

Committee: **Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **19th October 2021**

Report Subject: **Improving Schools Programme 2021**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr J Collins, Executive Member for Education**

Report Submitted by: **Lynn Phillips, Corporate Director of Education**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
29.09.21	30.09.21				19.10.21	10.11.21		

1. **Purpose of the Report**

The purpose of the report is 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.

2. **Scope and Background**

The report covers all schools and settings within the County Borough identified by the Education Directorate, supported by the EAS and/or Estyn as needing to improve. The Blaenau Gwent Improving Schools Programme operates within the regional arrangements for supporting schools across South East Wales.

2.1 **Update on School Categorisation 2021-2022: What are the new arrangements for supporting schools?**

School categorisation was suspended during the academic year 2019-2020. In March 2021, Welsh Government consulted on its new draft school improvement guidance (*School Improvement Guidance: framework for evaluation, improvement and accountability*). Importantly, the new proposals aim to:

- Strengthen the importance and effectiveness of self-evaluation and improvement planning by schools, which draws on a broad range of evidence;
- Focus on schools' self-evaluations and improvement priorities as the starting point for work with local authorities and regional consortia;
- Consider school performance in its widest sense, with schools evaluated in their own context, supported by a broad range of evidence, bespoke improvement planning and support;
- Ensure that the school's self-evaluation processes identify areas of strengths and priorities for improvement, which are drawn together in a single, strategic school development plan;

- Build on schools' self-evaluations and development plans to work with local authorities and regional consortia to agree the additional support they need to improve; and,
- Identify where schools have strengths and capacity to collaborate with other schools to support them.

2.2 As a result of these changes, in 2021-22 all of BG's schools will undergo a Professional Discussion with the LA, EAS and other partners. The discussion will focus on the school's priorities for improvement, the support it requires and may identify practice that is worth sharing. Schools have received a series of briefing sessions across a range of forums, to enable them to prepare for the above new ways of working. During the delivery period of this pilot approach, the views of schools will be regularly gathered, to inform practice moving forward.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 **Option 1**

Members are asked to scrutinise the information detailed within the report and contribute to the continuous assessment of effectiveness by making appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee.

3.2 **Option 2**

Accept the report as provided.

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

4.1 **Corporate Improvement Plan**

Education remains a priority in the Corporate Improvement Plan. The School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 consolidates, clarifies and reforms the law in relation to intervention in schools causing concern. The Welsh Government's statutory guidance for schools causing concern (February 2014) details the local authority powers of intervention in schools causing concern, the grounds on which those powers can be invoked and the procedures governing the intervention process. A further explanation of this is explained further in Appendix 1, which includes the LA powers of intervention.

4.2 **Blaenau Gwent Wellbeing Plan Objectives**

Through our Education provision we seek to ensure that provision is appropriate and able to meet the needs of children and young people so that their progress and performance is ambitious and raises aspirations levels.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 **Impact on Budget**

There are no direct financial implications for this report. However, the Council allocates approximately £42.8 million to schools via the Individual Schools Budget (ISB) to provide high quality education and to improve pupil outcomes.

Blaenau Gwent continues to make a financial contribution to the regional EAS arrangements of approximately £364,000 from the core Education Directorate Budget.

5.2 **Risk including Mitigating Actions**

Risk is associated with ineffective processes to ensure good progress against priorities in identified schools. Failure to raise standards is identified as a key risk to the Council, both in terms of reputation and pupil life chances. This is reflected in the Education Directorate and EAS risk registers. Mitigating actions include the routine monitoring of quantitative and qualitative information, regular Securing Improvement Partnership meetings between the Council and the EAS, regular quality assurance meetings within the Education Directorate and across teams and school inspection findings.

There is regular review of a school's progress towards its priorities. School attendance and exclusion figures are monitored on a fortnightly basis. School's safeguarding processes are also closely monitored. Holistic support packages are devised via regular intra Council services meetings between OD, finance, health and safety, education and school governor support services. The quality of provision i.e. the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms is monitored and supported via the EAS. The quality of school leadership is also supported extensively by the EAS via a range of programmes and school-to-school networks.

5.3 **Legal**

The Improving Schools Programme operates within the legal framework of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013.

