

Blaenau Gwent School Organisation Policy

(March 2021)



Version 2

Strategic Overview

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has undertaken a review of the School Organisation Policy (2015), which was last reviewed in 2017, along with the associated Education Transformation Strategy. The review takes account of key strategic developments that have taken place between 2017 and 2021, influencing the landscape and implementation of school organisation throughout Wales, the South East Wales region and ultimately Blaenau Gwent. The purpose of this document is to set the strategic direction for the organisation of the school estate within the County Borough from 2021 onwards - subject to annual review.

The Welsh Context

Over the Course of the last 4 years, there have been a number of significant and impactful developments within the field of Education, influencing progress, delivery, future plans and objectives.

In March 2021, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant changes within both school operation, access to and the delivery of education. Local Authorities and schools have been through an extensive emergency response period over the course of the last year. This has included, the closure and repurposing schools to support childcare for key workers and vulnerable learners in line with the emergency response; planning for recovery in line with the reopening of schools partially towards the end of the summer-term 2020, with full reopening from the start of the autumn-term 2020. The emergency response is ongoing with recovery planning being a key focus over the course of 2021 and beyond.

During the pandemic, schools and settings have seized opportunities to explore innovative ways of working and delivering meaningful learning experiences, through a creative blended learning approach. Leaders have placed high priority on the wellbeing of learners and staff, whilst simultaneously being engaged in reflecting upon and refining their approaches to teaching and learning. Moving into uncharted waters in terms of international understanding of what constitutes effective distance and blended learning, it has been important for schools to collaborate and learn together.

The Curriculum for Wales Framework is being developed for settings and schools in Wales. Following a consultation period which ended in July 2019, the refined version became available in January 2020, with schools trialling their planned approaches. The new curriculum will be implemented throughout Wales from 2022, and is based on the following principles, resulting from the Donaldson Review - an independent review of Curriculum and Assessment arrangements in Wales – Successful Futures (2015):

- The new national curriculum should be organised as a continuum of learning from 3-16 without phases and key stages;
- Progression should be described in relation to a continuum of learning in each area of learning and experience from where a child enters education to the end of statutory schooling; and,

- There are clear expectations that primary and secondary schools would have to work together much better, rather than secondary education being seen as a 'new beginning'.

Welsh Government subsequently developed the Digital Competency Framework (in line with the Donaldson report, and 'A Curriculum for Wales – a Curriculum for Life', 2015). The DCF establishes a framework for the delivery of ICT across the curriculum that will enable the development of a digitally skilled pupil population in the use of technologies, whilst preparing them for future progression routes and career pathways. It is recognised that supporting digital skill building will potentially stimulate the local economy and economic activity.

In December 2017, the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (2018) was passed by Welsh Government. The aim of the ALN Act is to create a unified process for children and young people 0-25 that will improve outcomes with a single statutory framework. The ALN Act provides the legislative framework to improve the planning and delivery of additional learning provision, through a person-centred approach to identifying learner needs earlier, putting in place effective support and monitoring, and adapting interventions, ensuring the desired outcomes. From September 2021, all Councils have a responsibility to ensure that the requirements of the ALN Act and accompanying Code are in place to support learners aged 0-25 and that they work effectively with other agencies such as Health to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people.

Prior to the pandemic, schools in Wales were showing signs of improvement in terms of attendance, Foundation Phase outcomes, Key Stage 2/3 performance and importantly the proportion of learners achieving 5 A* - C grades (L2+). There has also been some evidence in recent years of an improvement in the performance of pupils entitled to free school meals. These improvements have been brought about through the hard work of pupils, teachers and school leaders who have worked effectively in partnership with Local Authorities and other key partners.

The National Model for Regional Working has effected two significant changes to the school improvement landscape;

- i) The model defined school improvement more clearly, and placed clear responsibilities on Local Authorities to work through formally established regional services to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom and the quality of school leadership.
- ii) Underpinning the structural change was a fundamental change in the methodology for school improvement across Wales since 2014; stakeholders have been working towards creating a self-improving school led system. This is defined as a model where the key players in the education system take shared responsibility for their own improvement and for the improvement of others.

Welsh Government, in Qualified for Life and the National Model, has identified this as its ambition for the education system in Wales. The self-improving school led system is part of a whole system approach involving clear roles for Welsh Government, Local Authorities, Consortia and Schools.

