

Committee: **Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting: **20th April 2021**
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								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
25.03.21	01.04.21	08.04.21			20.04.21	FWP 2021/22		

1. Purpose of the Report

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

2. Scope and Background

2.1 Members will be aware that the Corporate Director of Education provides a verbal update to Scrutiny Committee regarding the response to the COVID-19 emergency. 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 report reflects on the activity covering both the Autumn and Spring terms.

2.2 School Re-opening - September 2020

The Council's corporate response during the Autumn term focussed on preparing for all of our learners returning to whole school settings. The Blaenau Gwent Whole School Re-opening Guidance document outlined the local approach and is a key source of reference for implementation in schools. It provides 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 has continued 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 were most pertinent to the whole school re-opening is provided below:

- Blaenau Gwent adopted a strategic approach to whole school re-opening (September 2020) for consistency purposes;
- Executive Headteacher School Planning Groups for secondary, primary and special schools are established;
- 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 was relatively successful e.g. pupil attendance is in range of 85%-80%, but some pupil learning regression has been identified;
- School support services - cleaning regimes further enhanced, a flexible catering offer and transport in place;
- Blended learning was put in place for learners who were self-isolating through identification of positive cases;
- FSM direct payments continued for learners not in school;
- There was initially a relatively stable position on school based workforce, however, increasing cases were experienced amongst school based staff, especially following the Autumn half term break;
- Positive COVID-19 cases for pupils increased significantly towards the end of term that resulted in many classes, year groups and one school closure on health and safety grounds; and,
- The Council took a decision to move to remote learning for all learners with the exception of vulnerable learners and support for critical workers in mid-December 2020.

2.3 **School Provision – Spring Term 2021**

Following the Christmas break, nationally it was determined that due to the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that schools would initially only provide direct face to face provision for vulnerable learners and support for critical worker families. All learners, however, were engaged through remote learning. Blaenau Gwent's schools participated in a regional survey in relation to remote and blended learning and the results of that survey are shown in appendix 1, which provides a useful insight into the effectiveness of the offer and areas for further consideration e.g. parental skills to support learners in home settings. This position changed in February 2021 with the move for Foundation Phase learners returning to face to face teaching and learning.

2.4 Recently, the recent Welsh Government announcement confirmed arrangements for more pupils to return to face-to-face teaching, subject of course to COVID-19 data continuing to move in the right direction. The Welsh Government's plan includes a return for the remainder of primary pupils (years 3 to 6); Year 11 secondary pupils and some 'check-in' provision for all other year groups. As always, the top priority for the Council and all our schools is to consider safety and minimise the disruption to learning for our children and young people. The Council has worked closely with our Headteachers to agree a common approach to this wider return for learners across Blaenau Gwent. This included:

- From Monday, 15th March 2021 all primary pupils will attend at their school full time.
- Year 11 learners will primarily attend at their school from the 15th March, but with the flexibility for an element of remote learning, which will be determined by the individual school and communicated to parents.

- There will also be provision for Year 10 pupils and this will be largely one day per week prior to the Easter break.
- The Minister for Education has also confirmed that schools should look to offer some limited provision for all remaining secondary pupils (years 7, 8 and 9) in order for them to catch up with their teachers prior to the Easter holiday. Therefore, during the week commencing 22nd March learners in these year groups were offered a full day 'check in' session at their school. There was a flexible localised approach to the days and times the pupils attended their school. These arrangements are to ensure that we can safely manage the numbers of pupils on site following this extended period away.

2.5 **Planning Arrangements – Spring Term 2020**

A Planning Group with representation from Education, Environmental Health, Health and Safety, Community Services, Civil Contingencies and SRS; are continuing to work with schools to oversee school reopening arrangements. Remote/blended learning continues where children are not in school on any given day, or where they are shielding or self-isolating.

The Council and our schools continue to offer provision for the children of critical workers where they are eligible and where required (up to the age of 14). This provision should only be accessed in line with the Welsh Government criteria and as a last resort where no other childcare options are available to parents. Support for learners eligible for Free School Meals continues. In circumstances, where children were learning from home; self-isolating; shielding or no onsite catering is available, that support will continue to be via direct payments. The following number of direct payments were issued over a week during March to eligible pupils in school years 3 and above, no payments were sent to Foundation Phase pupils:

- w/c 8/3/2021 – 1,768 payments; and,
- the application process is now initiated and closed on a weekly basis, to provide support to newly eligible families.

School based staff that have agreed to participate in twice weekly testing and at the time of drafting this report, Lateral Flow Testing is in the third week of implementation.

- There have been newly identified positive cases in schools since the relaxation of remote learning all resulting in class closures with the class contacts being required to self-isolate for a period of 10 days.
- ICT device requirements for digitally disadvantaged learners are being reviewed with schools on a weekly basis, with a view to identifying, rebuilding and distributing devices within a 7-day period (dependent on device and associated resource availability).
- The Executive School Planning Groups for both Primary and Secondary (including Middle and Special Schools), continue to take place on a fortnightly basis.

2.6 Recovery – Priorities

It needs to be acknowledged that the impact of 12 months disruption to teaching and learning is far reaching. Recovery will need to be planned in the short, medium and long term for learner development and progression. The Council has established a corporate recovery framework (appendix 2) and a key strand of this work will be a learning sub-group that will be led by the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion, with regular reporting into Corporate Leadership Team. The Education Directorate's top priority in the EAS business plan is to;

Minimise the impact of COVID-19 on learner development and progress, including improving the digital competency of all learners and staff in the wider Blaenau Gwent school community.

The Estyn Thematic Review report previously presented to the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee provided a positive overview of the Council's response in supporting our schools during the pandemic. Moreover, a full School Operational Guidance review is underway, along with additional training packages and information sessions for school leaders.

3. Options for Recommendation

3.1 This report has been discussed by Education DMT and CLT prior to submission to Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee.

Option 1: to accept the report as presented.

Option 2: Members are requested to scrutinise the information detailed within the report and contribute to the continuous assessment of effectiveness by making appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee.

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 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 £290,000, 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 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;
- Preparing for academic year 2020/21, particularly whole school re-opening from September 2020, in line with WG expectations;
- Spring term arrangements and the move to more face to face learning.

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 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 – Blended Learning Survey

Appendix 2 – Response and Recovery Structure