

Committee: **Executive Committee**

Date of meeting: **9th December 2020**

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 (Dates to be Entered)								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
1.10.20	8.10.20	24.11.20			3.11.20	09.12.20		

1. Purpose of the Report

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

2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 The Corporate Director of Education provided a verbal update to Scrutiny Committee at the meeting in September regarding the response to the COVID-19 emergency. However, 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 Welsh Government Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams MS, outlined the national approach for the return of children and young people to schools in Wales on Wednesday 3rd June 2020. The approach involved schools in Wales reopening on June 29th 2020. Welsh Government advocated a phased return to schools, supporting pupils to check in and catch-up with a focus on wellbeing, whilst also continuing with distance and online learning in and around school-based sessions.

2.2 School Communication and Operations

The reopening of schools in Blaenau Gwent was managed in conjunction with corporate colleagues and schools. There are robust reporting arrangements on Education matters to GOLD via the Emergency Response Team (ERT) protocols. Furthermore, Education has established two Executive School Planning Groups - one for the secondary sector inclusive of special schools, along with one for the primary sector inclusive of Welsh-medium provision. The aim of these groups is to oversee the development of a common framework and principles within which the reopening of schools can be implemented. During the summer term, the secondary sector including middle schools were operational between the hours of 9:00am and 12:30pm. The primary sector was operational between the hours of 9:00am and 12:00pm Pen-y-Cwm Special School was operational between the hours of 9:00am and 3:00pm, due to travel times and distance from home to school. This approach enabled two key aims to be delivered:

- The aim of the model was to ensure where practicably possible, that pupils had at least 3 opportunities to check in and catch-up during the summer term.
- Schools established maximum engagement opportunities for key year groups such as years 10, 9, 6 and 5 to catch-up and check in.

2.3 **Facilities, Health & Safety and School Support Services**

Technical facilities assessments were undertaken in preparation for reopening to assess physical works and adaptations. In addition, a comprehensive water testing, management and mitigation programme was established and monitored by Education, Technical Services, Health & Safety and Environmental Health. There has been a subsequent Joint Scrutiny Committee that dealt with the water testing issues experienced within schools. Some of the key work carried out from a facilities management and support services perspective included:

- Pupil capacity assessments and facilities planning sessions were programmed to inform the operational plans for each school including: maximum pupil numbers and grouping; operational layout, set-up and systems i.e. one way; room usage; decant and resource management requirements.
- Guidance was provided to schools regarding the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in general, for first aid, medical, intimate care and other purposes. Additionally, there were other resource requirements i.e. signage, spill kits etc. that were identified on a school by school basis.
- An enhanced cleaning service specification and associated guidance was produced and introduced across the school estate.
- The provision of direct payments to families eligible for Free School Meal (eFSM) circa 2,200+ learners.
- A reopening risk assessment template, guidance and example were produced and shared with headteachers. These template documents were then adapted by school leaders and validated by the Council. All school based risk assessments were deemed to be suitable and sufficient.
- Education and Health & Safety colleagues visited all school sites in order to review the reopening plans, risk assessments and to undertake Environmental Health based assessments ensuring compliance with key legislation.

2.4 **School Improvement**

The focus has clearly been on supporting a safe return to school for learners and staff, however, throughout each phase of the pandemic the range of support to schools has flexed in order to respond to emerging learner and school improvement needs. The EAS, the commissioned school improvement service has worked closely with the Council, school leaders, staff and governors to support the identified needs. A high-level summary of the extensive work that is ongoing to support schools is detailed below, but clearly this is not an exhaustive list:

- Providing timely communication and access to virtual networks for school settings and governors, in line with the Welsh Government's Continuity of Learning Plan (CoLP);
- Supporting adaptive and innovative leadership to manage change;
- Providing bespoke leadership support to schools and settings with a focus on self-evaluation, quality assuring current provision and planning for return;
- Providing wellbeing resources and guidance materials, particularly to support remote and blended learning;
- Continuing to provide a range of professional learning that meets the needs of the entire workforce (and governors) over the 2020-21 academic year; and,
- Support for circa 1,400 digitally disadvantaged learners with funding of £600,000+ support from the EdTech initiative.

