

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

**REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE EDUCATION AND LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**SUBJECT: EDUCATION AND LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 19TH OCTOBER, 2021**

**REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER**

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**PRESENT: COUNCILLOR H. TROLLOPE (CHAIR)**

Councillors J. Holt (Vice-Chair)  
D. Bevan  
M. Cook  
M. Day  
L. Elias  
S. Healy  
J. Hill  
C. Meredith  
J. C. Morgan  
J. P. Morgan  
T. Smith  
B. Summers  
D. Wilkshire

**WITH:** Corporate Director of Education  
Head of School Improvement & Inclusion  
Service Manager Education Transformation & Business Change  
Service Manager Young People & Partnerships  
Senior Education Welfare Officer  
Press & Publicity Officer  
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

**Representatives of EAS**

Hayley Davies-Edwards, Principal Challenge Advisor  
Alexis Edwards  
Sarah-Jane Waters

**Representative of Estyn**

Liz Counsell - Observer

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<p><b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b></p> <p>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.</p>	
No. 2	<p><b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillor G. Collier and T. Baxter (Co-opted Member).</p>	
No. 3	<p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS</u></b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p> <p><b><u>VERBAL UPDATE RESPONSE TO COVID-19</u></b></p> <p>At the invitation of the Chair the Corporate Director of Education gave a brief strategic overview of both the education and schools response to COVID-19.</p> <p>The latest position across Blaenau Gwent was 518 cases per 100,000 population. Blaenau Gwent was ranked 14th out of 22 local authorities across Wales regarding the amount of positive cases. However, indications from Environmental Health was that this was likely to approach circa 800 per 100,000 population over the next few days.</p> <p>The highest incidence rates were across under 16 year olds and mirrored the current situation across Wales. The amount of incidences schools have handled over the last 14 days were 142 positive cases in the primary sector; and 274 in the secondary sector. The School Infection Control Framework had been put in place and in line with other authorities in the region, Blaenau Gwent was currently at a moderate level of response.</p> <p>From a school workforce perspective, 40 positive cases had been identified, 23 confirmed positive cases, 5 fall into the vulnerable category, 7 identified as having new symptoms, 2 staff identified by TTP to self-isolate, 1 had received a positive lateral flow test and two members of staff with ongoing symptoms associated with</p>	

long COVID. Schools had secured face to face learning for learners across the board, despite the challenges that they were facing. The Director confirmed that support services, both catering and cleaning were managing at this point in time. From a learner perspective, it was important to note that the vaccination programme for 12 to 15 year olds was rolling out and progressing well, and currently there were circa 60% of 12 to 15 year olds who had now been vaccinated.

From an Education perspective the Directorate had prioritised four areas; i.e. learner well-being, support for vulnerable learners, standards and progress for learners, and school operations. The Director felt it was important to have a strategic approach, consistency and commonality across the school estate.

A Member commented on the considerable increase of 518 cases and the expectation of further increases to 800 and enquired regarding the safety measures in place to keep children and staff safe. The Director of Education pointed out that the 518 per 100,000 figures related to the amount of positive cases across the whole of Blaenau Gwent and included positive cases within the school estate. With regard to the school infection control framework they work on a school by school basis to consider the risk mitigation that was needed. The Education Transformation team had been working with one secondary school around potential extra measures due to the amount of positive cases that they had, an example was that face coverings would be introduced in order to reduce any transmission of COVID.

The Service Manager Education Transformation & Business Change reiterated that education at this point in time were at moderate risk level and they were regularly reviewing the risk level in conjunction with colleagues in Environmental Health, Civil Contingencies and Public Health Wales. They were working on a localised approach to support schools with increased cases and were reviewing risk assessments and looking at operational considerations to target improvements wherever possible, whilst ensuring continuity of learning throughout that process. The team were working very closely with schools on a daily basis and also regular discussions with parents and community members.

