

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

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

**SUBJECT: EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 30<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 2021**

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

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

Councillors: J. Holt  
D. Bevan  
M. Cook  
G.A. Davies (substitute for Cllr M. Day)  
S. Healy  
J. Hill  
C. Meredith  
J.C. Morgan  
K. Rowson (substitute for Cllr J.P. Morgan)  
T. Smith  
B. Summers

**AND:** Corporate Director of Education  
Head of School Improvement & Inclusion  
Service Manager Inclusion  
Service Manager Young People & Partnerships  
Pupil & Student Officer  
Press & Publicity Officer  
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
<b>No. 1</b>	<b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b>  It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	
<b>No. 2</b>	<b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b>	

	<p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Collier, M. Day, L. Elias, J.P. Morgan and D. Wilkshire.</p> <p><b><u>Co-opted Member</u></b> T. Baxter</p> <p>Service Manager Education Transformation &amp; Business Change Strategic Education Improvement Manager</p> <p><b><u>Welcome</u></b></p> <p>The Chair welcomed Julia Carmichael, the recently appointed Service Manager for Inclusion to her first meeting of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee.</p>	
<b>No. 3</b>	<p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
<b>No. 4</b>	<p><b><u>EDUCATION &amp; LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></b></p> <p>The Minutes of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2021 were submitted, whereupon:-</p> <p><b><u>Item 10 - Forward Work Programme – 30th November, 2021</u></b></p> <p>With regard to the request for information regarding the number of surplus places be included in the Management of Pupil Places and the School Estate 2020/21 report, a Member commented that information in relation to the number of surplus places in primary schools had not been included, only information regarding secondary schools had been provided.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<b>No. 5</b>	<p><b><u>ACTION SHEET - 19<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER, 2021</u></b></p>	

The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 19<sup>th</sup> October, 2021 was submitted, whereupon:-

**Item 8 – Pupil Exclusions**

A Member requested clarification on the information provided regarding data for exclusions of Children Looked After. The Head of School Improvement & Inclusion would seek clarification if this was current data and provide further detail on the information provided regarding ‘other’ reasons for exclusions i.e. the use of mobile phones in classrooms.

The Corporate Director of Education confirmed that further anonymised detail around specific cases regarding exclusions to provide some background information could be provided. With regard to social media posts, there was rising concern but he assured Members they were supporting schools to be vigilant as much as possible. A letter had been drafted to parents advising them to be particularly vigilant with their children’s social media posts, as this did have an impact upon the school and staff well-being.

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

**No. 6**

**COVID UPDATE POSITION IN EDUCATION AND ACROSS THE SCHOOL ESTATE**

At the invitation of the Chair the Corporate Director of Education gave a brief verbal update position in education and across the school estate in response to COVID-19.

The Corporate Director advised that the overall incidence rates in Blaenau Gwent continued to fall and were currently at 412 per 100,000 population and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council was ranked 20<sup>th</sup> in Wales. This was an improving situation although the Gwent Incident Management Team (IMT) agreed that the regional risk remained high for schools across the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board. Positive count cases for pupils currently stood at 58, and workforce cases overall were stable with less than 40 staff affected across all Blaenau Gwent schools. He advised there were two primary schools

and one secondary school that had introduced elements of blended learning and this was under constant review to ensure full face to face learning returned to those settings when safe.

Recently there had been a number of Welsh Government announcements associated with the Omicron variant, mostly regarding stronger wording for the use of face coverings. The Director confirmed that there were no material changes for Blaenau Gwent schools as secondary staff and pupils had already been using face coverings in indoor settings.

He informed Members that national advice was still awaited regarding consideration of 12 to 15 year olds being offered a second dose of the vaccine, if this was formally taken forward, there would be communication with schools as this would impact upon learners in secondary settings.

He summarised that it was largely an improving situation, but there remained cause for concern, particularly around the new variant Omicron that was emerging.

**No. 7**

**EDUCATION DIRECTORATE – ALN REFORM UPDATE**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education and the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion which was presented to provide Members with an opportunity to review the progress made against ALN reform and associated policy renewal.

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

The Chair commented that it was an excellent report but felt that it should be highlighted in the report that ALN reforms strived for the best for all pupils including the more-able and talented. The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion agreed with the Member's comments and explained that with the ALN reforms the more-able and talented young people would not necessarily be in receipt of an Individual Development Plan (IDP) and when looking at universal and targeted provision they needed to ensure that the practice

going on in schools enables more-able children to thrive. They were working with the ALN Service and the Educational Psychology Service to clearly set out the responsibilities for each of those areas to ensure when they go to schools they are not just looking at supporting those pupils who may be struggling, they are also looking at supporting pupils who really need to be pushed into having those enriched experiences.

