Communication across all of the school staff was highly effective during this time. The leadership team was determined to keep staff morale high and supported teachers and classroom assistants through WhatsApp groups which enabled department groups to share information and support one another. The senior leadership team had daily video conferencing meetings and departmental meetings were held twice weekly. In addition, remote teaching and learning protocols were developed by the school leadership and communicated to all staff.

Communication with parents

Principals reported, in the period when lockdown started, that they began to develop more comprehensive communication systems with parents/carers, enabling clear and consistent messaging including facilitating immediate requests for advice or equipment, and planning for pupils' attendance. As more parents/carers chose to request school placements, risk assessments were updated as necessary, informing appropriately the safe return of pupils. The process demanded a significant commitment and initiative; this was evident in the schools that had pupils attending immediately after lockdown. The school leadership teams provided extensive organisation for health and safety, staffing and transport, all essential in meeting the often complex needs of those pupils attending schools during lockdown.

Outcomes for learners

During the period March to August 2020, almost all pupils accessed and made appropriate progress through individualised home-learning and well-being programmes provided by their schools. Particular progress in extending the pupils' practical, social and life-skills was noted by parents and school staff. Where adult

support and connectivity were available, pupils accessed lessons and activities on a variety of learning platforms and made progress in meeting their individual learning targets. A small number of pupils could not access learning online due to issues including connectivity and lack of hardware.

Lessons learned during the Covid-19 recovery phase including a focus on blended learning: August 2020 - December 2020

Context

All schools re-opened for their pupils in September 2020. According to information published by the Public Health Agency (PHA), by the week ending 13 November 2020, there had been at least one confirmed Covid-19 case in all of the 39 special schools since the start of term. Approximately three-quarters of the 126 Covid-19 cases reported by special schools to the PHA were among staff. The resulting absence of staff poses one of the major difficulties for school leadership teams at present.

During the autumn term of the school year 2020/2021, inspectors had in-depth conversations with the leadership of all schools; within the sections that follow, a summary is provided of the challenges and strengths discussed.

Creating a learning environment

The pupils attending special schools present with complex learning difficulties, in addition, many of the pupils have co-morbid medical conditions, increasing the complex nature of how they are able to learn and to retain what they have learned. The pupils have been impacted significantly by Covid-19 through the disruption to their usual routines, environments, behaviour of the trusted adults in their lives, and worry about their own and their family's health. School staff report that this has resulted in some pupils finding it difficult to engage in learning; this appears to vary from school to school, depending on the nature and severity of the pupils' difficulties. The frequency and range of medical conditions amongst pupils adds to the need for safe learning environments within special schools.

Leadership: opportunities and challenges

The schools' planning for re-opening was based on a number of factors, including: the number of staff and pupils; the size and layout of the school; and the availability of suitable teaching and learning spaces for each class and curriculum area. The efficient and effective leadership and management of change was crucial in planning for addressing spacing requirements and learning approaches with regard to Covid-19. In addition, learning programmes were created for those pupils with significant medical conditions and consequently unable to attend school. A number of

considerations were taken into account, including the well-being of pupils and staff, health and safety, the curriculum, and assessment. As indicated above, the principals report overwhelmingly that their most difficult challenge continues to be staff absenteeism caused by Covid-19; some schools reported having up to 60 staff absent at the same time. A major additional factor in relation to this is the shortage of appropriately experienced substitute staff, including teachers and classroom assistants. In addition, extensive time was required to produce risk-assessments to manage staffing levels.

Principals report that the day-to-day running of schools is very challenging, particularly with regard to the overwhelming responsibility for keeping all pupils, staff and their families safe. Principals report that the availability of support from the EA has, at times, been insufficient. For example, transport for pupils to school was initially very difficult with delays in organisation, and insufficient communication to schools from the EA. Sharing transport with other schools brings additional risk, regarding Covid-19 cases in the other schools.

The school leadership teams address systematically the practical organisation and management of special schools. Complex changes are required frequently when teachers are absent and the staffing of bubbles is impacted. The EA has provided additional cleaning time/resource for each school which is greatly appreciated by schools. For sanitising outdoor play equipment, spray machines are in use, and for indoor areas, fogging machines are proving to be useful additions to cleaning equipment. Schools are controlling meticulously visitor access, particularly to classrooms, in order to keep pupils and staff as safe as possible from the spread of infection.

