

Committee: **Cabinet**
 Date of meeting: **10th April 2024**
 Report Subject: **Education Digital Strategy**
 Portfolio Holder: **Cllr Sue Edmunds, Cabinet Member People and Education**
 Report Submitted by: **Joanne Watts, Service Manager for Education Transformation and Business Change**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Governance Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Cabinet	Council	Other (please state)
	29/2/24	07.03.24			19/03/2024	10.04.24		

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1 The purpose of the report is to present the Council’s Education Digital Strategy to Cabinet for approval.

2. Scope and Background

2.1 The Education Transformation Team has been progressing with its Digital Transformation over the last few years and the purpose of this Strategy is to highlight the Education Department and its schools’ aspirations regarding the digital learner journey in Blaenau Gwent. The Blaenau Gwent Estyn inspection report published February 2023 highlighted in relation to ICT & Digitalisation that ‘despite there being appropriate plans in place to improve connectivity and developments there is no clear ICT strategy’.

2.2 A well-established Digital Strategy working group meets on a termly basis where members collaborate to outline objectives and priorities to achieve the agreed vision for Digital in Education in Blaenau Gwent, which is;

“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”.

A digital Strategy has been developed (**Appendix 1**) to support this vision, there are 7 Priority areas that have been identified in order to achieve the vision:

1. *Infrastructure and Connectivity* - Hwb EdTech funding (waves 1-3) permitted additional infrastructure priorities to be addressed. The Education team will continue to work with Schools, SRS, and the Finance team to plan for the school’s infrastructure to be replaced when approaching end of life.

2. *Device and Equipment Sustainability* - The Council are currently in Wave 4 (Device Replacement) of the Hwb EdTech Project, and currently signing off the 5-year device replacement schedules with schools to allow progress to Wave 5.
3. *Hwb EdTech* - As mentioned above, the Council plans to move into Wave 5 of the EdTech programme in the Spring 2024 term. Wave 5 is to support the implementation of audio-visual tools and resources within schools
4. *Migration to and use of Hwb* - The Authority continues to promote Hwb as a first approach and signposts schools to the platform for all software, teaching resources, training opportunities and guidance. The next step towards achieving this priority is to migrate all school-based staff from corporate licences to Hwb accounts
5. *Online Safety* - This has been set as a priority area for 2024 and discussions with the EAS and Safeguarding team are underway for the promotion and monitoring of the 360 safe tool.
6. *Support for schools, Training and Development* - Schools in Blaenau Gwent receive a high level of support from both the Local Authority, EAS, and the Shared resource Service. The well-established Digital Strategy Group meets termly and oversees, prioritises, and monitors the delivery and investment of Digital services in schools. A new monthly Digital lead meeting has also been established, where there is a main agenda point discussed each month. The EAS has a digital network meeting half termly, with updates on the professional learning offer. The SRS aims to provide a comprehensive and all-inclusive offering that caters for the needs of the school and is underpinned by the SLA.
7. *Education Management Information Systems* - All schools in Blaenau Gwent use SIMS as their MIS. The SIMS system is currently hosted for all schools by SRS on behalf of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, although this is due to change in Spring 2024. Owing to contract changes, at that time ESS will take on all SIMS hosting as part of their SIMS Connected model. This migration is currently being planned.

2.3 These priority areas are critical to support the delivery of the Digital Competency Framework and moreover the Curriculum for Wales. The aim of the strategy is to achieve the following objectives:

- Create a safe teaching and learning environment fit for the digital age.
- Effectively engage practitioners in seeking to improve and enhance the quality of Teaching and Learning.
- Secure continued access to high quality devices both in and outside of the classroom.
- Encourage and develop the use of technology in the classroom to facilitate improved learner outcomes in line with the Digital Competency Framework.
- Use and incorporate new technologies to inspire learners to become digitally skilled and enabled citizens.
- Facilitate effective connectivity for all learners, with the delivery of flexible blended learning, both inside and outside of the classroom setting.
- Establish a secure and sustainable approach to school-based infrastructure.

- Create structured data management processes ensuring maximum data Security.
- Provide effective management information systems to ensure consistency of the transfer and sharing of data information, throughout the learner journey.
- Create a continual professional learning journey which reflects on national, regional and local priorities, through monitoring, reviewing and effective collaboration.
- Develop collaborations 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 policies.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 The People Scrutiny Committee supported Option 1 at its meeting on 19th March 2024.

3.2 **Option 1:** That Cabinet considers and approves the Strategy.

Option 2: That Cabinet considers the Strategy and provides comments relating to improvements prior to approval.

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

4.1 The Strategy supports one of the key priorities in the Council's corporate plan to "*Maximise learning and skills for all to create a prosperous, thriving, resilient Blaenau Gwent*". The use of Digital in schools has the potential to transform traditional teaching and learning methods, enhance pupil engagement, and prepare learners for the digital age.

4.2 The Strategy has been aligned with the Corporate Digital Transformation Strategy and supports the delivery of the two principles and three key priorities of the Strategy:

- Principle One, developing a culture that supports digital improvement and a seamless customer experience;
- Principle Two: improving collaboration to make the best use of knowledge and expertise to create better services;
- Priority One: to be a customer focussed organisation;
- Priority Two: to be a digitally enabled Borough;
- Priority Three: to maximise the use of our resources and technology.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

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

There are no new or anticipated budgetary implications for the Councils to deliver the strategy. The funding provided from WG through the Hwb EdTech programme has supported the improvement in digital infrastructure and equipment over the last 5 years and is anticipated to continue as the Authority moves on to Wave 5 of the Hwb Ed Tech programme (Audio Visual Equipment). However, as part of the sustainability of the investment Welsh

Government has made into device replacement, schools are required to contribute a 20% commitment year on year for replacing devices going forward.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

There is a risk of non-compliance of the adoption of the strategy. Failure to comply with the ambitions of the strategy will impact on the delivery and transformation of Digital in Education in Blaenau Gwent. This is largely mitigated as there is regular communication via the ICT Strategy group and the monthly School Digital leads group.