A Member commented that the Act had been partially implemented since September 2021 and enquired if all the advice and guidance had been received to ensure that the code was being correctly implemented. The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion confirmed that guidance had recently been received and training for Headteachers and Local Authority Leads for Inclusion had been undertaken. However, there had been potential concerns regarding the guidance, particularly around parental guidance as this did not fit with the messages the Welsh Government had previously given. Concerns had been raised and a response was currently awaited from the Welsh Government to confirm if this was the definitive guidance.

A Member commented that a number of schools were working extremely well on maths, and pointed out that in some schools math pupils were being mentored, and felt a briefing could be considered sometime in the future to look at what schools were doing regarding maths. He also commented on school to school working and how collaboration between schools was working well.

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. 8**

**SCHOOL ATTENDANCE**

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion which was presented to provide opportunity for Members to scrutinise attendance data for Blaenau Gwent at Primary and Secondary school level for the academic year 2020-21 and the first half-term of the academic year 2021-22.

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

The Chair referred to reducing exclusions and felt that reducing exclusions would not help attendance and may hinder it, he felt it was important to keep control of schools, especially returning after COVID, as pupils needed to feel safe in school and Headteachers should only use exclusions as a last resort. He also enquired regarding data for Elected Home Educated pupils (EHE).

With regard to reducing exclusions, the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion felt the report referred to the ambition around prevention, getting in early to ensure that young people were supported before they reach crisis point and possible exclusion. With regard to the EHE numbers, there had been an increase and the Officer would provide exact figures to Members in due course. She advised that the Welsh Government was focusing more on EHE learners and had undertaken a review of support to enable local authority intervention to check processes that parents had put in place.

A Member commented that it was important to know the reasons for non-attendance and that Officers were now focusing on this. He felt that Blaenau Gwent was performing well on pupil attendance in relation to the national figures, however, there had been a drop in pupil attendance in July and felt this may be due to parents taking their children on holiday early and enquired if a national study had been undertaken on this issue.

The Head of School Improvement & Inclusion said that the drop in pupil attendance for July probably resulted from parents taking advantage of the relaxation of COVID restrictions to take holidays. The Welsh Government was commissioning a report which was still awaited and she felt it would be interesting to see if the same reason was given across Wales for the fall in pupil attendance. She advised that they were not allowed to issue fines to parents at the moment as there was a need to support families and their well-being. However, there were some young people who had persistent absenteeism before COVID, and some families used COVID as a legitimate reason not to send

	<p>their children to school and these reasons could not be challenged.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the report be accepted as provided.</p>	
<p><b>No. 9</b></p>	<p><b><u>BLAENAU GWENT DRAFT 10-YEAR WELSH IN EDUCATION STRATEGIC PLAN CONSULTATION REPORT / ADRODDIAD YMGYNGHORI CYNLLUN STRATEGOL CYMRAEG MEWN ADDYSG 10-MLYNEDD BLAENAU GWENT</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education and the Service Manager Education Transformation and Business Change which was presented to provide Members with the opportunity to scrutinise the draft Blaenau Gwent 10-year Welsh in Education Strategic Plan, providing views, comments and responses in line with the consultation process.</p> <p>The Corporate Director of Education spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>A Member commented that if the Welsh Government wanted to increase the number of Welsh speakers they should consider making Welsh compulsory in schools and provide extra resources to facilitate this. The Director of Education said the provision of learning Welsh was already a statutory component of the curriculum and felt that it was crucial to provide provision through the medium of Welsh as early as possible within the education system.</p> <p>In response to a Member’s question regarding progress on developments for the Welsh school in Tredegar, the Director of Education said that progress was going well, some investigatory work on the proposed site had provided assurances that the site was suitable for development and at this point in time they were still on track to have the new school available from September 2023. He hoped that post pandemic site visits could be considered for Members to see some of the practices going on within schools.</p> <p>A Member commented that most schools in Blaenau Gwent used incidental Welsh throughout the school and thought</p>	

that all secondary schools taught Welsh, from year 7 pupil options were between full time Welsh or short course Welsh so that every child sat a Welsh exam. The Head of School Improvement & Inclusion said there was an expectation for schools to use incidental Welsh and that all young people from nursery upwards were having Welsh lessons.

The Director of Education added that it was important to recognise within the WESP document the priority around Welsh as a second language and promoting that within English medium schools to increase the amount of use of the Welsh language in school settings.