The National landscape, however, for regional services and the extent of school to school collaborative working varies across Wales. **Local Authority based services have**

been placed under increasing pressure during a significant period of financial austerity, also more recently, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is, however, an exciting time for Local Authorities and Schools, as there is a greater sense of ambition and a clearer focus on the future. It has been important for schools and Local Authorities to take a self-help approach to developing greater resilience to change. Schools require well developed systems in place to support sustainable progress, in order to continue to improve pupil outcomes in the years ahead.

The national picture is clearly advocating a more collaborative working agenda for all partners in the self-improving school system. Blaenau Gwent is well placed to respond to the changing landscape at a national level.

The Blaenau Gwent Context

Blaenau Gwent is the most economically challenged Local Authority area in Wales and there is a determination to improve educational performance across the board, but particularly at Key Stage 4. The Education Achievement Service deliver a wide range of school improvement services via an agreed Business Plan on behalf of the Council. The Business Plan supports the role Local Authorities have in delivering their statutory function, addressing their individual improvement priorities and promoting improved pupil outcomes. The strategic priorities for Blaenau Gwent contained within the Post COVID Recovery Business Plan April 2021 – March 2022 are 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;
- Ensure high quality leadership and teaching that secures good progress for all learners, particularly the vulnerable and those who are eFSM;
- Improve wellbeing for learners at all stages of development;
- Secure strong progress in skills, particularly in English and mathematics at key stages 3 and 4; and,
- Support schools who are identified as causing concern through regional protocols to secure improvement, in conjunction with the EAS.

Blaenau Gwent schools have demonstrated that they have significant potential to move to an improvement model that is determined by schools for schools, in turn securing the capacity for collective improvement across the system.

The Council's policy advocates the all-through schooling approach. This model and approach is not unique to Blaenau Gwent and has historically focussed upon school re-organisation as a means of creating unified governance and leadership arrangements to consolidate the relationships between schools. Indeed, Blaenau Gwent has created **3 all-through learning communities** during recent years. This approach, however, is at the more formalised end of the spectrum of school to school working and responds to key strategic drivers, such as the need to significantly improve standards and/or sustainability of the school estate.

Education has initiated a schools funding review for implementation over the next 3 years, with a key focus on securing appropriate financial resource for schools across the 3-16 age range.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council remains committed to providing children and young people with high quality education and training, to contribute to the economic regeneration of the County Borough. The vision set out within the Corporate Plan (2020-2022) is:

- Proud heritage
- Strong Communities
- Brighter Future

In addition, the Education Directorate's vision (2017-21) is:

'Securing excellent achievement and wellbeing for all learners through a partnership, school-led self-improving system'.

Over time, within the self-improving school system, responsibility and control would be transferred through schools collaborating, which operate in a spirit of mutual challenge and support between school leaders and their colleagues who are committed to achieving more ambitious and better outcomes for all learners.

Blaenau Gwent acknowledges the key components of a self-improving school system are broadly agreed as:

- Autonomy
- Accountability
- Capacity building
- Choice/diversity
- System leadership

The Council accepts that such a transformation will create challenges and it is likely that organisational, structural and cultural barriers will need to be removed, however, the following benefits can be delivered:

- a shift in much of the responsibility for school improvement moving from Local Government/Consortia to Blaenau Gwent's schools over time;
- Blaenau Gwent's schools commit to developing a professional learning culture by commissioning and leading on the school improvement agenda;
- school leaders and governors sharing collective responsibility and accountability for the continual improvement of the schools working in partnership;
- partnerships of schools working collaboratively to challenge and support each other to achieve ambitious outcomes for all learners; and,
- a primary focus on teaching and learning; progression and continuity; and reducing variation in and between schools.

School Organisation – the Strategic Direction

The revised School Organisational Policy (2021-24) sets out 8 strategic priorities in line with the future direction and associated areas of development, which will inform and underpin school organisation and planning processes. The policy and associated priorities will be subject to annual review.

1. Duty – Planning and Provision of School Places

The Council has a statutory duty to ensure that there is sufficient provision of school places to meet the anticipated demand for education. Parents can apply for their child to be educated at a school of their preference. The Council has to manage the allocation of places to its schools in line with the Blaenau Gwent Admissions Policy for Nursery and Statutory Education.

All children in Wales between the ages of 5 and 16 are entitled to a free place at a state school, whilst nursery children are entitled to a free part-time educational places from the term following their third birthday. The types of school provision in the County Borough are:

- Community maintained schools, managed in partnership with Councils;
- Faith Schools such as Voluntary Aided schools; and
- Foundation School, which have more autonomy than maintained schools.

