

Committee: **Cabinet**
 Date of meeting: **10th April 2024**
 Report Subject: **Improving Schools Programme**
 Portfolio Holder: **Cllr S Edmunds, Cabinet Member People and Education**
 Report Submitted by: **Luisa Munro-Morris, Interim Corporate Director of Education**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
05.03.24	07.03.24	22.03.24			19.03.24	10.04.24		

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with an update on the Blaenau Gwent Improving Schools Programme.

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 The report covers all schools and settings within the County Borough that have been identified by the Education Directorate, supported by the Education Achievement Service (EAS), and/or Estyn as needing to improve. The Blaenau Gwent Improving Schools Programme operates within the regional arrangements for supporting schools across South-East Wales. It also provides a high-level overview of any school inspections from September 2023 to February 2024.
- 2.2 From February 2023 to November 2023, many of our headteachers and senior leaders engaged with Action Short of Strike (ASOS). This led to the majority of our primary headteachers not engaging with Professional Discussions with the LA during this time. Professional Discussions are an important way for the LA to engage with schools on their priorities for improvement, progress with implementing national reform, and to offer appropriate support where relevant. Since the end of ASOS in November 2023 the Local Authority has worked closely with the EAS to arrange and undertake Professional Discussions, prioritising those schools identified in most need initially, according to agreed factors discussed during our partnership meetings.
- 2.3 Presently, one of our schools is still formally within the Schools Causing Concern category - The River Centre. Brynmawr Foundation School was removed from a School Causing Concern category in December 2023. The school continues to engage with the Team Around the School process to ensure that there continues to be effective and purposeful dialogue between the school and the LA. *(Please see appendix 4).*

Following an inspection in the summer term, Bryn Bach Primary requires Estyn follow up. This does not place the school in an Estyn category. Instead Estyn will re-visit the school approximately one year after the initial inspection in order for the school to provide evidence and reassurance to Estyn that the school continues to develop in accordance with their school improvement priorities.

During the Autumn Term, three of our schools have been inspected Beaufort Hill, Deighton Primary and Ebbw Fawr Learning Community. None of the schools that have been inspected require a follow up (*Please see appendix 1-3*).

3. Options for Recommendation

3.1 The People Scrutiny Committee supported Option 2, at its meeting on 19th March 2024.

3.2 Option 1

Members are asked to consider the information detailed within the report and contribute to the continuous assessment of effectiveness by making appropriate recommendations.

Option 2

Accept the report as provided.

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

4.1 Education remains a priority in the Corporate Plan. The School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013 consolidates, clarifies, and reforms the law in relation to intervention in schools causing concern. The Welsh Government's statutory guidance for schools causing concern (February, 2014) details a local authorities' powers of intervention in schools causing concern, the grounds on which those powers can be invoked and the procedures governing the intervention process.

4.2 Through our education provision we seek to ensure that provision is appropriate and able to meet the needs of children and young people so that their progress and performance is ambitious and raises aspiration levels.

5. Implications Against Each Option

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

The Council allocated £52.563 million to schools in 23/24 via the Individual Schools Budget (ISB) to provide high quality education and to improve pupil outcomes. In addition, Blaenau Gwent continues to make a financial contribution to the regional EAS arrangements which was £326,668 for the financial year 23/24, from the core Education Directorate Budget. Processes such as monthly LA/EAS Partnership meetings are in place to ensure the LA

can hold the EAS to account for the support and challenge they provide to schools and ensure value for money for the Local Authority.

5.2 **Risk including Mitigating Actions**

Failure to raise standards in schools causing concern features in the corporate risk register of the Council. This risk is also reflected in the Education Directorate and EAS risk registers. A graduated response is in place to mitigate these risks; this approach is based on an early identification and support model:

Universal support: areas for improvement in relation to individual schools may be raised by a School Improvement Partner (SIP) or an LA Officer, and these are discussed in weekly LA/EAS meetings and more formally in monthly LA/EAS Partnership meetings, and appropriate courses of action agreed.

NB. Professional Discussions are held with all schools once per year. These are timetabled for the whole year. In schools where there are emerging risks they are prioritised early in the academic year. However, these discussions did not take place in the majority of our primary schools during the period of ASOS. Now that ASOS has come to an end, professional discussions with all schools have been undertaken or dates for them have been agreed.

5.2.1 **Targeted support/provision:** If a school is identified as needing more support by the LA, a 'Team Around the School' approach will be adopted. Key partners are brought together on a half-termly basis, to support and challenge a school with specific areas for improvement.