5.4 **Human Resources**

There are no direct staffing or workforce implications arising from this report.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 **Performance Information**

6.1.1 **Schools requiring higher levels of support that have made positive progress 2019-2021**

Since March 2020, there have been limited opportunities for Council/EAS staff to visit the schools in Blaenau Gwent to work alongside school leaders to undertake self-evaluation activity due to the pandemic. However, in-person opportunities to see provision and practice first-hand resumed to a limited degree during the Summer term 2021 and this has informed the progress evaluation of this report.

6.1.2 **Brynmawr Foundation School:**

- The school was inspected in October 2019 and placed within the category of schools requiring Special Measures.
- The school continues to be subject to a LA statutory warning notice to improve and intervention is now in place. The LA is currently reviewing the notice during the Autumn term.

- Governance has significantly improved. There are now no additional LA governors on the governing body.
- The school has had several beneficial changes in senior leadership since the core inspection, with 3 new assistant headteachers now in post and key subject leadership changes.
- During the pandemic, the school has engaged very well with EAS support and professional learning.
- A strong support plan is currently in implementation as part of the EAS Learning Network School model, working closely with Cardiff High School, with the headteacher undertaking the role of School Improvement Partner. Coaching and mentoring of leaders forms the core of this support.
- The school is part of the national pilot for *multi-agency support for schools in special measures* national initiative, which involves a range of partners supporting the school and monitoring its progress in a systematic and responsive way, tailored to the specific needs of the school. The next LA led meeting is in early October 2021.
- Estyn will revisit the school to monitor its progress from 5th-8th October 2021.
- In addition to Learning Network School support, the school has engaged in a range of helpful programmes to support improvements in teaching and learning, preparing for curriculum reform, supporting wellbeing of learners and improving outcomes for disadvantaged learners.
- The school engaged very positively with the Celebrate, Share, Support and Refine initiative, which demonstrated that it had in place strong practice during the time of school closure in providing online learning for pupils, and good support for families within the community.

Progress update:

- From evidence seen in limited on-site visits during Summer 2021, there is still work to be done, but the school is making progress against its recommendations with good progress made in strengthening leadership.

6.1.3 Abertillery 3-16 Learning Community:

- The school was inspected in February 2018 and placed in the category of schools requiring significant improvement.
- The school is currently subject to an LA warning notice. The LA is currently reviewing this via the SCC meeting in the Autumn term.
- Governance has improved significantly. Governors have received a planned programme of EAS support and sub-committees are now working well.
- The Learning Community has had several changes in senior leadership since the inspection: a new substantive Headteacher was appointed in January 2020; a Deputy Phase Lead at Primary was appointed in Spring 2021; a new substantive Secondary Phase Lead started at Easter 2021; a new Secondary Assistant Headteacher started at Easter. The impact of leadership consolidation can now be seen in more consistent provision and practice across the community, with standards in books overall broadly in line with age and stage.

- The school is engaging well with Tonyrefail School as its Learning Network School. On-site visits between the schools commenced in May 2021, and Tonyrefail supported with an EAS/LA verification visit in May 2021, which included the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion.
- In addition to Learning Network School support, the school has engaged in a range of helpful programmes to support improvements in teaching and learning, developing middle leadership, preparing for curriculum reform, supporting wellbeing of learners and improving outcomes for disadvantaged learners.
- The school engaged very positively with the Celebrate, Share, Support and Refine initiative, which demonstrated that it had in place strong practice during the time of school closure in providing online learning for pupils, and good support for families within the community.

Progress update:

- The May verification visit looked at a limited but useful range of first-hand evidence, supporting the view that the school has made satisfactory progress overall against its inspection recommendations.
- Some aspects of the school's progress were identified as strong (e.g. leadership development).
- Estyn will revisit the school to monitor its progress during the autumn or spring terms this year.

6.1.4 **Sofrydd Primary School:**

- The Local Authority commissioned a Leadership, Management, Teaching and Learning Review at the school, in February 2020. This review found significant shortcomings in the way the school was led and managed.
- A new substantive Headteacher was appointed in September 2021.
- The governing body is now carrying out all its statutory functions and governors report stronger engagement with the school.
- The school engaged very positively with the Celebrate, Share, Support and Refine initiative, which demonstrated that it had in place strong practice during the time of school closure in providing online learning for pupils, and good support for families within the community.
- The Headteacher worked quickly and effectively to put in place additional nurture provision to support vulnerable learners during their acting period in post. This was supported financially by the LA.
- The school has been supported by a Learning Network School (LNS) arrangement with both Cwrt Rawling Primary School and Blaen-y-Cwm Primary School, which has enabled improvements to be made in the quality of teaching and pupils' learning. The school has also engaged well with fortnightly EAS mathematics and STEM in-school support, as well as programmes to improve outcomes for disadvantaged youngsters and those who have had adverse childhood experiences.