Blaenau Gwent has a track record of managing school places effectively, and the position on surplus places is an improving picture. **The position in line with the latest all-Wales dataset (January 2018/19) is as follows:**

- 13th (out of 22 Local Authorities) for primary;
- 10th (out of 22 Local Authorities) for secondary; and,
- 11th (out of 22 Local Authorities) in terms of the combined primary and secondary position.

The School Organisation Policy (2021) sets a target for surplus places of less than 15% for both primary and secondary sectors.

In addition, Education are working to facilitate effective pupil place planning within the special school sector, inclusive of resource base and other specialist provision for pupils with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). The first phase of this work involves a proposal which seeks to secure increased capacity at Pen-y-Cwm Special School. A detailed review of ALN provision will be undertaken over the course of the next 3 years. As part of this review consultation and engagement with key stakeholders will be key to ensuring that informed decisions are made based upon the needs of learners.

2. School to School Support and Collaboration

There are two main elements of legislation, which are supported by regulation and code that govern the process for changing the organisational arrangements of schools. These are:

- School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013, **which is supported by the by Welsh Government School Organisation Code (2018, version 2);** and,
- Federation of Maintained School (Wales) Regulations 2014, which is made under the Education Wales Measure 2011.

In 2015, Estyn reported on school to school collaborations and identified ‘nearly all’ schools are involved in some form of partnership working with the other schools. In

most schools in Wales there are cluster collaborative working arrangements in place, and approximately 50% have other school to school working arrangements that are self-generated. This level of engagement with collaborations within the Local Authority and the region has developed considerably since this time, with a strong culture of partnership growing amongst school leaders, and an outward-facing approach to development and improvement. Engagement in regional professional learning programmes and networks is very strong within the Borough. This was exemplified in Spring 2021 by Blaenau Gwent having the highest number of schools within the region taking part in the Celebrate, Support, Share and Refine EAS pilot, which focused on schools' development of provision and practice in distance and blended learning.

As per the Welsh Government's School Organisational Code (2018, version 2) Councils can use their powers for school re-organisation. Whilst the powers remain, the use of school organisation powers is not the preferred option presented in this policy, as the Council is advocating a self-improving schooling system. The spectrum of school support and collaboration includes:

- Self-generated collaboration;
- Brokered support;
- Collaboration or 'soft' federation, which can involve a 'soft governance' model
- 'Hard' federation; and,
- School re-organisation

The term 'federation' describes a formal and legal agreement by which a number of schools (between two and six) where governance arrangements. The key drivers for considering federation should be the benefits that such an arrangement would bring for children and young people in the federating schools to enhance provision. There is no single blueprint for federation and the design and operational workings of a federation will depend entirely on the circumstances of the individual schools and the focus or the purpose of working together. Federation models, however, can offer distinct advantages to collaborative working between schools. The main characteristics of the range of collaborative working options are shown in **Appendix 1**. The Council's Education Directorate is committed to supporting schools considering greater collaboration through the change process, and consequently, has developed a 'Governors Guide' to progressing school to school working. The Guide covers some key points for consideration, including;

- School to school collaboration, partnerships or federations are bespoke arrangements. It is not a 'one size fits all approach';
- Federation models can be led by Governing Bodies or the Council;
- 'Hard federation models require a formal consultation process and can take up to 125 days to implement.
- The Education Directorate will support schools throughout the process.

The Education Directorate will continue to engage schools in the County Borough in the collaborative working agenda seeking to establish opportunities for greater collaboration. School to school working has advanced over the course of the last year, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Management of the School Estate – School Organisation

The management of the school estate seeks to secure improved condition and suitability of education facilities in line with the creation and management of sustainable education system in Blaenau Gwent. This process not only informs key school organisation priorities and the 21st Century Schools Programme, but facilitates effective access to education throughout the Borough in line with key developments such as housing.

Since the establishment of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (1996), there has been a substantial change across the school estate, which has resulted in significant improvements in the quality of school learning environments.

In 1996/97 there were 32 primary schools, 1 special school, 1 pupil referral unit and 6 secondary schools. The position as of 2021 has been reconfigured to:

- 2 secondary schools (inclusive of 1 Foundation school)
- 2 3-16 Learning Communities (All through school model)
- 2 Special schools
- 1 Welsh-medium primary school
- 18 primary schools (4 of which are Faith schools)

The 25 schools serve a pupil cohort of 9,279 including nursery age pupils. Post 16 provision is provided in partnership with Coleg Gwent through the Blaenau Gwent Learning Zone.

