

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

**SUBJECT: EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE – 15TH MARCH, 2022**

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

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR J. HOLT (IN THE CHAIR)

Councillors: D. Bevan
M. Cook
P. Edwards (substitute for L. Elias)
S. Healy
J. Hill
C. Meredith
J.C. Morgan
J.P. Morgan
T. Smith
B. Summers
D. Wilkshire
L. Winnett (substitute for H. Trollope)

AND: Corporate Director of Education
Strategic Education Improvement Manager
Service Manager Inclusion
Service Manager Education Transformation &
Business Change
Service Manager Young People & Partnerships
Pupil & Student Officer
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

ALSO: **Representatives of EAS**
Ed Pryce, Assistant Director
Hayley Davies-Edwards, Principal Challenge Advisor

Representative of Aneurin Leisure Trust
Ceri Waters, Partnership, Funding & Contracts Manager

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
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<p>No. 1</p>	<p><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></p> <p>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.</p>	
<p>No. 2</p>	<p><u>APOLOGIES</u></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H. Trollope (Chair), G. Collier and L. Elias.</p> <p><u>Co-opted Member</u> T. Baxter</p>	
<p>No. 3</p>	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
<p>No. 4</p>	<p><u>SPECIAL EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The Minutes of the Special Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 26th January, 2022 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p>No. 5</p>	<p><u>ACTION SHEET – 26TH JANUARY, 2022</u></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the special meeting of the Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 26th January, 2022 was submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the action sheet be noted.</p>	
<p>No. 6</p>	<p><u>EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The Minutes of the Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 1st February, 2022 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p>No. 7</p>	<p><u>ACTION SHEET – 1ST FEBRUARY, 2022</u></p>	

	<p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 1st February, 2022 was submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the action sheet be noted.</p>	
<p>No. 8</p>	<p><u>EDUCATION DIRECTORATE RESPONSE TO COVID-19</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education, which was presented to provide Members with an opportunity to review the Education Directorate’s response to the COVID-19 situation, particularly supporting the schools during the emergency response period.</p> <p>The Corporate Director of Education presented the report and gave an overview of the current position with regard to the Education Directorate’s response to Covid-19.</p> <p>A Member enquired if there were any proposals to reduce the school summer holiday period to catch up on pupil learning as this was being considered in England. He also raised concerns regarding the increased charges for Leisure services and the affect this would have on some children’s health and well-being. The Corporate Director of Education responded that there were no proposals to change the duration of the school summer holiday period. With regard to the proposed increase in charges for Leisure services, in particular swim prices, he confirmed that following negotiation with the Aneurin Leisure Trust the proposed increase in swim charges had been reduced and would be implemented from 1st April, 2022.</p> <p>A Member referred to page 78 of the report and commented that EAS Challenge Advisors had now been replaced with School Improvement Partners. He felt that the report needed information in relation to youngsters with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and in relation to academic progress enquired if level 1 qualifications had been withdrawn from the River Centre. The Corporate Director of Education responded that he would ensure that future reports would be updated with regard to the title of School Improvement Partners. With regard to youngsters with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties he</p>	

confirmed that learners at the River Centre in year 11 would have the opportunity to access appropriate qualifications from level 1 up to GCSE's and would also be offered other alternative curriculum qualifications.

A Member referred to the recent temporary closure of the River Centre for health & safety reasons. The Corporate Director of Education confirmed the River Centre had been partially closed to years 9, 10 & 11 for a short period of time and explained that a major incident had occurred and support from both Gwent Police and the South Wales Fire Service had been requested. As a result, a safer schools package of support had been put in place which included a number of key partners and corporate support services to ensure that arrangements within the setting facilitated improved practices in the future.

The Member had been unaware of this issue and enquired regarding the process to keep Members informed of such incidents. The Service Manager Education Transformation & Business Change explained that all Local Authority support services were notified when there was a school closure, and a communication was distributed to Ward Members on behalf of the school and the Education Directorate notifying them of the latest position. The Service Manager confirmed that a communication was issued but would ensure that the Corporate Communications team were aware of any issues regarding Member distribution.

A Member commented that a comprehensive report on the River Centre and schools causing concern should be presented to a future meeting of this Committee. The Director of Education agreed that as part of the Improving Schools report, a comprehensive update in relation to the River Centre could be provided.

In response to a Member's question regarding 'build back better', the Director of Education said that an example of this work related to ICT developments around connectivity work with the schools and also the devices that had been issued to vulnerable learners. He gave an example of 'build back better', in adverse weather conditions learners would still be able to continue to receive meaningful education.

	<p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the report be accepted as presented.</p>	
<p>No. 9</p>	<p><u>EDUCATION ACHIEVEMENT SERVICES (EAS) BUSINESS PLAN 2022/25</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education and the Managing Director EAS which was presented for Members to consider the full contents of the draft EAS Business Plan 2022-2025, as part of the regional consultation process. Through this activity Members will ensure that the plan enables appropriate support for schools and settings in Blaenau Gwent.</p> <p>The Assistant Director EAS gave a presentation on the Business Plan covering a wide range of school improvement services to all schools. The plan supports the role the Local Authority have in delivering their statutory function, addressing their individual improvement priorities and promoting improved pupil outcomes.</p> <p>A Member enquired if all schools now participated in school to school working, professional learning and self-improvement. The Assistant Director EAS said there was strong school engagement data, which was shared with the Local Authority and concerns were raised if there was insufficient engagement by schools. A brief two slide PowerPoint presentation called 'Stats and Stories' specifically focusing on Blaenau Gwent levels of school engagement would be circulated to scrutiny Members to give a snapshot of school engagement as of Spring 2022.</p> <p>A Member referred to paragraph 5.1.5 and the uncertainty around regional grant funding, the Assistant Director EAS said there had been a commitment from the Welsh Government to move to a three year grant profile which showed positive intent from the Welsh Government and confirmed that for the first year they were unaware of any significant reductions.</p> <p>In response to a Member's question regarding how the EAS was going to measure pupil progress moving forward, the Assistant Director EAS gave a detailed response and said that dialogue was still being undertaken with schools</p>	

regarding progression and assessment and would continue with local authorities and Headteachers to evolve that dialogue.

