

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

**REPORT TO:** **THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**SUBJECT:** **EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 15<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2020**

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

---

**PRESENT:** COUNCILLOR H. TROLLOPE (CHAIR)

Councillors: J. Holt  
D. Bevan  
M. Cook  
M. Day  
L. Elias  
W. Hodgins  
C. Meredith  
J.C. Morgan  
J.P. Morgan  
T. Smith  
B. Summers  
S. Thomas

**Co-opted Members**

T. Baxter

**AND:** Interim Corporate Director of Education  
Strategic Education Improvement Manager  
Education Transformation Manager  
Service Manager - Inclusion  
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
<b>No. 1</b>	<b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b>  It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	

## **UPDATE - RETURNING TO SCHOOL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

At the request of the Chair, the Interim Corporate Director Education provided a verbal update on returning to school during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The Interim Director confirmed that a full report would be presented to the next Scrutiny Committee covering the emergency response to date and an update on the reopening of schools.

It was reported that the process to re-open the schools had been a strategic approach with the formation of Executive Planning Groups for both primary and secondary school sectors. There were two planning days and two transitional planning days included into the process with specific targeting of certain year groups. The Education team with corporate support developed guidance to support the reopening of schools and this included health and safety advice and the undertaking of risk assessments.

It was reported that all schools in Blaenau Gwent opened fully on the 7<sup>th</sup> September. This had been in advance of the Welsh Government requirement of 14<sup>th</sup> September. In terms of attendance, it was advised that as of week commencing 7<sup>th</sup> September attendance was at 84% which dropped to 81% by the Friday, the reasons for the reduction in attendance was not yet known.

The Interim Corporate Director Education continued that there have been 4 confirmed Covid-19 cases in schools at present. There was one case in a primary school which had not impacted other pupils and 3 pupils in a secondary school. The guidance was revised to take account of these cases, for example school assemblies would not take place and face masks are encouraged in communal areas. The school based staff attendance is being monitored by OD and so far 20 staff are self-isolating, although it was anticipated that this number could increase.

A Member asked if the officers were confident guidelines were being followed and also asked what support was in place for parents.

The Interim Corporate Director advised that the guidance would be enforced at the next planning meeting on Friday and clear messages have been provided to the schools and parents.

Another Member asked if an infected pupil had a sibling in a different school what would be the advice to parents. The Education Transformation Manager explained the process and it was felt that guidance available for parents needed to be clear. The Officer reiterated that these messages are being provided and would continue to be available to parents.

Further concerns were raised in relation to guidance and it was stated that it was crucial that the appropriate information was available for schools, parents and pupils.

A Member commended school based staff for their dedication in getting the schools back up and running.

In response to a question raised in relation to Welsh Government monies, it was asked if this funding was available to supply pupils with masks. The Interim Corporate Director confirmed that £1.8m had been allocated across Wales and the allocation for Blaenau Gwent had yet to be received to date. However, Corporate Procurement were ready to purchase the masks and visors for staff. The Chair added that visors should also be made available for pupils who cannot wear face coverings.

The Interim Corporate Director Education advised that all these issues would be considered when risk assessments are carried out.

In relation to face masks, the Member noted that Welsh Government had left it to local authorities to make the decision if face coverings should be mandatory in schools and the Member felt that Blaenau Gwent should make it mandatory.

The Member further raised concerns in relation to the protocols in place in notifying schools if a pupil had tested positive.

The Education Transformation Manager advised that a great deal of work had been undertaken with schools during the summer and had alternative control measures in place to ensure the safety of both staff and pupils. The Manager added that making face coverings mandatory would be the last resort. There were variations in other local authorities, however, in Blaenau Gwent it was encouraged to wear a face covering in communal areas and the Education Transformation Manager stated that consideration also needed to be given to guidance in terms of infection control in respect of face coverings.

In response to a positive test result, it was informed that it had only taken 20 minutes to contact Environmental Health who then contacted the headteacher. All parties had been in constant contact over the weekend and a meeting had been arranged for the Monday morning.

Another Member advised that he had been contacted by residents with concerns that pupils using school transport were removing their face coverings and asked if escorts should be in place on all school transport to enforce this rule. The Education Transformation Manager advised that a zero tolerance policy had been agreed in terms of school transport, however, the Authority needed a careful balance to ensure both the safety measures are in place and that children are able to access education. There was also hand sanitizer on all buses which was encouraged to be used.

It was important that the children were adhering to advice and the parents would need to be informed to ensure the zero tolerance policy was reinforced.

Further points were raised in terms of positive cases of pupils who may have come into contact with children outside of their year groups whilst accessing school transport. It was reported that children who use school transport was registered for Test, Trace and Protect purposes. The Education Transformation Manager added that the Authority also took advice from Public Health Wales and if a pupil had been in contact with a positive pupil they would be asked to self-isolate.

