Executive Committee and Council only
Date signed off by the Monitoring Officer: 14.02.22
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Committee: **Executive Committee**

Date of meeting: **2nd March 2022**

Report Subject: **Blaenau Gwent Education/Schools ICT Strategy and Project Update**

Portfolio Holder: **Education and Learning Portfolio – Cllr. Joanne Collins**

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

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
13.1.22	13.1.22	15.02.22			1.2.22	02.03.22		

1. **Purpose of the Report**
1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Executive Committee with the opportunity to scrutinise progress in relation to Blaenau Gwent Education/Schools ICT Strategy, along with associated projects.

2. **Scope and Background**
2.1 **Blaenau Gwent ICT Strategy Purpose and Overview**
The purpose of the Education ICT Strategy is to clearly set out the Council and its schools' aspirations and goals, aligned to the digital learner journey within Blaenau Gwent. In addition, the strategy seeks to identify the priorities and resources required to facilitate effective infrastructure, connectivity and approaches to learning via the use of digital technologies.

2.2 **Vision for Education ICT**
'To secure continued development ensuring that all learners, regardless of age or demographic, have continued safe access to a blend of digital resources, hardware and cloud-based learning throughout the course of their education'.

2.3 **Aims and Objectives**
   o Create a safe teaching and learning environment fit for the digital age
   o Effectively engage teaching practitioners in seeking to improve and enhance the quality of teaching and learning
   o Secure continued access to high quality devices both within and outside of the classroom
   o Encourage and develop the use of technology in the classroom to facilitate improved learner outcomes in line with the Digital Competency Framework.
   o Use and incorporate new technologies in inspiring learners to become digitally skilled and enabled citizens
   o Facilitate effective connectivity for all learners in line with the delivery of a flexible blended learning offer

o Secure and develop collaboration with key partners and neighbouring authorities to inform localised developments, opportunities and create a regional strategic overview which is aligned to national priorities and associated policy

2.4 **Progress to Date**
The Blaenau Gwent Education ICT Strategy Group was re-established post emergency response period and met for the first time since November 2019, on March 18th 2021. The Group met 4 times over the course of the last academic session, and have made very good progress towards completion of the draft Education ICT Strategy. There are two remaining aspects which require completion, as follows:
- Delivery Strategy; and,
- Migration to and use of HWB.

2.5 Due to the pressures on schools and associated staff resourcing issues during the autumn-term 2021, a decision was taken to hold the final workshop until towards the end of January 2022. This will contribute to the final draft of the delivery strategy section.

2.6 Local authorities throughout Wales, have been experiencing issues with connectivity, due to an issue with the Welsh Government Internet filtering solution Websafe, which SRS authorities moved to in September 2020. Welsh Government had highlighted this solution to be more efficient, much simpler and quicker to use for schools. However, to date, these benefits are yet to be realised. BG have experienced outages and reliability issues, which have been escalated to the highest levels within Welsh Government, BT and local authorities in seeking a solution. SRS LAs were informed by Welsh Government in January 2022, that the issues which have been ongoing since the early part of the autumn-term 2021, will be resolved by the end of the second week in January. Once these issues are resolved, we can review the HWB migration strategy and complete the final section of the draft strategy.

2.7 The timeline which includes indicative dates for production of the final draft, consultation, approval and implementation can be found in **Appendix 1**.

2.8 **ICT Project Progress to Date**
Despite the impact of COVID-19, which resulted in both school access and resourcing issues, along with extensive additional planning and risk assessment requirements; the Infrastructure and Connectivity Project (ICP) was successfully delivered during the 2020/21 academic session. The project has not been without it's challenges and has encountered issues along the way including: facilities issues, Public Sector Broadband and British Telecom technical and resourcing issues, service disruption etc. However, issue management has been strong, and addressed via detailed action plans which are effectively monitored in partnership with the Council and schools.

2.9 The capital investment of £560,000 has achieved the following throughout the school estate:

- **Migration to the Schools EDU Network** – Improving the network infrastructure within schools throughout BG.
- **Improved internet connectivity and use** – Prior to project inception, school usage on the connection peaked at just over 50%. Internet usage in schools is expected to increase following these improvements. Should the capacity for schools have remained the same this would create a bottle neck, which despite faster connection, would mean that schools experience slowness.
- **School connectivity** – Connection between the school and the central infrastructure. Achieving LiDW 2020 aspirations for all schools; i.e. 100MB for primary schools and 1GB for secondary schools, for middle schools on separate sites the primary and secondary requirements apply.
- In-school infrastructure to ensure **effective internet access to meet current and future** requirements and aspirations (switches and wireless).
- **Internal connectivity** - the BG standard is defined as infrastructure and connectivity for every person in the school (student, teacher, adult) to have a maximum **1.5 internet connected devices simultaneously in appropriate areas**.
- Provision of **secure remote access for teachers, pupils, parents and governors**.
- **Centralised infrastructure including** school file storage, infrastructure licensing, software deployment servers (SCCM).
- **Secure e-safety** infrastructure arrangements – to include web filtering, anti-virus protection, and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD).
- **Centralised SIMS** – ensuring consistency and continuity of access.