A Member enquired regarding what barriers and weaknesses the EAS may encounter to achieving the vision moving forward. The Assistant Director EAS said that a broad range of risks were highlighted in paragraph 5.2.1 and felt it was around recognising that they were part of a wider system, partnerships with schools, local authorities, Estyn and the Welsh Government was key and collectively, working with partners, to know when to intervene and not leaving that intervention too late.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that Members received the report for information and accepted the Business Plan.

No. 10 **INSPIRE 2 ACHIEVE AND WORK PERFORMANCE REPORT JANUARY – DECEMBER 2021**

Consideration was given to the report of the Service Manager Young People & Partnerships, which was presented to provide Members with an opportunity to scrutinise the local Inspire 2 Achieve and Inspire 2 Work projects funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). These projects are part of the Youth Service's approach to reducing the numbers of young people becoming Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET).

The Service Manager, Young People & Partnerships presented the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

A Member commented that it was an outstanding achievement that year on year the figures for NEET's were low and felt it was important to secure long term funding to ensure that these projects continue in the future.

With regard to funding, the Service Manager, Young People & Partnerships advised Members that the regional programme would end in May 2023 and local delivery would end in April 2023. She felt it was important to ensure that

they were involved in discussions for any UK Government funding coming through the system, however, there were concerns that UK Government programmes were not looking at supporting employability programmes for young people below the age of 18. There was also a risk that the NEET's figures could increase if staff left the service as their contracts would not continue beyond May next year.

A Member commented that future prosperity of the County Borough was through education and jobs for young people and felt it should be a priority for the Council to seek long term funding to ensure these projects were carried forward.

The Corporate Director of Education commented that if the funding gap remained relating to Inspire 2 Achieve and Inspire 2 Work projects then, as part of the Council's budget setting process, consideration could be given to secure elements or provision for the projects moving forward.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that Members scrutinised the information detailed within the report and the report be accepted.

No. 11 **WELSH PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARDS (WPLS)**
ANNUAL RETURN 2020/21

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education and the Service Manager Young People & Partnerships which was presented to consider the report submitted to the Museums, Archives and Libraries Division (MALD) of Welsh Government with respect to the fourth year of the Sixth Assessment Framework for the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) return 2020/21.

The Service Manager Young People & Partnership presented the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

A Member referred to paragraph 5.1 of the report and welcomed the increased spend on books but felt further increases were needed. The Service Manager Young People & Partnerships explained that a new five-year agreement had been put in place in 2020, which did not

measure library services specifically around spend on books. Currently, the Council and Leisure Trust were looking at and scrutinising the whole standards in library services to ensure that the whole library service was developing well and operating at a good level. This involves the potential for further increases in resources for books and other reading material.

With regard to book donations from the public, the Partnership, Funding & Contracts Manager ALT said they received substantial donations from the public, however, there was no measure within the standards regarding public donations and as such they were not included in the figures for the number of items required.

A Member enquired if libraries were adequately staffed moving forward as they were now also community hubs. The Partnership, Funding & Contracts Manager ALT said libraries were currently adequately staffed as visitor numbers had not yet returned to pre pandemic levels. As the community hubs expand and libraries take on more services then a review of staffing structures may be needed.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely Members scrutinised the information detailed within the report and the report be accepted.

No. 12

BLAENAU GWENT ADMISSIONS POLICY FOR NURSERY AND STATUTORY EDUCATION 2023/24

Consideration was given to the report of the Service Manager Education Transformation & Business Change which was presented to outline the outcome of the annual consultation process, in line with the revised draft of the Blaenau Gwent Admissions Policy for Nursery and Statutory Education 2023/24.

The Service Manager Education Transformation & Business Change presented the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

A Member referred to Appendix 1 paragraph 20 Home to School and Post 16 Transport – and raised concerns

regarding a ward issue relating to an overflow of children for the forthcoming Year 7 intake to Abertillery Learning Community. The Service Manager Education Transformation & Business Change said this issue specifically related to the Home to School and Post 16 Transport policy. The Service Manager advised that the admission number for Abertillery Learning Community was 150 and they had allocated 'in time' applications up to the admission number. There had been four 'late' applications and they were working with the Abertillery Learning Community to look to extend their capacity in order to accommodate those additional learners.

Following further discussion, the Service Manager reiterated that this issue specifically related to the Council's Home to School and Post 16 Transport policy, and although the Admissions policy for Nursery and Statutory Education 2023/24 referenced the Home to School and Post 16 Transport policy it was for the Council, as an admissions authority, to implement the Admission Policy in line with Welsh Government's School Admissions and Admission Appeal codes.

Councillor Bob Summers left the meeting at this juncture.

A lengthy and detailed discussion ensued whereby Members expressed concern regarding the Home to School and Post 16 Transport policy, the Service Manager thereupon clarified points of concern raised by Members.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee considered and accepted the policy document.