

Committee: **Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee**
 Date of meeting: **9th March 2021**
 Report Subject: **Estyn Thematic Review - Blaenau Gwent's Response to COVID-19**
 Portfolio Holder: **Executive Member of Education, Cllr. Joanne Collins**
 Report Submitted by: **Corporate Director for Education, Lynn Phillips**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
Feb 2021	25.02.21	22..2.21			9.3.21	14.04.21		

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members of the Education and Learning Committee with an opportunity to review the Estyn Thematic Review report that outlines narrative on the corporate 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 throughout the Autumn term regarding the Education Directorate's and corporate response to the COVID-19 emergency. This was complemented by presenting an update COVID-19 response report to Members during the November cycle, in line with the forward work programme. The report provided background, context and an overview of the corporate response, in particular how the Council has and will continue to support schools during the pandemic. Members were also briefed that Estyn was carrying out a Thematic Review across Wales. The review was titled 'Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19' and covered the period June to November 2020. The report was published in January 2021 and Blaenau Gwent received a dedicated letter as part of this regulatory work.
- 2.2 The Estyn report was written in response to a request for advice from the Minister for Education in July 2020. It provides an overview of how local authorities and regional consortia have worked with schools and pupils referral units (PRUs) to promote learning and support vulnerable pupils. It captures the ways local authorities and regional consortia have adapted their work to respond to the challenges resulting from COVID-19. The work was carried out before all schools returned to remote learning in January 2021 but will be helpful to inform current ways of working. The intended audience for this report is the Welsh Government, local authority and regional consortia officers and staff in schools and PRUs. The report features 'cameos' from local authorities and regional consortia. These were

not considered as case studies because Estyn were unable to evaluate the impact of the work because of restrictions on our activities due to COVID-19. The cameos are included to exemplify points raised in the report, giving a flavour of the work that has taken place across Wales and in Local Authorities. The report focused specifically on two aspects:

- Promoting learning – the quality of the learning offer and how has this been supported through further guidance and professional learning? Supporting vulnerable pupils – how did the local authority targeted services; and,
- Support to vulnerable pupils to support them to engage in learning? What barriers still exist?

2.3 In Blaenau Gwent there were two sessions convened with Estyn Local Authority Link Inspectors (LALI) during the Autumn term and they also interviewed a cohort of Blaenau Gwent's Headteachers. The BG Estyn Thematic Review letter is attached as appendix 1 to this report. The letter is positive overall and highlights four cameos of notable practice, covering;

- Strong collaboration across the Local Authority;
- Beneficial support for vulnerable pupils by the Educational Psychology service;
- The work of the local authority youth service; and,
- Effective sharing of ICT resources.

The narrative from the Estyn Thematic Review findings provides Members with assurance that the Council/Education Directorate has handled the emergency response well in supporting our schools, but clearly there are also areas to learn moving forward, such as the need to enhance water testing compliancy when school buildings are closed for longer periods of time. This has been the subject of a separate report to the Executive and Full Council for consideration and recommendations were adopted.

3. Options for Recommendation

3.1 This report has been discussed by Education DMT and CLT prior to submission to Scrutiny Committee. There are two options for Member consideration:

3.2 Option 1: That Members of the Scrutiny Committee accept the report as presented.

3.3 Option 2: Members are requested to review the information detailed within the report and offer comments that contribute to the continuous assessment of effectiveness, particularly in light of the response to COVID-19. This report provides the Scrutiny 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 key 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 Q3 revenue budget monitoring report's position demonstrated a favourable variance circa £210,000, 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 is a stabilisation of cases amongst the workforce, which 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 coherent, 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.
- Managing the move to remote learning during the Spring term, with the exception of on-site provision for key worker families and vulnerable learners.

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 COVID-19 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. This approach has been recognised as a cameo in the Estyn Thematic Review letter.

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 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 - BG Estyn Thematic Review Letter