**No. 4**      **EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee

	<p>Meeting held on 14th September, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p><b>No. 5</b></p>	<p><b><u>ACTION SHEET - 14TH SEPTEMBER 2021</u></b></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 14th September, 2021 was submitted, whereupon:-</p> <p><b><u>Education Services – Main Self Evaluation Report (SER)</u></b></p> <p>A Member referred to the attachment and asked for clarification on the rates of transfer figures for Brynmawr Foundation School and Georgetown Primary school. The Service Manager Education Transformation &amp; Business Change explained that the wrong document had been attached in error and she would provide Members with the correct document.</p> <p>A Member raised concerns regarding the number of outward migration of pupils and enquired why pupils were choosing to be educated outside of Blaenau Gwent. The Director said the overall data illustrated that there was comparability between those learners that were moving out of county and those that were coming in county. The Member commented that in year transfers out of Blaenau Gwent also needed to be captured in the tables to give Members a clearer picture of transfer rates.</p> <p>The Director commented in relation to the secondary sector, three of the four secondary settings were now starting to experience, not surplus places, but sufficiency issues. That meant schools were actually having more applications than the amount of school places that were available. He informed Members there had been some progress against Section 106 planning agreements, where the housing prospectus was now starting to generate additional requirements for places across the school estate. Overall, the position was improving across the secondary sector in relation to the amount of learners that were either staying or actually coming into those schools.</p> <p>With regard to reasons for outward migration, the Service Manager Education Transformation &amp; Business Change said they vary significantly from application to application. Parental preference</p>	

usually dictated where the pupil attended school, other considerations were friendship groups, transport, child care and sometimes the parent's workplace, it could be a matter of convenience to access out of county schooling rather than better Education provision.

A Member suggested that post-16 transfer figures for pupils transferring from Blaenau Gwent secondary schools to out of county colleges be available in the future. The Officer would look into providing this information in future.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the action sheet be noted.

**No. 6**      **EDUCATION DIRECTORATE – RECOVERY AND RENEWAL PLAN**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education, the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion, and the Service Manager – Education Transformation and Business Change, which was presented to provide Members with an opportunity to scrutinise the Education Directorate's identified priorities for recovery and renewal, as part of the response to the COVID-19 situation.

The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

The Chair raised concerns regarding a recent request for all IT equipment issued to learners during COVID, was now being recalled and the affect this may have on vulnerable learners. The Service Manager Education Transformation and Business Change said IT equipment was not being formally recalled, but a review of equipment was being undertaken and schools had been asked to review their digitally disadvantaged learner data, to ensure that the Council could look to support upgrades with the existing equipment and ensure it was functioning correctly. Schools had been asked to continue to monitor, and where there was obvious pupil need the schools would not be expected to return any IT equipment until such time as a replacement device could be provided.

A Member felt that this was a big programme of recovery and raised several concerns including:-

- the number free school meal pupils;
- mental health of pupils;
- delays with the CAMS programme; and
- literacy and numeracy programmes with some parents unable to help their children with IT programmes.

He felt strongly that children must be given the best opportunities possible. The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion said that the Recovery and Renewal Plan was an evolving document, working closely with schools through a Strategic Group with Headteachers in order to keep abreast of any changes within their pupil population. Julia Carmichael had recently been appointed to the post of Service Manager for Inclusion and would focus on well-being which was reflected in the recovery and renewal plan. With regard to literacy and numeracy, grant funding from Welsh Government had focused on supporting those young people with identified gaps in their literacy and numeracy skills. The Directorate was supporting schools, along with the EAS, to enable them to develop literacy and numeracy skills of all young people and advised that some schools had ran parent classes to help parents if there was a return to the blended learning situation.

The Member reiterated his concerns, as the last set of figures were from 2019, and certain schools had numeracy levels of 33%, and for Members there was no new information available to consider, as there had not been any testing or Estyn inspections due to the pandemic and hoped that these pupils were not falling behind.

A Member referred to paragraph 2.4 of the report - Education Staff Training - Staff training needs aligned to operations are not all currently adapted to be delivered online e.g. first aid – and enquired when first aid would be taught in schools. The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion said that a number of schools had a first aid programme, which had been impacted by COVID. Some schools worked with St. John's Ambulance to deliver training, she would discuss with schools whether first aid training could be restarted, taking into consideration current COVID restrictions.