All schools have organised pupils and staff into bubbles to help contain the spread of infection. A small number of schools have also zoned their school buildings and outside spaces, with separate entrances for each zone. In some schools, areas are zoned for serving school dinners, and the pupils eat in their classrooms. Some schools are using disposable plates and cutlery. Hand cleansing stations are placed strategically throughout the schools for staff and pupil use. In addition, principals report that therapy staff wear full personal protective equipment (PPE) in class, and that nursing staff change all their PPE after contact with each pupil.

A majority of schools report a lack of outdoor space which impacts significantly on the quality, amount and range of exercise and activities the school is able to offer. The impact of this is particularly damaging at a time when family outdoor activities and exercise may be curtailed. Research indicates that exercise, especially when outdoors, can have a highly positive effect on mood, mental health and physical well-being. For many pupils, space for physical exercise or individualised sensory circuits is an essential element in their self-regulatory programmes. In addition, almost all schools report that they have insufficient space for teaching; some classes and groups

have to be taught in corridors and staff rooms with a negative impact on learning and behaviour. There is insufficient space for crucial input from therapists and counsellors, or for some medical procedures. A particular concern for parents and staff during the current Covid-19 period has been the delay in providing appropriately furnished rooms to carry out aerosol generating procedures (AGP).

School collaboration has been beneficial

Principals are working collaboratively and collegially to share their practice and experiences during the present Covid-19 period; this has included participation in the Special School's Regional Group. The principals report that they have benefited from a mutual support system and sharing of experiences, as well as disseminating innovative practice in relation to dealing with Covid-19 and its effect on school routines, staff, pupils and parents.

Principals recognise the significant impact of school closure on their pupils and are keen to mitigate the effects on children and young people. In addition, the school leadership teams are concerned with the well-being of staff in the context of the additional stress, worry and work caused by Covid-19, and endeavour to provide sufficient support.

Support for pupils by therapists is ongoing in most special schools albeit reduced in some cases. Some principals report that the positive working relationships amongst school staff and therapists have strengthened with the shared purpose and determination to provide appropriately for the pupils. However, other principals report that the contribution from therapists of different disciplines to the pupil's overall programmes in schools has been severely disrupted. Whilst principals are responsible for the delivery of therapy to their pupils, special schools do not have a devolved budget and so most are not able to employ and deploy a multi-disciplinary staff. The efficacy of multi-disciplinary approaches can clearly be seen in schools and organisations which are able to employ this approach through their own multi-disciplinary staff teams, for example, the Middletown Centre for Autism, and special schools with therapists attached to their staff.

Boards of governors have been unable to hold face-to-face meetings for all of their members; as a result meetings have to be held online.

Developing skills for blended learning - a rapid response

School staff have developed a wide range of skills through their provision of blended learning, compared to their pre-Covid-19 levels of expertise. Before the pandemic, a small number of staff had a high level of expertise in online learning for pupils attending special schools. However, within a short period of time, staff in all special schools have developed their skills in, and capacity to deliver, online and blended learning. Following schools re-opening in September 2020, teachers continue to maintain online learning resources. Most schools have individual pupil plans in place, usually for a two

week period, should schools be required to close again, or individual pupils have to remain at home. Online learning often involves activities for parents/carers to complete with their child, who can use portable devices to return to the school the video or photographic evidence of completed tasks. The schools are using a range of online platforms and the school website to communicate with the school community.

The skills of pupils in special schools differ widely, and, when using digital technology, some are able to use laptops and/or tablets independently and others need support for the use of any device. Schools report that a tablet can be easier to use than a laptop for some pupils; however, an integrated camera on a pupil's laptop can enable the teacher to observe more easily how a pupil attempts a task, for example handwriting. Most schools estimate that between five and ten percent of their pupils are able to complete work independently, depending on their age and ability level. School staff are focused currently on developing further the pupils' skills for using technology in preparation for any future need for pupils to avail of online learning, and to be competent in using technology in their lives after school. Schools report that some pupils are excelling in online working, particularly pupils with autism who may be easily distracted in the classroom. Schools have used the additional funding provided by DE to purchase additional laptops for their pupils.

Most principals report that the professional development for all school staff to provide blended and online learning continues to be highly beneficial, and the quality and quantity of associated resources produced by schools continues to improve.

The curriculum in special schools has evolved in response to changing needs

Schools have found that placing more emphasis on a nurture-based curriculum has worked extremely well for pupils returning to school, settling and reassuring them and thereby enabling better well-being and effective learning. Schools are providing a curriculum that is weighted towards being enjoyable for the pupils, and within the class bubbles provides opportunities for additional paired and group work to develop social skills. Schools are placing increased emphasis on teaching and supporting self-help and practical skills such as cookery and horticulture; and this is strongly supported by parents. In addition, staff are reflecting on how their pupils learn most effectively in these circumstances and whether there are aspects that can influence their curriculum development and delivery in the future.