The Chair commented that it was important that parents with children who attended Welsh medium schools were supported. The Director of Education said that parental ability to be able to communicate via the Welsh language in home settings was an important consideration for learners being able to use the language in an immersive way. He advised that there was an element of Adult and Community Learning provision that needed to be strengthened moving forward to ensure that parents had the right skills to help and support their children in the medium of Welsh.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the draft 10-year Welsh in Education Strategic Plan (WESP) be accepted.

**No. 10 MANAGEMENT OF PUPIL PLACES AND THE SCHOOL ESTATE 2020/21**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education and the Service Manager Education Transformation and Business Change which was presented to provide Members with the opportunity to scrutinise the management of pupil places and the school estate, throughout the 2020/21 academic session.

The Corporate Director of Education spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

A Member enquired regarding the live birth data. The Director of Education advised that the Council was yet to



receive the 2020/21 live birth data from Aneurin Bevan University Health Board. With regard to planning for school places they also look at trend analysis as some schools received more applications. Both the birth rates and the trend analysis gave an overall picture that depicts likely projections for surplus places across the school estate. He advised that they were expecting the overall pupil population to increase and they were also starting to see some positive trends around inward migration into the county borough.

A Member referred to surplus places and was disappointed that information for primary schools had not been provided and requested that this be an action point for the next meeting.

The Director of Education clarified that the information presented in the table on page 325 related to secondary schools. He advised that a similar table had been produced for the primary sector and would ensure that was shared with Members. Surplus places in the primary sector had been in the region of 29% which had now been reduced significantly.

The Member referred to condition surveys that showed the condition of Blaenau Gwent schools had improved dramatically over a period of time. He referred to trend analysis and enquired if work was undertaken with parents, to share the improvements made to schools, to give them confidence to send their children to Blaenau Gwent schools, to reduce outward migration as pupil numbers affected school finances. The Director of Education confirmed that the data did include trend analysis and they worked with parents to give them assurances and confidence, that as learners transition from primary into secondary schools, that the secondary settings were well placed to from the quality of the learning environment perspective. He pointed out that this year Abertillery Learning Community year 7 had admitted 160 learners which had been a dramatic turnaround of the uptake of places within the school setting.

With regard to Penycwm school and the River Centre a Member enquired how these schools were assessed. The Director of Education said that capacity at Penycwm school had recently been increased to 175 and capacity at the

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River Centre was 64. As Special schools, the learners within those settings were placed via the Additional Learning Needs Panel and was based upon learners needs and requirements.

The Chair commented in relation to Ebbw Fawr Learning Community the data for January 2022 was 992 and reduced to 943 for January 2028 and raised concerns that with all the new residential developments being undertaken in Blaenau Gwent how the data was reducing. The Director of Education said the figures were based upon the anticipated pupil population coming through the system, which showed a slight decline in that area. Moving forward this would be compensated by the new housing developments taking place. The secondary phase was going to be meeting capacity in the near future but at this point in time it was difficult to make calculations on pupil populations with housing developments still in relatively early stages of development. There would be an annual review of the numbers but the Director was confident that Ebbw Fawr Learning Community would be reaching and meeting capacity over the next few years.

The Member accepted the Director's comments but reiterated his concerns that Ebbw Fawr Learning Community with reduced capacity would then not be able to accommodate the number of pupils.

A Member commented that the Education Directorate was fully aware of the situation with regard to Ebbw Fawr Learning Community and felt confident that they would look at future numbers and future provision the school could provide.

The Corporate Director of Education commented that three out of the four secondary settings were starting to have emerging sufficiency issues and as a consequence there needed to be investment within the school estate. He pointed out there was now less migration out of county to secondary learning settings which was very positive and was encouraging to note that Blaenau Gwent learners were receiving their teaching and learning in Blaenau Gwent settings.

	<p>The Chair felt that all Councillors should promote Blaenau Gwent schools and inform parents how good education in Blaenau Gwent schools was.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely that the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee considered the report, and provided comments relating to the current monitoring and reporting processes.</p>	
<p><b>No. 11</b></p>	<p><b><u>FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – 1<sup>ST</sup> FEBRUARY, 2022</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>The Chair advised that the Forward Work Programme for the meeting on the 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2022 was substantial and proposed that a Special meeting of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee be arranged to consider the Youth Service Performance Report, the Recovery and Renewal report and the Education Directorate End of Year 2021 report.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2022 consider the following reports:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 21st Century Schools Programme Bands B progress and education project overview</li> <li>• School Admissions Policy for Nursery and Statutory Education</li> <li>• Education ICT Strategy</li> </ul> <p>And FURTHER AGREED that a Special meeting of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee be arranged to consider the following reports:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth Service Performance Report</li> <li>• Recovery and Renewal report</li> <li>• Education Directorate End of Year 2021 report</li> </ul>	