The Member again referred to paragraph 2.4 of the report – Poverty – Family entitlement to benefits has increased across Blaenau Gwent and the region, including free school meals.

Additional funding has been allocated to support these families, however, many schemes are not sustainable and so the ongoing impact will need to be assessed. He enquired regarding the schemes that were not sustainable.

The Service Manager Education Transformation and Business Change said that the COVID secure risk assessment restrictions placed pressure on those schemes continuing in the short term, but where they were able to be reintroduced in a safe way, they were looking to support schools to affect that change.

The Member agreed with paragraph 2.6 of the report and said it was an important message that the relationship between the Council and its schools was stronger than ever before.

The Director gave a brief overview of some of the key points raised by Members. He said the levels of families eligible for free school meals had increased, with just over 2,700 direct payments being made, that was directly correlated to the economic impact of COVID. Work would continue on the Pupil Development Grant (PDG) around providing support to individuals and groups of learners who were eligible for free school meals.

With regard to support for pupil well-being there were delays with the CAMHS service, however, there was counselling provision in place across schools and more resources were recently announced by the Welsh Government. The Youth Services team managed the counselling service, which provided information and support to children and young people across the school estate.

The Adult and Community Learning team as part of their basic skills agenda could support parents particularly around digital aspects of learning, to assist their children during blended learning.

The Director said a key strategic point in the recovery and renewal report was that learner progress was fundamental to all key priorities that had been identified. He advised Members that there would be a range of measures to demonstrate progress from the current response. The Recovery and Renewal report and Action Plan would be reported to Scrutiny Members on a regular basis.

The Chair enquired regarding schools paying for licences for digitally disadvantaged learners. The Service Manager Education

Transformation and Business Change said they were asking schools for their current position to determine the financial issues. A financial exercise was being undertaken to scope out what would be required going forward to secure sufficient resource and if schools were in a position to be able to contribute. She clarified that the licences had not been withdrawn, they continued to be funded by Welsh Government up to the summer period.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the report, associated documentation and proposed course of action be accepted.

**No. 7**

**IMPROVING SCHOOLS PROGRAMME 2021**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education which was presented to provide Members with an update on the BG Improving Schools Programme, in line with national changes to school evaluation, improvement and accountability. The report will also cover the pilot of the new regional approach 2021-2022, which reflects the national changes.

The Corporate Director of Education spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein. The EAS had collaborated on the report and gave a brief update on each school.

A Member commented that good leadership and good planning was key to taking schools forward to make improvements. The EAS were playing a major role in supporting schools and staff and he enquired how Blaenau Gwent schools compared with our family of schools. He said in the past there had been concerns with Abertillery Learning Community that pupils were transitioning out of the area and this had led to low pupil numbers and resource implications. The Director agreed with the Members comments and reiterated the importance of leadership. In relation to benchmarking and our family of schools, there had been a relaxation of performance measure reporting arrangements across Wales but assured Members that on a school by school and learner by learner basis they would be looking at progress at a forensic level. With regard to the creation of Abertillery Learning Community, one of the key drivers was around sustainability, he reported that for the third year running the school's year 7 pupil population had exceeded the capacity of 150 learners. The cohort going through in year 7 was now 160 learners and they were above school in-take capacity, which was important in terms of

getting resources into the school and making sure that learners had continuity from primary into secondary phase learning.

A Member raised concerns regarding the River Centre Learning Community and felt this provision needed to get back on track or it could impact on other schools in the borough. The Director said they were working closely with the school and EAS to ensure that support was fit for purpose. The River Centre was engaged with the Council around areas for improvement via the schools causing concern discussions. He assured Members that this was a top priority as the provision of the River Centre did impact on placement of learners from all other schools across the school estate. It was important that the right provision was in place for learners and the right learners were placed into the setting with the support that they needed.