2.10 **Welsh Government Hwb EdTech Initiative**
During 2019, the Welsh Government launched the Hwb EdTech (HET) initiative, which over a 3-year period, will realise an investment of over £2 million (£900,000 over waves 1 and 2) throughout the school estate. The status of the ICP placed Blaenau Gwent in a strong position to further enhance the infrastructure in line with the first 3 waves of Hwb EdTech funding. Welsh Government stipulated that waves need to be signed off sequentially. Waves 1-3 of the Hwb EdTech Programme were completed on January 31st 2021. The Council and SRS are currently working towards the completion of Wave 4, having already replaced over 40% of end of life devices, which equates to 4,194 devices in total to date.

2.11 **Digitally Disadvantaged Learners (DDL)**
The Council are working with the Shared Resource Service and its schools, in order to undertake a fundamental review of both the provision and demand. The strategy to date, has involved the repurposing of end of life devices using Neverware software, which is carried out by the Shared Resource Services via the current SLA team. However, there is a licence cost involved with the Neverware product, which requires renewal on an annual basis. To date, funding has been obtained via a variety of sources

as follows: Welsh Government Hwb EdTech Programme, the Welsh Government Hardship Grant and the Council, in order to establish and deliver this project.

2.12   Device requirements for digitally disadvantaged learners are regularly reviewed in partnership with schools, with a view to identifying, rebuilding and distributing devices in line with demand. Currently, 1,359 devices and 161 Mi-Fi units have been distributed to digitally disadvantaged learners, the allocation and management of which, is undertaken by the schools in partnership with SRS and the Council.

2.13   **Sustainability**
It has been agreed that the Neverware licences for 682 of the current DDL device allocation, will be supported by the Welsh Government until July 2022. Additional devices over and above those funded by Welsh Government, will require a Neverware licences at a cost of £25 per device, per annum. The Council has been supporting connectivity for the Mi-Fi devices at a cost of approx. £2,135 per calendar month between Spring 2020 and Spring 2022. Ongoing costs associated with the Mi-Fi connectivity (the devices/units themselves have been purchased via the Council), will be taken over by schools from January 2022.

2.14   A review process commenced with schools during the spring-term, in order to inform the development of school device sustainability plans from January 2022. In addition to DDL device management, school-based device replacement sustainability planning is in development for implementation from April 2022. This will ensure that the device replacement strategy of at least 20% of end of life devices per annum, in line with the device audit and review process.

2.15   **SRS Service Level Agreement (SLA)**
The SRS SLA is coming to the end of the existing 3-year cycle (April 2019 – April 2022), and is currently under review in line with the Council's SLA programme. Headteacher and Governor engagement sessions are planned throughout January and February 2022.

2.16   The SRS Education Service aims to provide a comprehensive and all-inclusive offering that caters for the needs of the school and underpinned by the SLA agreement between schools and the SRS. The SLA provision covers:
- Management and monitoring of the ICT infrastructure and hardware in schools such as switches, access points and caching servers.
- Management and monitoring of the central ICT infrastructure.
- Day to day technical support, school visits and end user device management.
- High quality technical advice, project planning and problem resolution.

2.17 The service has significantly moved forward over the last 18 months, reshaping to continue to deliver a high quality service despite the backdrop of the global pandemic. Blaenau Gwent schools have been supported with:

- The Hwb EdTech programme delivery – including the device roll-out project.
- Design, implementation and review of the Digitally Disadvantaged Learners strategy.
- A home working response team dedicated to meeting the needs of staff and students as we moved away from an education setting to 'blended learning'.
- Safeguarding schools against cyber threats.
- Maintaining the integrity of associated systems.

Ensuring the platform and service provided is relevant to school's needs.

3. **Options for Recommendation**
3.1 **Option 1:** The Executive Committee accepts the report.

3.2 **Option 2:** The Executive Committee considers the report, and provides comments relating to the current monitoring and reporting processes.

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**
4.1 Education is a Strategic priority within the Council's Corporate Plan, of which the development and sustainability of school-based ICT provision is an essential component in relation to teaching, learning and pupil outcomes.

4.2 Welsh Government has developed the Digital Competency Framework (in line with the Donaldson report, and 'A Curriculum for Wales – a Curriculum for Life', 2015). The DCF establishes a framework for the delivery of ICT across the curriculum that will enable the development of a digitally skilled pupil population in the use of technologies, whilst preparing them for future progression routes and career pathways.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**
5.1 **Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)**
There are no new or additional budgetary implications for the Council associated with the ICT Strategy. There is, however, an agreed approach to infrastructure and device sustainability, which has previously been approved via the Council's political process, and will be subject to continued monitoring and review. This involves:

- **Future infrastructure costs** will be funded by continuing the existing ISB top slice (£50,000) to generate further prudential borrowing. This will realise a further investment of circa £500,000.
- **Future device costs** will be funded via school budgets on an annual basis, in line with each individual school's sustainability plan.