5.2.2 **Specialist support/provision:** A school that has been issued with a statutory warning notice by the LA or has been placed in an Estyn category will receive further bespoke support, in addition to half-termly meetings. For example, a school will be supported with creating and delivering against a Post Inspection Action Plan.

KS4 data was reported on for the first time since 2019 for the 2022/23 cohort. The Welsh Government have reintroduced All Wales Core Data Sets. KS4 results were published on 'My Local School' in February 2024 and have been shared with members in a previous report. Schools have been placed in Core Data Set families from the Autumn term 2023. (See *Appendix 5*)

School attendance and exclusion figures are monitored by DLT on a half-termly basis. School's safeguarding processes are also closely monitored. The quality assurance arrangements that are in place include the safeguarding matrix, which is currently being reviewed and further developed. Holistic support packages are devised via regular intra Council services meetings between OD, finance, health and safety, education, and school governor support services. The quality of provision in schools and leadership is monitored and evaluated in conjunction with the EAS and is in addition to the work the LA undertakes directly with its schools.

5.3 **Legal**

The Improving Schools Programme operates within the legal framework of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013.

5.4 **Human Resources**

There are implications arising from the actions created to support those schools identified as a school causing concern and/or in an Estyn category. This information is held within each school's single plan.

5.5 **Health and Safety**

As part of their inspection, Estyn will comment on any health and safety concerns that they identify. The River Centre was issued with a health and safety letter. All of the recommendations in the letter have been actioned. No schools that have been inspected to date in the academic year 2023/24 have been issued with a health and safety letter.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

6.2 **Schools in an Estyn Category**

6.2.1 **The River Centre**

- The Governing Body of the school remains under statutory intervention because of the Statutory Warning Notice to improve dated November 2021.
- Staffing - The Headteacher remains absent from work. The school was previously supported by an Executive Headteacher arrangement. Since November 2022 an Acting Headteacher was in post to provide consistent support for the school. However, this arrangement was changed from December 2023 where an internal Acting Headteacher and Acting Deputy Headteacher arrangement has been put in place on an interim monthly review. In the period since December 2023, systems and processes for safeguarding and health and safety have been improved.
- The senior leadership team has been further strengthened through an extensive network of support through mentorship for the Acting Headteacher, LA involvement, increased governor representation on the Governing Body and regular partnership review with the EAS.
- Following an Estyn inspection July 2022, the school was placed in Special Measures. Estyn made a number of recommendations:
 - Address those issues identified in the health and safety letter.
 - Establish a clear purpose and vision for the school and implement a staffing structure that is fit for purpose and adequately reflects roles and responsibilities.
 - Ensure that the curriculum is sufficiently engaging, broad and balanced and prepares pupils well for their next stage in life and learning.
 - Improve the behaviour of pupils, particularly on the secondary campus.
 - Improve the quality of the learning environment and culture, particularly on the secondary campus.

- Improve the outcomes for pupils, particularly those on the secondary campus.
- Establish systems, procedures and routines across the school that are clearly understood by staff and relevant partners.
- A Post Inspection Action Plan to address the recommendations was created by the school, with the support of the EAS, and the LA. Some good progress has been made against the actions within the school including the remodelling of the secondary site and new safeguarding procedures being put in place. In addition, Home to School transport is now being provided by the LA since September 2023 which has enabled staff to focus on teaching and learning. However, there are still a number of the Estyn recommendations where limited progress has been made, in particular around teaching and learning.

The school was subject to an Estyn re-visit in May 2023. Estyn recognised that good progress had been made against some of the recommendations and that the school is focusing on the right things to develop first. However, it also identified that the school was very early in its improvement journey. Estyn and all relevant stakeholders have been informed and updated on the current Leadership arrangements. Since January 2024 the school have had to realign their focus to operational and safeguarding priorities. However, moving forward there is an expectation for strategic priorities linked to the Estyn recommendations to be prioritised again.

6.2.2 **School Inspections**

6.2.3 **Beaufort Hill Primary School (Appendix 1)**

Estyn inspected the school in Autumn 2023. Estyn reported Beaufort Hill Primary School is a happy and nurturing school that supports pupils and their families well. Nearly all pupils enjoy and value being part of the school and they speak appreciatively of the opportunities they have to learn and play. Nearly all pupils engage well with their learning and their behaviour is exemplary. Most pupils make good progress across the curriculum.