The Director clarified that requirements around the Council's expectations were clearly outlined in both the pre-warning notice and the statutory warning notice. The Inclusion team had been working to secure the improvements needed and they were committed to making those differences where challenges had been identified. He advised that the EAS had also been supporting the leadership and governing body within the setting.

Councillor Martin Cook left the meeting at this juncture.

A Member commented that it was pleasing to note the progress that had been made in Abertillery Learning Community. With regard to Brynmawr Foundation school he commented on one of the recommendations from the Estyn report regarding the unsatisfactory target setting, tracking and assessments and enquired if this had improved. The EAS representative said that the target setting processes were receiving support and was an ongoing piece of work. A challenge facing all schools was ensuring that children were baselined from the beginning of autumn term so that schools could monitor their progress. Cardiff High School were working directly with leaders in Brynmawr Foundation school to look at their systems and had supported with some standardisation activity to ensure consistency i.e. that a C grade was a C grade.

In relation to the River Centre the Member raised several issues and sought clarification on the pre-warning and statutory warning notices and also, as a unique setting, what was the designation of

the River Centre i.e. Special school. He also commented on the revolving door policy, and enquired regarding dual registration between the main comprehensive or primary school and the River Centre.

The Director clarified the nature of the pre-warning and statutory warning notices, there were three strands, the first related to capacity of the school, second to admission arrangements, and third to an element that had emerged around school improvement. The statutory notice indicated that it was a school that falls within a special school category. The officer confirmed that revolving door activity was a key component ensuring that learners had the right support and was a key part of the admissions issues that were outlined within the statutory warning notice. With regard to dual registration, the Director said there would be an element of dual registration for certain learners. Moreover, in line with the requirements of ALN reform there would be Individual Development Plans that would have bespoke arrangements and requirements for learners based upon their own individual needs.

The Head of School Improvement & Inclusion added that the overarching requirements for the River Centre were being reviewed and were working with the school to ensure that there was a clear policy for pupils that attended on a revolving door basis and for those that attended on a permanent basis.

The Member felt that 64 places was not sufficient and that some pupils would be there for a longer period than others and the setting would suit some pupils throughout their educational needs. He felt it was about ensuring that pathways were set correctly so pupils came out with qualifications as this affected every school within the county borough.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the report be accepted as provided.

**No. 8**

**PUPIL EXCLUSIONS**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education which was presented to provide opportunity for Members to scrutinise internal exclusion data for Blaenau Gwent in both the primary and secondary school sectors for the academic year 2020-21, as well as the regional exclusion data for the

academic year 2019-20.

The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

In relation to professional development meetings the Chair enquired if it would be beneficial to engage with the Chair and Vice of School Governors. He also enquired regarding exclusions in relation to Children Looked After. The Officer confirmed that Chairs of Governors were invited to professional development meetings.

With regard to the data for exclusions for Children Looked After, the Senior Education Welfare Officer explained that recording of this information had begun in the summer term on a regional level via the EAS and would provide Members with this information in due course.

In response to a Member's question regarding clarification on unofficial exclusions being unlawful, the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion clarified that the Welsh Government guidance on exclusions was clear that only a Headteacher could undertake an exclusion, either through a fixed term exclusion or a permanent exclusion. Headteachers could not, for example, send a pupil home to calm down, this would be viewed as an unofficial exclusion and would be unlawful.

A Member enquired if there was a standard procedure across all schools for exclusions. The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion advised that there was one approach across all schools in the County Borough.

Regarding paragraph 6.1.12 of the report - Number of Exclusions by Reason, a Member enquired regarding the 'other' category. The Senior Education Welfare Officer said there was no official definition and would look into this categorisation.

With regard to the sharing of good practice, the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion said that part of the recovery and renewal working group with Headteachers was around well-being and sharing ideas on how to support those young people who had been adversely impacted by having significant periods of time off school. She gave an example of a school who had set up a nurture group, the idea was that young people accessed that

provision and when they felt ready would gradually be reintroduced into mainstream classes. She advised that this had impacted very positively on the exclusion rates in the school.