Schools are providing increased opportunities for physical exercise to address pupils' mental health and fitness; however, approximately half of special schools are inhibited by the lack of sufficient outdoor space for the pupils. Strategies that have been particularly successful are sensory circuits for core development and sensory regulation, and the daily mile for regular exercise and for calming and relaxing pupils. Soft play sessions are proving to be helpful for pupils requiring sensory regulation, but require careful timetabling to enable enhanced cleaning.

A number of schools report that pupils with challenging behaviours settled very well on return to school, however, since that initial period the pupils have begun to display their former behaviours. The management and support of pupils with challenging behaviour while adhering to Covid-19 advice is proving to be exceptionally difficult. Some pupils have found the restrictions on some of their activities difficult to comply with and comprehend. Schools report that senior pupils are unhappy at not being able to access the usual wide range of rooms and facilities within the school. In addition, most are unable to attend work experience, thereby impacting on their preparation for life after school. However a minority of pupils have been able to access further education provision following risk assessments.

Case study 3: Planning for school re-opening

One special school provides for pupils with a wide range of severe learning difficulties aged three to nineteen. Like many similar schools, their enrolment has increased significantly over the last decade, and there are increasingly more pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, and with challenging behaviour. The current accommodation does not meet the needs of the pupils or staff in terms of size and design, lacks outdoor space, and they await the commencement of their new school build.

The well-conceived planning for the school re-opening saw almost all pupils transition smoothly back to their classes. The risk-assessments, many of which were individualised, informed well the school's planning to meet potential difficulties the pupils might encounter such as coping with Covid-19 Health and Safety procedures, and transitioning to, from, and within school. A reviewed model based on meeting pupils' emotional health and well-being needs and appropriate attention was also given to staff by the school leadership.

The resulting impact noted by staff during September and October 2020 included well-settled pupils, sustained and increased levels of engagement with learning activities presented in reduced timetables and less incidents of challenging behaviour, both mild and severe. Staff reflection noted that this may have been a result of less pressure being placed on pupils in relation to the curriculum, along with less sensory stimulation and overload due to class bubbles and restricted movement around the school. As the term progressed however, staff noted that increasingly more pupils became unsettled, especially those with complex behaviour. Some pupils became less engaged in learning activities and there were increased incidents of challenging behaviour. The school leadership team believe that there are strong links with this change in pupil behaviour and factors relating to both Covid-19 and the school accommodation including:

- the absence of familiar and highly experienced staff due to either contracting Covid-19 or contact-related isolation;
- the negative impact of insufficient space to exercise, play or benefit from sensory integration programmes, and
- the pupils being aware of, and reacting to, increasing staff stress.

Care and welfare: evolving priorities

From March 2020, the schools have addressed effectively the emotional health and well-being needs of almost all pupils by a variety of means including individual and group support, remote counselling sessions, and regular remote contact including personalised videos. These strategies reassured pupils learning from home, and lessened anxieties around changed routines. Whilst schools report that most pupils are coping well, counselling provision has become increasingly sought after and a minority of schools find the provision is insufficient to meet the needs of the pupils, particularly for those with anxieties about their own well-being regarding Covid-19.

One school moved its weekly youth club to online access and found that this was an effective way to engage young people in the evenings, including those who lived too far away to participate in the school based youth provision. Like many of the novel ideas introduced during lockdown, the school has decided to retain and build on this provision going forward.

Schools have learned that through increasing their engagement with parents/carers and families, they have gained more understanding of the individual circumstances impacting on their pupils learning in the home environment. For example, as the majority of pupils in special schools need support to learn through online learning, schools that have included parents in their online learning training for staff report that pupils' learning has benefitted as a result. School leaders report that they intend to maintain the closer links they have built with the families, and to support further those families in particular need.

Considerations for all in special schools going forward

The challenges for special schools have been numerous, particularly because of the fragile health of many of their pupils and the fears of parents for their children should they become ill with Covid-19. The leadership teams and staff of special schools have responded very well to the challenges of the pandemic and there are considerable strengths noted in this report, including the strong emphasis on a nurture-based curriculum. Schools have addressed the need to develop their skills for teaching pupils online with enthusiasm and succeeded in providing effective learning programmes which take advantage of the home setting for developing the pupils' life skills. Schools have shared resources, training and advice with parents and carers, whilst extending their care and support to pupils' families during the pandemic. They report that they have benefitted from collaborating and sharing their professional learning within their schools, amongst schools, and with parents.