	<p>Another Member noted his disappointment that information had been placed on social media which had not been provided to Elected representatives. The Member felt it was important that these messages are being communicated, however there was also a need for Councillors to be informed. The Member advised that he had received numerous calls in relation to a local matter but was unable to comment as he was not aware of the incident and asked that Members be informed of any such cases in their respective Wards.</p> <p>The Interim Corporate Director Education noted the importance of communication and it was key that Elected representatives received regular updates.</p> <p>The Co-opted Member stated that the support from Education and other Departments in the Council had been great. The clear and calm instructions from officers had kept the schools running during this very difficult period. The Co-opted Member sought clarification on the process for an inconclusive test result. The Education Transformation Manager advised that discussions would be undertaken with Environmental Health as to how this would be addressed and then contact would be made with the head teacher. Although the Manager assumed that self-isolation should be continued until a further test was carried out.</p> <p>In response to a question raised in relation to guidance for schools, the Interim Corporate Director Education advised that school guidance documents had been produced and would be regularly updated as new information was received from Welsh Government.</p>	
<p><b>No. 2</b></p>	<p><b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L. Parsons, G. Collier and Alun Williams.</p>	
<p><b>No. 3</b></p>	<p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	

<p><b>No. 4</b></p>	<p><b><u>EDUCATION &amp; LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></b></p> <p>The Minutes of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2020 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p><b>No. 5</b></p>	<p><b><u>ACTION SHEET – 26<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY, 2020</u></b></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 26th February, 2020 was submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the action sheet be noted.</p>	
<p><b>No. 6</b></p>	<p><b><u>TIME OF FUTURE MEETINGS</u></b></p> <p>The Committee AGREED that future meetings be held at 10.00 a.m.</p>	
<p><b>No. 7</b></p>	<p><b><u>PROPOSED SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2020-21</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>A discussion ensued around School Inspection reports and Members noted the importance of the Inspection reports which are statutory items and should be available on the agenda to be scrutinised by Members. The Interim Corporate Director concurred with these comments and the Chair thereupon proposed that School Inspection reports be presented as part of the agenda going forward.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED this course of action.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1.</p>	

No. 8

**HOME TO SCHOOL AND POST 16 TRANSPORT  
POLICY 2021/22: APPROVAL AND PUBLICATION  
(BY 1<sup>ST</sup> OCTOBER, 2020)**

Consideration was given to the report of the Education Transformation Manager which was presented to seek the views of Scrutiny Members in relation to the review of the Blaenau Gwent Home to School and Post 16 Transport Policy for the 2021/22 academic session.

The Education Transformation Manager advised that the Council had a duty to publish the home to school and post 16 transport policies. The Council's policy must be made available by the 1st October proceeding the academic year to which the policy related. The policy has been reviewed by the Education Transformation, Inclusion and Transport teams, along with Children's Services and the Manager noted that the revised document was attached at Appendix 1 and referred to the minor additions, which had been proposed.

The Education Transformation Manager further referred Members to the budget implications and advised that the Home to School Transport budget was approximately £1.9m, and the Post 16 budget was approximately £133,290 per annum. The Policy was last reviewed in September 2019 and adopted in October 2019. The policy would ensure that there was an appropriate framework to aid delivery and therefore reduce the risk of overspend relating.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee considered the Home to School and Post 16 Transport Policy 2021/22 (Appendix 1), and recommended it to Executive Committee for approval.

No. 9

**BLAENAU GWENT –**  
**POST 16 PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT**

Consideration was given to the report of the Youth Services Manager which was presented to provide Members of the Scrutiny Committee with an opportunity to scrutinise a proposal to establish a Blaenau Gwent Post 16 Partnership Board to oversee the strategic development of academic and vocational provision for learners across the County Borough.

The Interim Corporate Director Education advised that there was a strong partnership arrangement between the Council and Coleg Gwent. The Learning Zone delivered an annual performance report to the Council which featured as a key component of the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme. In addition to the Learning Zone, a number of post 16 Work Based Learning organisations provide alternative training opportunities across Blaenau Gwent and the Aspire Apprenticeship programme was delivered by the Authority.

The Interim Corporate Director added that Blaenau Gwent Learning Zone's performance continued to improve and the transformation of post 16 provision across the County Borough had delivered more post 16 learners, a wider range of courses, particularly for vocational provision and improved attainment levels. The strong partnership continued to progress and a systematic approach was in place to share data at both a strategic and operational level. The partnership would be developed further through the establishment of a Post 16 Partnership Board with representation from the Education Directorate, Coleg Gwent, work based learning providers and Blaenau Gwent secondary school settings. There would also be representation from colleagues in Regeneration to encompass the broader skills and economic development agenda, contributing towards the Blaenau Gwent Employment and Skills Plan. The Interim Corporate Director Education added that it was hoped that the Partnership Board would be in place by the autumn term and welcomed comments on the draft Terms of Reference for the Blaenau Gwent Post 16 Partnership Board.