A Member felt that the number of children was comparatively low when compared to the number of exclusion days and the main point was how to work with those young people causing the most disruption. The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion agreed that they were relatively small numbers of young people who were extremely vulnerable and needed significant support from schools. A number of schools had undertaken trauma informed schools training and this was key to supporting those young people before they reach crisis point and was essential that early interventions be put in place to avoid exclusion behaviour being exhibited.

A Member referred to paragraph 5.1.1 of the report - the Council is required by the Education Act 1996 to ensure that pupils who have been permanently excluded are in receipt of an appropriate education after fifteen days. The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion said in those circumstances tuition would be provided for those young people as a temporary measure while different schools were explored to accommodate the pupil.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the report be accepted as provided.

**No. 9**

**EDUCATION PLANNING OBLIGATIONS - OVERVIEW**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education and the Service Manager for Education Transformation and Business Change which was presented to provide the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee with an overview of Education Planning Obligations and associated processes.

The Service Manager for Education Transformation and Business Change spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

A Member commented on the houses potentially being constructed in the County Borough over the next 4-5 years and enquired how the Council could increase the capacity of schools to facilitate the projected increase in the number of children. The

Officer said even though standard projections were produced twice annually, there was also effective monitoring and management processes in place, which informs the capacity assessments undertaken in the autumn term each year. The Officer then gave an overview of the work that was undertaken to inform the capacity assessments. The information was also used to plan school reorganisation and 21st Century school priorities and planned maintenance of the school estate management processes. Modelling is undertaken within each school in line with projections, birth data and trend data etc. Secondary schools were under pressure and were programmed for investment under Band B and potentially Band C of the 21st Century schools programme.

A Member commented that the Education Directorate needed to be included in discussions regarding planning matters. He commented on two schools within Blaenau Gwent that had the Section 106 agreements withdrawn and had concerns how this would impact on education within that area. He felt this was an excellent report as it gave Members the chance to see how planning matters affected capacity within schools.

In response to a Member's question regarding applying for Section 106 agreements, the Officer outlined the procedure. There was an established format with a dedicated form and a set formula, she advised that the methodology for calculating payments was set out in paragraph 2.7 of the report. She explained that when a potential planning obligation was identified a set form was completed and potential implications discussed with the Planning Department who then discussed with the developer. She referred to the two schools within Blaenau Gwent who had Section 106 agreements withdrawn and explained that there had been concerns about the viability of those residential developments should the contribution to Education and others be realised. They had scrutinised the data to determine whether or not they could potentially be able to manage the school estate without the developer contribution.

A Member raised concerns that as the Council had not implemented the Section 106 agreements on the residential development for over 200 houses due to the viability of the scheme, had a precedent now been set on Section 106 funding. The Officer felt that a precedence had not been set and that it was manageable as a large scale piece of work had been undertaken around that development and as the predominantly affected school was subject to a 21st Century schools funding proposal, they

determined that they could forgo the developer contribution as it could be managed within their own financial resources aligned to the capital investment from both the Local Authority and Welsh Government.

A Member commented that Section 106 agreements were important as the funding was used to benefit the pupils within the area.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the report be accepted as provided.

**No. 10**

**FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME: 30TH NOVEMBER 2021**

Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee which presented the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for the Meeting on 30th November 2021.

The Director advised that the Education Directorate Director's Overview 2021 report would be presented to the February meeting of this Committee.

A Member raised concerns regarding the recent transport disruption and how it was impacting on home to school transport. The Service Manager for Education Transformation and Business Change responded that the issues were being discussed with colleagues and would provide a briefing note on the latest position for Members consideration.

A Member requested that information regarding the number of surplus places be included in the Management of Pupil Places and the School Estate 2020/21 report.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that:

- the Education Directorate Director's Overview 2021 report be presented to the February 2022 meeting of the Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee; and
- information regarding the number of surplus places be included in the Management of Pupil Places and the School Estate 2020/21 report.