The headteacher and governors have a clear vision for education, and they work well with a range of partners to ensure that the curriculum is broad, balanced and relevant to the pupils and the community. Teaching staff monitor the progress of pupils carefully and provide a wide range of exciting and varied learning experiences. Although teachers generally use assessment effectively to plan learning, they do not always identify or share clear next steps for learning for all pupils in their feedback.

Teachers work effectively in partnership with local schools to ensure that the school's curriculum is relevant for its pupils and allows for clear progression of skills. They ensure that learning experiences are exciting and varied. However, pupils do not have enough opportunities to apply their numeracy and digital skills across the curriculum at a suitably high level of challenge.

Generally, vulnerable pupils and pupils with additional learning needs (ALN) make good progress through the wide range of learning and support interventions on offer. Support staff work in close partnership with teachers to ensure that both academic and emotional and social needs are met. The school's approach to developing health and well-being is a strength. Staff know pupils and their families well. They ensure, through effective communication, that any issues arising are addressed quickly and that relationships are mutually beneficial.

The school will be expected to draw up an action plan for the following recommendations with no follow up from Estyn:

- Improve teachers' marking and feedback across the school to ensure that pupils have a clear understanding of their next steps in learning.
- Strengthen opportunities for pupils to apply their numeracy and digital skills across the curriculum.

6.2.4 **Ebbw Fawr Learning Community (Appendix 2)**

Estyn inspected the school in Autumn 2023. Estyn reported staff in Ebbw Fawr Learning Community are committed to the school's vision of creating a safe, secure and caring environment to ensure that pupils are 'learning to achieve together'. This vision is communicated clearly by the headteacher who is a strong role model that has high expectations of himself and others. Leaders work well with each other and succeed in creating an ethos across the school sites that encapsulates the 'Ebbw Fawr Way' of being 'Ready, Respectful and Safe'.

Promoting pupil well-being is central to the school's work and it has an extensive range of provision to support pupils in an inclusive and supportive environment. This contributes towards its pupils feeling safe in school and displaying a positive attitude towards their work and school life. A positive feature of the school is the numerous opportunities it provides for pupils to take on leadership roles.

Most teachers plan and adapt work that meets the needs of nearly all pupils. They engage pupils in their learning, provide valuable experiences that relate to their everyday lives and successfully remove barriers to learning. As a result, most pupils in the primary phase and many pupils in the secondary phase, including those with additional learning needs (ALN) and those eligible for free school meals make at least suitable progress over time. Whilst there are good opportunities for pupils to develop their oracy and reading skills, they do not write at length often or purposefully enough.

Teachers promote positive behaviour well and there are robust arrangements to promote good attendance. The Ebbw Vale Engage ('EVE') programme ensures that a few pupils in danger of disengagement attend regularly and benefit from alternative off-site provision. Although attendance at the time of the inspection remains lower than before the pandemic it has improved significantly over the last few months. The learning resource base (LRB)

successfully supports secondary pupils with a range of significant additional educational needs to make sound progress and attend school regularly.

Leaders mitigate the effect of poverty on pupils' attainment and well-being effectively. They monitor and evaluate the school's work carefully and implement changes effectively. They use the opinions of pupils and parents well to make improvements to provision, especially for pupils' well-being. However, when evaluating teaching, leaders do not always consider the impact on pupils' progress well enough

The school will be expected to draw up an action plan for the following recommendations with no follow up from Estyn:

- Sharpen self-evaluation processes to focus more specifically on the impact of teaching on learning.
- Provide more opportunities for pupils to develop their writing skills and write at length for authentic purposes.

6.2.5 **Deighton Primary School (Appendix 3)**

Deighton Primary School was inspected in Autumn 2023. Estyn reported leaders, staff and governors of Deighton Primary have worked effectively as a community to develop an inclusive school focused on raising aspirations for all pupils and developing them as resilient, lifelong learners. Relationships between pupils and adults are strong, and the school's partnership with parents is outstanding. Most pupils behave well, and are friendly, courteous and respectful. The support for pupils with additional learning needs, and those who are vulnerable, is effective. In particular, pupils appreciate the high-quality care and support when they experience social and emotional difficulties. Nearly all feel safe. They are confident that leaders and staff will look after them whenever they need their help.

The school provides a stimulating, engaging and nurturing learning environment for all pupils. This supports many to make suitable or better progress, often from very low starting points. The youngest pupils settle well into daily routines and benefit from the many purposeful opportunities, indoors and outside, that help them to explore, problem-solve, and develop their language and physical skills successfully. Most pupils make strong progress in developing their social and communication skills. They listen well to adults and, by Year 6, many enjoy drama activities, collaborate effectively and discuss their learning activities confidently.