2.5 Home to School Transport

Education determined that transport provision would be required in consideration of availability and safe operation. Education requested that schools who have transport provision in place in line with the Council's Home to School and Post 16 Transport Policy, provide the Council with their school operation plan and pupil transport priorities, based on the following criteria:

- Distance from home to school;
- The needs of disabled learners and learners with learning difficulties;
- Any particular needs of learners who are 'looked after' or formerly looked after by a Council;
- The age of a learner; and,
- The nature of the route that the learner is expected to take between home and the places where they receive education or training.

Pupils from 15 schools within Blaenau Gwent are currently eligible for transport in line with the Council's policy, along with pupils from 12 schools/specialist education facilities outside of the County Borough. The Council was able to fully meet the transport requirements identified by schools within and outside of the County Borough.

2.6 Key Worker Childcare, Vulnerable Learners and Youth Services

The Council's approach to the re-purposing of schools has provided childcare for over 500 critical workers throughout the course of the last 6 months, via school childcare hubs and/or private childcare provision. 377 children have accessed a key worker childcare place at a school hub between March and early July 2020. School hub attendance increased throughout the summer term to over 140 children and young people per day across 7 school childcare hubs. The percentage split was 83% key worker and 17% vulnerable children and young people.

The Youth Service also supported young people throughout the emergency period in both school and community settings. The team liaised with secondary schools regarding support for school-age young people on a weekly basis along with the following key activities:

- Providing emotional wellbeing support for young people.
- Emergency support for young people in crisis, including the provision of food.
- Resources to support Elective Home Educated (EHE) young people and families in line with requests.
- Reviewing the 'stay at home' campaign with vulnerable 18-25 year olds (liaising with local partners such as Gwent Police).
- Providing support for young people experiencing homelessness issues.

2.7 **Whole School Re-opening - September 2020**

More recently, the Council's corporate response has focussed on preparing for all of our learners returning to whole school environments. The Blaenau Gwent Whole School Re-opening Guidance (Appendix 1) document outlines the local approach and is a key source of reference for implementation in schools. It provided 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 will continue 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 are pertinent to the whole school re-opening is provided below;

- Blaenau Gwent has adopted a strategic approach to whole school re-opening (September 2020) for consistency purposes;
- School Planning Groups for secondary, primary and special schools are established, including Headteacher representation;
- Re-opening from 1st September involved a common approach across the school estate;
 - 2 planning days.
 - 2 transitional year group planning days.
 - Whole school reopening from the 7th September (WG expectation 14th September).
- Re-opening has been relatively successful e.g. pupil attendance is in range of 85%-90%, but pupil regression has been identified;
- School support services-cleaning regimes further enhanced, a flexible catering offer and transport in place;
- Blended learning in place for learners who are self-isolating through identification of positive cases;
- FSM direct payments will continue for learners not in school;
- Relatively stable position on school based workforce, however, increasing cases are being experienced amongst school based staff; and,
- Positive COVID-19 cases for pupils has resulted in some classes, year groups and one school closure on health and safety grounds.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

- 3.1 This report has been discussed by Education DMT, CLT and Scrutiny Committee prior to submission to the Executive Committee.

Option 1: to the Executive Committee accept the report as presented.

Option 2: Members are requested to review the information detailed within the report and contribute to the continuous assessment of effectiveness.

This report provides the Executive 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

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 Q1 revenue budget monitoring report's position demonstrated a favourable variance circa £340,000, mostly attributable to the reduced provision of transport and out of county support for vulnerable learners. There are, however, some significant cost pressures that are being managed through school support services, such as cleaning, but there is WG Hardship funding available 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 are increasing cases amongst the workforce, but 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 strong and effective, especially in the following aspects of work:-

- Re-purposing of schools – supporting children of key workers & vulnerable learners;
- Re-opening schools – from the 29th June 2020; and,
- Preparing for academic year 2020/21, particularly whole school re-opening from September 2020, in line with WG expectations.

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**

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**

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**

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

6.8 **EqIA**

There is no requirement for EQIA assessment since there is only a limited change of policy and guidance associated with this report.

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 – Blaenau Gwent Guidance for Whole School Re-opening – Autumn Term 2020