5.1.1 The SRS Service Level Agreement review is underway, with cost plans programmed for circulation among school leaders and governance, during the latter part of January 2022.

5.1.2 The ICP project was delivered on profile as was the Digitally Disadvantaged Learner Project. Welsh Government Hwb EdTech Funding received for Wave 4 to date, is as follows: £293,293.35. Education are presently awaiting confirmation of further funding to complete this Wave, having highlighted to Welsh Government our current status and future requirements.

5.2 **Risk including Mitigating Actions**
The primary risk is failure to deliver an effective ICT strategy in line with the WG Education Digital Standards, which facilitates and enhances delivery aligned to the Digital Competency Framework and the new Curriculum for Wales. However, this is largely mitigated due to the following:

- The Infrastructure and Connectivity Project has successfully been delivered, along with Waves 1-3 of the Hwb EdTech Programme. Wave 4 implementation is currently underway, and progressing as programmed and in line with the financial profile.
- Sustainability sessions have taken place in order to inform the device refresh and replacement programme, along with the development of the ICT Strategy. As a result, school's ICT Sustainability Plans have been drafted and will be reviewed in the early part of the Spring-term 2022, for implementation in the 2022/23 financial year.
- Strong progress has been made in line with the development of the Education ICT Strategy, which is scheduled for consultation in the Spring-term 2022, and implementation from September 2022.
- The Website/PSA issues continue to be subject to daily monitoring and escalation processes, with school's connectivity having been negatively affected – particularly during the latter part of the Autumn-term 2021. These issues have been escalated to the highest level, with WG having produced an action plan to address them. An effective communications plan is in place, which has been developed in partnership with SRS and neighbouring authorities, to ensure that schools are in receipt of up to date information in order to aid planning, engagement and delivery.
- There is continued engagement with school's via headteachers, regarding both the projects and individual school needs
- Device and infrastructure audits have been undertaken for all schools and are update annually, meaning that the Council, SRS and schools have an excellent working knowledge of provision.

5.3 **Legal**
There are no direct legal implications associated with this report.

5.4 **Human Resources**
There are no direct legal implications associated with this report.

6.   **Supporting Evidence**
6.1   **Performance Information and Data**
        To date the following outcomes have been achieved:
        - 1,359 devices and 161 Mi-Fi units have been distributed to digitally disadvantaged learners.
        - 4,194 devices have been ordered to replace end of life devices throughout the school estate.
        - 30 out of 30 school sites have been fully migrated and their connectivity addressed under the ICP. Infrastructure upgrades have been completed in 30 out of 30 school sites.
        - Device and infrastructure audits have been completed and updated for all schools.

6.2   **Expected outcome for the public**
        The primary outcomes associated with projects are driven by two key education objectives:
        - Improved quality of teaching and learning via the development of a fit for purpose ICT infrastructure; and,
        - Improved standards of education, pupil attainment and outcomes.
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6.3   **Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)**
        Stakeholder and end user needs and engagement are of paramount importance, and a key focus of the strategy and associated projects. The strategy will be subject to consultation, which will be used to inform development, delivery, progression and learning.

6.4   **Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)**
        The projects and Blaenau Gwent ICT Strategy will be form part of a 10-year plan in addressing classroom delivery, ICT infrastructure, connectivity and device-based sustainability, throughout Blaenau Gwent school estate.

6.4.1   Shared Resource Service Wales SLA, will be reviewed with schools on a 3-yearly basis in line with the economic life of the assets. The SLA will ensure that SRS are able to provide the required level of support in managing the infrastructure and connectivity requirements of Blaenau Gwent's schools.

6.5   **Preventative focus**
        The ICP and Hwb EdTech Projects, along with the strategy aim to address existing ICT issues and enhance provision, whilst ensuring parity of provision throughout the school estate and ensuring a sustainable strategic approach which creates consistency.

6.6   **Collaboration / partnership working**
        Both the strategy projects require a collaborative approach in terms development, implementation, monitoring and progression. This is carried out via the ICT Strategy Group, Project, Welsh Government and SRS delivery team and strategic planning meeting.

6.7 **Integration (across service areas)**
The projects and strategy are being progressed and managed by a multi-disciplinary team with dedicated officers from key services, along with external partners.

6.8 **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.

6.9a **Socio Economic Duty Impact Assessment**
The report does not involve a strategic decision covered under the Act, however, the above assessment will be undertaken in line with production of the final strategy.

6.9b. **Equality Impact Assessment**
EqIA screening and impact assessments are carried out on a case by case basis.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**
7.1 The projects are managed in accordance with Blaenau Gwent Corporate Project Management Framework and the PRINCE 2 methodology. Project development and implementation is managed via the Education Transformation Manager in partnership with the Shared Resource Service. Project monitoring is carried out via the Project Group, Programme Board and the ICT Strategy Group, along with regular reporting to Welsh Government. This process supports effective project management ensuring that both projects meet spend and delivery profiles.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

Appendix 1 – Timeline