

Committee: **Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting: **15th March 2022**
Report Subject: **Education Directorate-Response to COVID-19**
Portfolio Holder: **Executive Member of Education, Cllr. Joanne Collins**
Report Submitted by: **Corporate Director for 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)
		02.03.22			15.03.22			

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members of the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee with an opportunity to review the Education Directorate’s response to the COVID-19 situation, particularly supporting the schools during the emergency response period.

2. Scope and Background

2.1 Members will be aware that the Corporate Director of Education provides a verbal update to Scrutiny Committee regarding the response to the COVID-19 emergency. This report provides the background, context and a current view of the response, in particular how the Council has and will continue to support schools during the pandemic. The report predominantly reflects on the activity covering Spring term.

2.2 School Position – February 2022

The Council’s corporate response during 2021-22 has focussed on our learners returning to whole school settings. The Blaenau Gwent Whole School Re-opening Guidance document outlined the local approach and is a key source of reference for implementation in schools. It provides schools with a strategic framework for a safe and effective return to whole school working. It continues to be a dynamic emergency response situation, and therefore, the Council has continued to work with the schools to review the planning arrangements and amend the guidance accordingly e.g. the use of face masks and social distancing requirements. A summary of the main considerations that were most pertinent to the whole school learning is provided below:

- Blaenau Gwent adopted a strategic approach to whole school re-opening for consistency purposes;
- Executive Headteacher School Planning Groups for secondary, primary and special schools are established;
- Re-opening from 1st September 2021 involved a common approach across the school estate; and,
- The BG approach is in line with WG’s national School Infection Control Framework, which places an emphasis on localised

determination of response to COVID, particularly linked to COVID Secure Risk Assessments on a school by school basis.

2.3 School Provision – Spring Term 2022

At the time of drafting the report, the overall Blaenau Gwent incidence rate is 300.6 per 100,000 population and the positivity rate is 27.0. This is an improving picture across the County Borough during recent weeks. The latest BG schools case data is outlined below in Table 1. The number of reported cases amongst school children has now decreased significantly.

2.4 Table 1

Weekly Totals: Last 12 Weeks (Week beginning)

Week Commencing	Case Count	Weekly Change	% Change
21-Nov	52		
28-Nov	60	8	15%
05-Dec	61	1	2%
12-Dec	48	-13	-21%
19-Dec	49	1	2%
26-Dec	127	78	159%
02-Jan	144	17	13%
09-Jan	107	-37	-26%
16-Jan	288	181	169%
23-Jan	198	-90	-31%
30-Jan	135	-63	-32%
06-Feb	59	-76	-56%
Grand Total	1328		

2.5 The workforce considerations across Blaenau Gwent schools continues to be monitored and is reported separately at GOLD. The position is an improving one, however, there are real challenges in the Education sector relating to securing appropriate supply teaching staff in particular. The latest position is that 35 staff are affected, including:

- 30 confirmed COVID cases, of which 9 are working from home;
- 1 self-isolating due to new symptoms;
- 2 self-isolating following positive LFT, 1 of which is working from home;
- 1 self-isolating prior to hospital admission; and,
- 1 self-isolating following symptoms in the household.

2.6 Education has assembled a Task and Finish Group on which they lead, comprised of officers from Health and Safety, Environmental Health and Test Trace and Protect (as required). The Group is convened in response to the following:

- A rise in cases in a particular class or school grouping;
- Human resource depletion and associated considerations; and,

- Risk tolerance and mitigation reviews.

The T&F Group has supported all schools in managing the increased risks to school operation associated with, and/or compounded by the pandemic. Thus far this Spring term (over the course of a 7-week period), 10 classes have moved to blended learning across 6 school settings, as follows:

- One Special School - 5 classes linked to positive cases negatively impacting upon staff resourcing
- Four Primary Schools - 3 Nursery classes, 1 Reception class, 1 Year 1 class and 1 Foundation Phase Resource Base class, linked to positive cases negatively impacting upon staff resourcing
- One Secondary School – 1 Year 9 class linked to positive cases negatively impacting upon staff resourcing

Blended learning has been offered between 1 and 8 days, with the majority of the above cases lasting between 1-4 days. During periods where classes have moved to blended learning, schools have sought to prioritise on site provision for critical worker children and vulnerable learners - where resources are available. This is an extremely positive picture in comparison to the situation in the autumn-term, whereby the move to blended learning were a weekly occurrence with approximately 4 classes on average per week accessing blended learning.

The Council has continued to work closely with our Headteachers to adopt a common approach to provision for learners across Blaenau Gwent and schools report back positively regarding the corporate response across the Council.

2.7 Recovery and Renewal – Priorities

- 2.7.1 The Education Directorate core purpose is to secure ‘Better Schools, Better Citizens and Better Communities’ through a child centred approach. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that the impact of approaching 24 months’ disruption to teaching and learning is far reaching. Recovery is planned in the short, medium and long term for learner development and progression. The Council has established a corporate recovery framework (**Appendix 1**) and a key strand of this work will be a learning sub-group that will be led by the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion and Service Manager for Education Transformation and Business Change, with regular reporting into Corporate Leadership Team. Moreover, the Education Directorate’s top priority in the EAS business plan is to;

Minimise the impact of COVID-19 on learner development and progress, including improving the digital competency of all learners and staff in the wider Blaenau Gwent school community.