The Scrutiny Committee would monitor progress going forward as reports would form part of the Forward Work Programme.

A Member raised concerns in the relation to the number of post 16 training being undertaken out of the County. The Member felt that a high number of pupils was going to neighbouring Boroughs as the courses was not available in Ebbw Vale. It was important that Blaenau Gwent offered a wide range of options to give these young people aspirations.

The Interim Corporate Director Education advised that some young people have always chosen to go to other campuses, e.g. to undertake Horticultural Studies at the Usk Campus. There was a reduction in pupils attending a neighbouring 6<sup>th</sup> form, however this year the amount of A Levels awarded had actually increased and this was against the national trend increasing the previous year figures. The Interim Corporate Director added that a number of learners were now increasingly opting to study vocational courses.

Concerns were raised around the grant funded Aspire programme and it was felt that without guaranteed grants to maintain Aspire apprenticeships these opportunities could be lost to young people.

The Interim Corporate Director Education advised that both Inspire managed by the Youth Service and Aspire operated by the Regeneration team were funded with the assistance of European Social Funding. Both these programmes are being monitored via the risk management process.

Councillor M. Cook left the meeting at this juncture.

The Chair asked who would be attending the Partnership Board on behalf of Blaenau Gwent. It was confirmed that the Interim Corporate Director Education and Youth Service Manager would be in attendance. An invitation would also be extended to the Executive Member for Education to oversee the work of the group.

	<p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; Members scrutinised the information detailed within the report and made the appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee for final approval.</p>	
<p><b>No. 10</b></p>	<p><b><u>BLAENAU GWENT EDUCATION SERVICES</u></b> <b><u>DRAFT SELF – EVALUATION FINDINGS</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Interim Corporate Director of Education.</p> <p>The Interim Corporate Director advised the report provided Members of the Scrutiny Committee with an opportunity to scrutinise the findings of ongoing self-evaluation processes undertaken within the Education Directorate, across the Council and with key partners. The Interim Corporate Director further spoke to the report and highlighted the key points as outlined in the report.</p> <p>Councillor B. Summers left the meeting at this juncture.</p> <p>A Member asked what financial implications had Covid-19 had on schools in terms of teachers self-isolating, the need for replacements to be sought and would this be covered by the monies to be received from Welsh Government.</p> <p>The Interim Corporate Director Education advised that during the closure of schools some revenue savings had been made, therefore some school balances had improved, however budgets were being monitored closely. In terms of Welsh Government funding, the monies received had assisted with for example enhanced cleaning in response to Covid-19.</p> <p>Further discussions ensued in relation to KS4 and A Level results as well as how the Directorate had performed. It was also felt that the impact Covid-19 had on schools needed to be taken into consideration as well as the need for blended learning going forward. It was anticipated that schools would need to provide this blended form of learning going forward therefore it needed to be effective. These issues would be important during the next 12 months.</p>	

The Interim Corporate Director Education responded that if any schools were causing concerns these would be flagged up via the appropriate process and brought to Members via the Improving Schools report.

The Interim Corporate Director Education noted the points raised and advised that the advert for the post of Corporate Director was currently live and it was anticipated that an appointment would be made in October. He advised that the Directorate was also recruiting a School Improvement Leader and this advert was also live.

In response to a question raised in relation to new elective home learners, it was advised that a small number of parents had requested to home school their children. The Inclusion Manager added that the Directorate had been proactive in addressing parents' anxieties when an enquiry had been made and it was hoped that following these discussions their concerns had been addressed.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 2; namely Members scrutinised the information detailed within the report and contributed to the continuous assessment of effectiveness by making appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee.

**No. 11**    **REVISED LA GOVERNOR POLICY**

Consideration was given to the report of the Strategic Education Improvement Manager which was presented to consult Members of the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee on the revised Local Authority Governor Policy prior to consideration by the Executive Committee.

The Chair referred to the recent LEA Governor Panel and noted his request for the meeting to be clerked. He felt that it was important that the decisions made at the panel were recorded formally as applicants are permitted to request a Freedom of Information request to have sight of discussions. The Officer confirmed that this had now been agreed with Business Support and agreed to include this arrangement in the report to be presented to the Executive Committee.

The Committee AGREED this course of Action.	
---	--

The Committee AGREED to recommend, subject to the foregoing that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1	
--	--