

Committee: **Joint Education and Learning and Social Services Scrutiny Committee (Safeguarding)**

Date of meeting: **21st January 2022**

Report Subject: **Safeguarding - Vulnerable Learners**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr Joanne Collins, Executive Member Education**

Report Submitted by: **Sarah Dixon – Safeguarding in Education Manager and Michelle Jones – Strategic Education Improvement Manager**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
		12.01.22			21.01.22			

1. **Purpose of the Report**
 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with the opportunity to scrutinise strategies being used to safeguard vulnerable learners and to provide relevant performance data, particularly in response to COVID-19.

2. **Scope and Background**
 - 2.2 Members will be aware of the emergency response to the COVID-19 situation, including the repurposing and subsequent reopening of schools.

 - 2.3 On 20th March 2020, all schools across Wales closed, and were re-purposed to provide provision for vulnerable learners and children of critical workers.

 - 2.4 The Welsh Government provided a definition of vulnerable children, which allowed flexibility for consideration of other children identified locally. Vulnerable children included Children Looked After, those on the Child Protection register, those on a Care and Support Plan, those open to Families First, those open to the Youth Service, those identified through Operation Encompass, young carers, and those identified by schools as vulnerable.

 - 2.5 During this first lockdown period, schools were re-purposed as hubs and Children’s Services were required to prioritise their contact with those families being supported through a statutory service. Children on the child protection register and children looked after were considered for places at a school hub. Education and Children’s Services worked closely together to identify those children requiring a hub placement.

 - 2.6 Schools re-opened to all learners in the Autumn term 2020.

 - 2.7 During the second lockdown period in the Spring term 2021, measures established in the first lockdown period to meet the safeguarding needs of vulnerable learners were re-introduced. In addition, there was greater

flexibility in the criteria for accessing a school hub placement and a wider range of learners were able to access this provision.

- 2.8 Schools once again re-opened to all learners from Summer term 2021.
- 2.9 A Renewal and Recovery action plan has been established. One of the key priorities within this plan is supporting vulnerable learners.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

- 3.1 **Option 1** – Members consider and accept the report.

Option 2 – Members provide comments in relation to any improvements that can be made.

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

Education is a strategic priority and key to facilitating delivery of the Corporate Plan. One of the objectives in the Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan is for every child to have the best start in life. The Council seeks to ensure that provision is appropriate and able to meet the needs of children and young people, so that their progress is in line with ambitious expectations. Safeguarding learners is a statutory function associated with Education.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 **Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)**

There are no direct financial implications associated with this report.

5.2 **Risk including Mitigating Actions**

Failure of educational establishments to adopt rigorous arrangements for safeguarding poses significant potential risk to children and other education users. Settings are required to have safeguarding policies and procedures in place, reviewed annually, in accordance with local and national guidance.

Importantly, the Blaenau Gwent Local Government Education Services Safeguarding in Education Policy is reviewed annually and adopted by all schools.

5.3 **Legal**

Under Section 175 of the Education Act 2002, Local Authorities, governing bodies of maintained schools and FE institutions must have regard to Welsh Government Circular 272/2021, 'Keeping Learners Safe', for the purpose of meeting their duties, and should exercise their functions in a way that takes into account the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 sets out the responsibilities in terms of the promotion of well-being, places a duty on

local authorities to arrange or provide for services which contribute to the prevention of abuse or neglect and ensures all agencies give sufficient priority to safeguarding.

5.4 Human Resources

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

6. Supporting Evidence

6.1 Performance Information and Data

- 6.1.1 At the onset of COVID, there were 62 children on the child protection register and 129 children looked after on roll in Blaenau Gwent's schools. These children would, therefore, have been eligible for a hub placement. The number accessing a school hub placement was variable on a daily basis and changed in response to changing need.
- 6.1.2 A daily Designated Safeguarding Person (DSP) was assigned to each hub and safeguarding contact information and procedures for reporting were reinforced and shared widely. The Local Authority confirmed the contact information for DSPs, to enable accurate points of contact for Children's Services.
- 6.1.3 A weekly safeguarding bulletin was established to co-ordinate the safeguarding information being shared with schools. The bulletin was also used to reinforce the reporting arrangements for safeguarding concerns. A communication protocol was also developed to provide guidance on contact with learners and families during this lockdown period.
- 6.1.4 Schools formulated a list of vulnerable learners and made regular contact with those families. At a minimum, the contact took place fortnightly and in most cases, more frequently. Operation Encompass alerts continued to be shared and Education and Children's Services worked closely to ensure that safeguarding reports had been made and to consider any further action.
- 6.1.5 The Education Welfare Service provided support to schools with visits to vulnerable pupils where schools were unable to make contact. These visits resulted in referrals to Children's Services, housing, foodbanks and general support around accessing blended online lessons. A telephone line was also established so that pupils and parents could make direct contact with officers.
- 6.1.6 The Youth Service carried out a vulnerability assessment of all young people aged 11-16 on their database. Support included the allocation of youth workers, daily wellbeing contact, linking with parents to support the school meal process, sourcing essentials, accessing online counselling provision, online wellbeing tools and online learning. Youth Service and secondary schools worked together to ensure those vulnerable learners

who were not CLA or on the child protection register were supported. Year 6 transition support was also provided.