- 2.7.2 The Education Directorate are using the learning from the pandemic and the aim is to ‘build back better’. Through schools having to adapt to new ways of working, a number of positive outcomes have been evidenced. The Directorate will work with relevant stakeholders, including schools and the EAS, to use these outcomes to shape new ways of working across the

Education Directorate and throughout the school estate. The core purpose of all schools in Blaenau Gwent will be to provide excellent learning and teaching for all our learners, but this will not mean a return to doing things as they were pre-pandemic, but to using the experience of the pandemic to shape education provision as we move forward. The Recovery and Renewal report was presented to Members early in 2022, but the latest update is as follows;

- Impact assessments completed.
- Key measures to indicate progress identified.
- Baseline and data collection on key measures from September 2021 in place.
- Recovery and Renewal targets set from September 2021 baseline.
- Curriculum Reform, ALN Reform and Recovery and Renewal groups set up from September 2021 and now working effectively to ensure a strategic approach to the delivery of the Recovery and Renewal Plan.
- Detailed action plan for each impact area shared with relevant stakeholders.
- A series Headteacher working groups has been set up with 14 schools participating that started in January 2022. Recovery and renewal, self-evaluation and the theme of 'building back better' are key components of the work of these collaborative groups. The Terms of Reference (ToR) for the working groups are shown in **Appendix 2** and the progress documents in **Appendix 3**.

2.7.3 The Estyn Thematic Review report previously presented to the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee provided a positive overview of the Council's response in supporting our schools during the pandemic. Moreover, a full School Operational Guidance review served schools well, along with additional training packages and information sessions for school leaders.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 This report has been previously discussed by Education DMT, CLT and the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee.

Option 1: Scrutiny Committee accept the report as presented.

Option 2: Scrutiny Committee are requested to consider the information detailed within the report and contribute to the continuous assessment of effectiveness by making appropriate recommendations to the Committee.

This report provides the Scrutiny Committee with important emergency response and statutory information, as well as opportunity to identify where progress has been made and where further improvement is required.

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

4.1 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. This is particularly pertinent in an emergency crisis situation.

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, however, it should be noted that the impact of the COVID-19 emergency response on both Council and school revenue budgets is being closely monitored. The Education Directorate Q3 revenue budget monitoring position demonstrates a favourable variance circa £177,000, mostly attributable to the Strategic Management and Premature Retirement Costs (PRC) revenue budgets. There are, however, some cost pressures that are being managed through school support services, such as cleaning, but there is WG Hardship funding available until March 2022 to offset aspects of the additional cost burdens at this point in time.

5.2 **Risk including Mitigating Actions**

There are two strategic risks associated with this report;

1. The impact of COVID-19 on learner progression and pupil regression. This is being mitigated through the Council, EAS and Schools working in collaboration to support learners across the board; and,
2. The risks associated with the provision of safe learning environments to minimise the potential transmission of COVID. There are comprehensive risk assessments in place to mitigate the risks, but the situation is constantly under review and appropriate remedial action is taken e.g. self-isolation protocols are implemented.

5.3 **Legal**

This report provides information relating to the emergency response requirements as well as the specific Education obligations set out the School Standards and Organisation Act Wales (2013) to support strategic and operational activity to improve pupil outcomes and wellbeing.

5.4 **Human Resources**

Colleagues in Organisational Development provide a weekly analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the Education Directorate's workforce. There is a stabilisation of cases amongst the workforce, importantly this has resulted in only a limited impact on service delivery within schools at the time of drafting this report.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

Across the board, the emergency response from the Council and its schools has been largely effective, especially in the following aspects of work:

- Re-purposing of schools – supporting children of key workers and vulnerable learners;
- Re-opening schools – from the June 2020;
- Preparing for academic year 2021/22, particularly whole school re-opening from September 2021, in line with WG expectations; and,
- Spring term 2022 arrangements, particularly retaining face to face learning, where possible.

6.2 **Expected Outcome for the Public**

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

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

There has been extensive involvement of key stakeholder both corporately and across the school estate. The planning groups for secondary, primary and special schools that are established, including Headteacher representation has secured a collaborative and corporate response.

6.4 **Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)**

This report largely reflects on the emergency response to date, however, there are robust governance arrangements in place to support the next stages of the emergency for the foreseeable future.

6.5 **Preventative Focus**

The Council's emergency response has facilitated a preventative approach to minimising the transmission of the COVID-19 virus.

6.6 **Collaboration / Partnership Working**

The report outlines the significant amount of partnership working at a strategic and operational level. This has resulted in a strengthening of the working relationships between the Council and the schools.

6.7 **Integration (across service areas)**

The emergency response has been a 'One Council' approach.

6.8 **Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions**

N/A

6.9a **Socio Economic Duty Impact Assessment**

The existing impact assessment and action plan was created prior to the socio-economic duty commencing. However, an assessment will be carried out in relation to each priority area during the spring-term review process

6.9b. **Equality Impact Assessment**

The application of EqIA's to each priority has been considered as part of the Education impact assessment process. EqIA's will be undertaken in line with development and implementation of the recovery and renewal plan.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

7.1 The report will be presented to the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee and then subsequently through to the Executive Committee for monitoring purposes.

Background Documents / Electronic Links

Appendix 1



Appendix 2
Response and recov

- Appendix 2



HWG Terms of
Reference.docx

- Appendix 3



Workstream Action
Plan Version 1 (Febru