The headteacher places great importance on staff communicating and working with parents and carers, as partners in their children's education. A few years ago, parental engagement with the school was limited so leaders adapted their approach, developing a programme of social events and fun activities that pupils and parents could enjoy together. For example, on 'Come and Do' curriculum days, parents and pupils learn circus skills

together as part of the school's 'This is me' topic. Staff ensure that the school is a welcoming space and this helps to develop positive relationships within the school community. Most parents now feel comfortable to take part in social and learning experiences in the school and nearly all attend meetings to discuss their children's learning and progress.

A positive culture of continuous improvement and reflection is developing well in the school.

The school will be expected to draw up an action plan for the following recommendations with no follow up from Estyn:

Ensure that improvement processes and professional learning drive improvements to the quality of teaching and assessment to meet pupils' learning needs.

- Improve pupils' writing skills.
- Improve attendance, particularly for pupils who are eligible for free school meals and those with additional learning needs.

6.2.6 **Brynmawr Foundation School (Appendix 4)**

The school was originally inspected in October 2019 and placed within the category of schools requiring Special Measures. As a consequence, the school was subject to an LA statutory warning notice to improve.

The school received preliminary KS4 data in August 2023 which showed good progress when compared to the Welsh average and the Family of Schools the school is a part of data. As a consequence of the KS4 data and Estyn re-visits to the school, which indicated progress in the school, the LA made the decision to lift the statutory warning notice in September 2023.

Brynmawr Foundation School received a follow up Estyn visit in November 2023. Estyn's monitoring Report following their visit concluded that Brynmawr Foundation School was judged to have made sufficient progress in relation to the recommendations following the most recent core inspection. As a result, His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales removed the school from the list of schools requiring special measures. It has been concluded Leaders have continued to focus sharply on the areas for development from the recommendations, for example, a specific focus on teaching and learning and improving pupil outcomes. Estyn commented since the core inspection, the headteacher and his senior team have focused successfully on their vision for improving teaching and learning, pupils' engagement and aspirations, and building leadership capacity at all levels. This work has had a significant impact on the quality of teaching, pupils' attitudes to learning and leaders' ability to plan robustly for improvement. Many teachers plan learning activities that build well on each other and challenge pupils effectively to make strong progress from their starting points. Across the curriculum, many teachers provide relevant and beneficial opportunities to help pupils develop their literacy and numeracy skills.

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

The River Centre and Brynbach Primary are both participating in a Team Around the School approach. This is a multi-agency meeting where the school is both supported and appropriately challenged. The School Improvement or the Principal School Improvement Partner from the EAS attend meetings to consult on ideas for supporting the school and to discuss engagement with opportunities such as EAS reviews. We have additional schools involved in the Team Around the School Process to support their progress in the key areas they have identified for their development.

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

Monitoring school progress against priorities facilitates support for schools to ensure that they achieve and maintain high quality outcomes in the long term.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

Through effective monitoring and evaluation of school performance, early identification of emerging areas for improvement can be achieved with consequent early intervention to secure improvement. The effectiveness of the LA's monitoring, evaluation and intervention programmes ensure that preventative action is taken early in order to minimise the escalation of concerns.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The LA collaborates with neighbouring local authorities through the South East Wales Consortium for the provision of School Improvement services through the Education Achievement Service (EAS). The LA also works closely with colleagues in the SEWC region sharing good practice and ideas for what has worked well.

The LA also secures a range of pupil support services such as Hearing Impaired, Visually Impaired, Speech and Language, and Gwent Education Multilingual Service support services through regional collaboration. Within the LA, the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion ensures that there is a co-ordinated approach to supporting schools within the Education Directorate and across the Council corporately as a whole.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

The LA commissions its school improvement function on a regional basis.

6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

There are no implications arising from this report.

6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)***

There are no implications arising from this report.

7. ***Monitoring Arrangements***

7.1 Monitoring of improvement pathways is an important mechanism for ensuring that Members are sufficiently informed to enable them to hold the authority

to account effectively for the quality of education provision and hence pupil progress and outcomes.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- **Beaufort Hill Primary School (Appendix 1)**
- **Ebbw Fawr Learning Community (Appendix 2)**
- **Deighton Primary School (Appendix 3)**
- **Brynmawr Foundation School (Appendix 4)**
- **KS4 Results (Appendix 5)**