- 6.1.7 During this first lockdown period, multi-agency safeguarding meetings moved to a virtual model and schools were represented at these meetings. Attendance at Case Conferences improved following the move to a virtual platform, with Education/Schools represented at 94% of conferences from 2020-21 compared to 83% from 2019-20

Figure 1: Attendance by Education/Schools at Case Conferences

Q4 2020	70%
Q1 2020-2021	78%
Q2 2020-2021	95%
Q3 2020-2021	100%
Q4 2020-21	87%
Overall Attendance for Academic Year Sept – July 2020-21	94%

- 6.1.8 The CLA Education Service also adapted to the virtual working model. CLA children and their parents/carers were also supported through the CLA education team mentoring service. Children’s Services ensured that all children looked after by Blaenau Gwent had access to an appropriate IT device and mentoring support ensured that they were able to access online learning. Carers and parents were also supported to access the learning platforms.
- 6.1.9 The EHE officer supported families and learners initially with either phone calls or emails and this was later followed up by virtual meetings or doorstep visits. These visits checked on the wellbeing of learners and their families.
- 6.1.10 Children who offend and those at risk of offending were supported with regular telephone calls and virtual meetings from the Youth Offending Service. This contact addressed both wellbeing needs and any direct work that needed to be completed.
- 6.1.11 Schools reopened to all learners in Autumn 2020. Usual safeguarding arrangements applied. The safeguarding bulletin continued on a monthly basis as an effective mechanism to share safeguarding information. A monthly safeguarding in education bulletin is now embedded practice. Multi-agency meetings continued to be held on a virtual platform.
- 6.1.12 Throughout this period, Education continued to make referrals to Children’s Services. The number of referrals significantly reduced during the first lockdown period, (Quarter 1, 2020-21). As schools re-opened, the number of referrals into Children’s Services increased and the second lockdown period had less of an impact on this activity. During quarter 1 2021-22, schools reopened to all learners following the second lockdown

period, and there was a marked increase in referrals. This was followed by a decrease in Q2 2021-22 which was anticipated as the period included the Summer holiday period.

6.1.13 **Figure 2: Referrals into Children’s Services from Education**

Date	Number of Referrals
Q1 2020-2021 (lockdown)	32
Q2 2020-2021	93
Q3 2020-2021	158
Q4 2020-21 (lockdown)	135
Q1 2021-22	302
Q2 2021-22	134

6.1.14 For pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) provision, to ensure continuity of the FSM provision during the school, class and year group closure periods as a result of COVID-19, direct payment were made available for current and newly eligible approved applicants from April 2020, and this arrangement is ongoing. Application rounds are initiated on a termly basis, and prior to school holiday periods. The application process is online and available via the Council’s webpage, with communications and links distributed to parents via the individual school communication platforms.

6.1.15 The Council experienced a very high level of applications within the first few weeks, with over 100 applications per day. In order to manage this, additional staff resource was secured via the Education Transformation team, to review applications on a daily basis, and undertake the relevant checks i.e. eligibility in partnership with the Benefits team, and process applications and payments. Within the first month 1,800 eligible pupils received payments. The level of applications stabilised with a consistent flow, taking the total number of eligible pupils receiving the payment to 2,400 by the end of the Summer-term 2020. With school leavers removed, the number of pupils receiving the payment decreased to 2,200 during the Summer holiday period in 2020. Schools reopened in September 2020, at which point the Council saw a very high number of positive COVID cases in schools. Therefore, it was agreed that due to the high-level of pupils required to self-isolate, that an isolation payment of £3.90 per school day, would be made available to any FSM eligible pupils who were isolating. The Education Transformation team worked closely with schools to identify self-isolation entitlement and as a result a payment would be sent to the family. The latter continues to be implemented and monitored.

6.1.16 For each of the school holiday periods since the Autumn-term 2020, Welsh Government has committed funding for FSM direct payments of £19.50 per child, per week. Prior to each holiday period, the application round is opened for any newly eligible families to apply for the provision.