Progress update:

- A formal review of progress against the recommendations of the review in 2020 will take place this term, with the new Headteacher and the

leadership team working collaboratively together. This will inform the identification of priorities for improvement moving forward and the school's status under the SCC arrangements.

6.1.5 **Schools Causing Concern**

The River Centre Learning Community:

- The LA is concerned that the school does not engage with key statutory LA functions and services. The pre-warning letter of Spring 2021, which set out these concerns in detail, did not achieve the compliance required and the school was issued with a Statutory Warning Notice on 14.09.21.
- Schools Causing Concern meetings have not provided the LA or EAS with the assurance of the effectiveness of the school's blended learning provision.
- Staff at the school are now engaging in regional professional learning programmes including engagement with the Distance and Blended Learning training; Newly Qualified Teachers programme; Schools as Learning Organisations and wellbeing training.
- The EAS has supported the Governing Body with training in self-evaluation. Strengthening the Governing Body's effectiveness will continue to be a focus of support.
- Following the school's engagement in the Celebrate, Support, Share and Refine pilot, the EAS has supported with its review and development of distance and blended learning provision.
- The LNS school Ysgol Bryn Castell is supporting, with a focus on: developing an effective School Development Plan; reviewing the school's self-evaluation of teaching and learning, including distance and blended learning; mentoring of leaders; planning for the new curriculum and ALN reform. The school is engaging appropriately overall with this support.
- The school has also received increased support via additional School Improvement Partner (SIP) time, with a specific focus on self-evaluation and improvement planning.

Progress update:

- The LA and EAS will work alongside school leaders to undertake self-evaluation activity during the autumn term 2021 to evaluate provision and practice and agree priorities for improvement.
- From the outcome of the May SCC meeting, it should be noted that the engagement with the Schools Causing Concern process has been unsatisfactory.

6.3 **Expected outcome for the public**

6.3.1 **Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)**

The regional pilot of new ways of working to reflect the new national arrangements for school evaluation, improvement and accountability has been evolved through the engagement of a variety of stakeholders including schools and members of governing bodies. A range of Council services and external partners are involved in delivering programmes to support schools requiring

improvement. Monitoring progress towards targets enables effective targeting of support.

6.3.2 Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)

Monitoring school progress against priorities facilitates support for schools to ensure that they achieve and maintain high quality outcomes in the long term.

6.3.3 Preventative focus

Through effective monitoring and evaluation of school performance, early identification of emerging areas for improvement can be achieved with consequent early intervention to secure improvement. The effectiveness of the LA's monitoring, evaluation and intervention programmes ensure that preventative action is taken early in order to minimise the escalation of concerns.

6.3.4 Collaboration / partnership working

The LA collaborates with neighbouring local authorities through the South East Wales Consortium for the provision of School Improvement services through the Education Achievement Service (EAS).

The LA also secures a range of pupil support services such as Hearing Impaired, Visually Impaired, Speech and Language, and Ethnic Minority support services through regional collaboration. Within the LA, the school improvement and inclusion leadership teams ensure that there is a coordinated approach to supporting schools in the Education Directorate and across the Council as a whole.

6.3.5 Integration (across service areas)

The LA commissions its school improvement function on a regional basis.

6.4 EqIA (screening and identifying if full impact assessment is needed)

There is no requirement for EQIA assessment since this is not a change of policy or practice. However, implementation of the LA's monitoring, evaluation and intervention practice in schools has a positive impact on children and young people and on staff within a particular school. By improving the quality of education, standards are improved for all children and young people. Through the LA's school improvement strategy, particular focus is given to vulnerable learners and those who are at risk of underachievement.

7. Monitoring Arrangements

7.1 Monitoring of improvement pathways is an important mechanism for ensuring that Members of the Education Scrutiny Committee and the Executive are sufficiently informed to enable them to hold the authority to account effectively for the quality of education provision and hence pupil outcomes.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

Appendix 1 – Schools Causing Concern operational appendix