5.3 ***Legal***

There are no direct legal implications associated with the strategy.

5.4 ***Human Resources***

There are no direct Human Resources implications associated with this strategy.

5.5 ***Health and Safety***

There are no direct Health and Safety implications associated with this strategy.

6. ***Supporting Evidence***

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

6.1.1 A joint Digital Thematic review was undertaken by ESTYN and Welsh Government in January 2023 (**Appendix 2**). Overall, the review highlighted the positive work that has already been done in Blaenau Gwent with the transformation of Digital services in Education. The key observations were:

- There is a reliance on SRS as the SLA provider. High trust from the LA and growing trust from schools in SRS relationship.
- Blaenau Gwent is considering the impact of sustainability plans on schools and intends to provide updated plans to the Welsh Government. Schools are encouraged to spend their own funding and Welsh Government funding on devices. Conversations about sustainability are collaborative involving heads, the LA and SRS and start with the premise – what do you want to achieve?
- Schools are placing greater emphasis on developing computational thinking skills. Staff training is being provided to enable teachers to work with learners in developing these skills. Cluster-based professional learning offers are being utilised to assess the placement and development of learner skills.
- Blaenau Gwent is actively addressing digital exclusion by considering the cost-of-living crisis and ensuring access to digital learning for all learners. Efforts are being made to monitor engagement and identify learners who require access to digital equipment at home. Additionally, alternative options such as libraries are being promoted for learners without digital access.
- LA provided comprehensive evidence to Welsh Government which was appreciated.

There are 3 areas of recommendation which are currently being addressed:

1. Blaenau Gwent to work with schools to re-focus on utilising 360 Safe Cymru tool.

The Education team has been liaising with the Safeguarding Officer in Blaenau Gwent to create a monitoring report. The report indicates when schools have accessed or updated the portal. The report is analysed on a termly basis and any schools who haven't accessed the portal within the last 2 terms are contacted as a reminder and to offer additional support.

2. Provide finalised Digital Strategy to Welsh Government once consultation is completed.

The Digital Strategy will be shared with Welsh Government once approved by Cabinet.

3. Welsh Government to support Blaenau Gwent with planned Hwb email migration and further Hwb adoption across the LA.

The Hwb email migration is in the early stages of planning with aspirations to complete the migration by the end of 2024. The migration to Hwb is one of the key priorities in the Education Digital strategy.

6.2 **Expected outcome for the public**

The strategy aims to secure the development of a digitally skilled pupil population in the use of technologies, whilst preparing them for future progression routes and career pathways.

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

Stakeholder, end user needs and engagement are a key focus of the strategy, along with its implementation, monitoring, evaluation, learning and future strategic approach. The strategy has and will continually be subject to consultation, which will be used to inform development, delivery, progression, and learning.

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

By identifying the resources required to facilitate effective infrastructure, connectivity, and approaches to learning via the use of digital technologies, the strategy serves as a roadmap for schools to navigate the continuous integration of digital in education.

Technology is essential for future generations and is an integral part of their lives, it is how they access and participate in education, work, and society. Therefore, it is vital that education embraces technology as a strategic and transformative force that can enhance learning outcomes and prepare learners for the future.

6.5 **Preventative focus**

The digital strategy recognises that technology is not a static or fixed entity, but a dynamic and evolving one that requires constant adaptation and innovation. Technology creates new challenges and risks that need to be

anticipated and addressed in a timely and effective manner. Therefore, the digital strategy adopts a proactive rather than a reactive approach to digital services.

6.6 *Collaboration / partnership working*

The strategy has been developed in partnership with members of the established Digital Strategy group, which includes representation from schools, the Digital team, SRS and EAS.

6.7 *Integration (across service areas)*

The strategy has been developed by members of the Digital Strategy group which includes dedicated officers from key service areas (Education, Digital team, SRS, and selected schools). It will ultimately be progressed and managed by the Education team, with members from the Strategy group being consulted throughout.

6.8 *Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions*

Digital services in Education contribute to decarbonisation by promoting the use of digital resources and materials, rather than paper-based ones. Digital resources, such as e-books, videos, podcasts, and interactive simulations, can provide rich and engaging learning experiences, while also saving paper, ink, and energy.

6.9 *Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)*

An Integrated Impact Assessment is considered for each Digital project individually as part of business case submissions.

7. *Monitoring Arrangements*

7.1 Project monitoring is carried out via the Project Group, Programme Board and the Digital Strategy Group, along with regular reporting to Welsh Government. The Education Directorates established Digital Strategy group has a strategic oversight for the programme, in line with the requirements of the Managing Successful Programmes (MSP) good practice guidelines. The Education Transformation team manager reports to Education Department Leadership Teams (DLT) and Corporate Leadership Team (CLT). The People Scrutiny Committee / Cabinet monitor progress via their forward work programmes.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- *Appendix 1- Education Digital Strategy*
- *Appendix 2- Blaenau Gwent Thematic Review*