Figure 1 below, provides a timeline of implementation and uptake over the course of the last and current academic session:

Figure 3: Payment Timeline

Period	Number of Pupils Receiving Direct Payments	Notes
April 2020	1,800	
May 2020	2,000	
July 2020	2,400	
Summer Holiday Period 2020	2,200	2020 Year 11 leavers removed
October Half-term 2020	2,200	
Christmas Holiday Period 2020	2,342	
January 2020 - Average	2,383	
February Half-term 2021	2,400	
February – March 2021 Average	1,751	Staggered return to school – isolation payment average
Easter Holiday Period 2021	2,400	
Summer Holiday Period 2021	2,500	
October Half-term 2021	2,400	2021 Year 11 leavers removed

6.2 Present Position – Spring Term 2022

6.2.1 At the start of the new academic year transmission rates of the virus are increasing with the rate as at 5th January 2022 for Blaenau Gwent being 2,945 per 100,000 which is an increase of 2,177 per 100,000 in the previous 7 days. It is likely that the level of incidence will continue to increase post-Christmas break. As always, the main priority for the Local Authority and all of our schools is to consider safety and minimise disruption to learning for our children and young people. The Local Authority continues to work closely with our Headteachers in Blaenau Gwent, to agree a common approach where possible. Welsh Government will continue to work with Local Authorities and schools to monitor the situation, ensuring to adapt guidance and operations accordingly over the course of the next few months.

Schools have been advised that they will need to continue to operate at the 'very high' risk level within the WG's Schools Infection Control Framework. Blaenau Gwent schools have been functioning at this level since October 2021. There is a commitment from the Council and its

schools to keep learners safe and provide quality education for our children and young people to improve their life chances, despite the challenges faced during the emergency crisis.

Given the recent high prevalence of the Omicron virus, in addition to the actions within the recovery and renewal plan, the following arrangements have been reintroduced to support vulnerable learners.

6.2.2 Free School Meals

During periods where children who are in receipt of Free School Meals cannot attend school due to a move to blended learning, families will be able to once again access direct payments. Families who are already in receipt of a direct payment do not need to reapply. The Local Authority will contact the family via the child's school when each new round of applications opens.

6.2.3 Critical Worker and Vulnerable Learners

Over the course of the early part of the Spring term, there may be occasions where schools need to move to blended learning as a result of staff absence. Arrangements to co-ordinate this are underway to collate and retain information relating to critical worker childcare demand, and use it in order to inform and develop a childcare provision needs assessment in consideration of resourcing and capacity requirements. Generally, if schools feel that they are able to accommodate the demand for critical worker provision, then Education's Inclusion team and Social Services will advise and support regarding vulnerable learners. The Education Directorate will establish a corporate group consisting of Education, Health and Safety and Environmental Health, to work with the school in question. The purpose of the group will be to establish risk management and tolerance levels, agree and support schools to coordinate and prioritise critical worker and vulnerable learner provision.

In addition, LA will work with schools to establish and agree a critical worker priority list - taking account of the local workforce, which can be used when schools become overwhelmed in order to prioritise access. The current Welsh Government guidance on critical workers can be found here: <https://gov.wales/identifying-children-critical-workers-guidance>

6.2.4 Recovery and Renewal Plan

Within the Education Recovery and Renewal plan supporting vulnerable learners is a high priority. The current version of the plan is shown below and will continue to be updated with progress reported at regular intervals to the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee.

6.3 Expected Outcome for the Public.

There is a commitment from the Council and its schools to keep learners safe and provide quality education for our children and young people to improve their life chances, despite the challenges faced during the emergency crisis.

- 6.4 **Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)**
Children's Services and Education work closely together to ensure safeguarding in education and support for vulnerable learners is a priority.
- 6.5 **Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)**
Safeguarding is a priority at all times and one of the key priorities of the Recovery and Renewal action plan is supporting vulnerable learners.
- 6.6 **Preventative focus**
Throughout school closure periods, procedures were in place to ensure proactive contact was made with the families of vulnerable learners, to identify any support or safeguarding needs early. Specific arrangements continue to be in place to support vulnerable learners during periods of disruption.
- 6.7 **Collaboration / partnership working**
Children's Services and the Education Directorate have worked closely together throughout this period.
- 6.8 **Integration (across service areas)**
The emergency response is a 'One Council' approach.
- 6.9 **Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions**
Any physical works planned and undertaken within education settings are planned in order to take account of decarbonisation and reducing carbon emissions.
- 6.10a **Socio Economic Duty Impact Assessment**
Throughout the pandemic the number of families eligible for FSMs has increased, which suggests an increasing number of vulnerable pupils across Blaenau Gwent.
- 6.11b. **Equality Impact Assessment**
There are no adverse impacts in relation to the data in this report.
7. **Monitoring Arrangements**
- 7.1 Regular safeguarding reports are presented to Joint Education and Learning and Social Services Scrutiny Committee (Safeguarding).

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- Recovery and Renewal Action Plan – Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee – 19th October 2021
- Keeping Learners Safe - [Keeping Learners Safe \(gov.wales\)](https://www.gov.wales/keeping-learners-safe)