4. School Size, Suitability, Condition & Operation

The position for building suitability and condition as at September 2019/20, based on categorisations ranging from A (good) to D (Bad) is shown in **Appendix 2**. The overall status and quality of the school estate is improving, mainly from significant capital investment and the rationalisation of aging school buildings.

The size of a school and its capacity is influenced by a range of factors. The School Organisation Policy (2021) advocates the following school size framework principles:

- Schools, where numbers on roll are forecast to be less than 90 pupils should be reviewed
- Nursery provision to be co-located and part of the governance structure of statutory school provision
- Primary schools with a minimum capacity of 210, other sizes to include 360, 420 and 630 places.
- Secondary schools being no smaller than 600 places
- Middle schools – all through school and provides continuity for students in one organisation with a single leadership and management structure and the size of the school will be flexible.

The Council has a minor works, maintenance and planned works programme to improve the condition, suitability and operation of Education assets/facilities, with the

2021/22 programme currently underway. The capacity of each school is reviewed annually throughout the autumn-term in line with pupil numbers, operation and changes in the use of school facilities. This process informs the admissions policy arrangements for the preceding year.

5. Promoting Access to Education

In 2018, the Council consulted upon their home to school and post 16 distance limits in line with the award of free transport. The Council's agreed limits are more generous than those set out within the Learner Travel (Wales) Measure 2008 ("the Measure"), and the Learner Travel Information (Wales) Regulations 2009 (the "Regulations"). As a result of the consultation and associated outcomes, it was determined by the Council's Executive Committee that the distance limits would remain unchanged for the term of office of the existing Council, with elections scheduled to take place in 2022. Blaenau Gwent Council reviews the Home to School and Post 16 Transport Policy on an annual basis, with the last review having taken place in 2020, for implementation from September 2021.

The School Organisation Policy advocates greater school to school collaboration and this is likely to have implications for Home to School Transport. This policy, therefore, sets out a principle that any school organisation/collaborative arrangements between schools is subject to a full transport impact assessment prior to determining the proposal. The transport impact assessment may also consider changes to existing school catchment areas, which could require consultation processes to be followed.

The Blaenau Gwent Accessibility Strategy is also scheduled for review, with a view to securing continued improvement and access for those in greatest need. The Strategy and associated Action Plan will undergo review in 2021, for implementation from 2022. Access to education is also facilitated by the Admissions Policy for Nursery and Statutory Education, which was last reviewed in January 2021, for publication on the 15th of April and implementation from September 2021.

6. 21st Century Schools Programme

The 21st Century Schools Programme is a long-term strategic investment in the education estate throughout Wales. The Programme is broken down into phases of investment, categorised as Bands. The Band A Programme in Blaenau Gwent, successfully concluded on programme and on profile in the autumn-term of 2019. The Council works closely in partnership with the Welsh Government, to secure funding in line with the delivery each project within the Programme, via the HM Treasury 5 Case Model.

The Band A programme which concluded in 2019, resulted in an investment of £20.25m into the school estate, and consisted of:

- 2 new build primary schools in the Southern Ebbw Fach Valley
- 2 remodelling projects of a comprehensive school in Tredegar and remodelling of a Primary School in the Ebbw Fach North valley.

The Band B programme will result in £19.6m into the school estate, with more emphasis on remodelling, consisting of:

- 1 New build primary along with remodelling of 3 primary schools in the Ebbw Fawr Valley

- 4 Secondary school remodelling projects to include transition into Band C
- Remodelling of the exiting Welsh-medium Primary School in the Northern Ebbw Fach Valley

The Blaenau Gwent Band B Programme investment objective are as follows:

- **Investment Objective 1:** to raise standards and achievement in line with localised targets at foundation phase, KS2, KS3 and KS4; and secure improved transition into post 16 learning.
- **Investment Objective 2:** to create a sustainable model for the 21st Century school estate in consideration of both capital and revenue investment, along with the condition and suitability of buildings.
- **Investment Objective 3:** to establish effective management and provision of school places, by having the right schools in the right place at the right time.
- **Investment Objective 4:** to implement the 21st Century Schools Programme in line with local, regional and national school organisation policy; ensuring synergy between progression, development and implementation.
- **Investment Objective 5:** meeting the needs of vulnerable learners.

In addition to the Band B funding envelope, Blaenau Gwent Council received confirmation in October 2018, that they were successful in securing £6 million via the Welsh-medium Capital Grant, along with £200,000 from the Capital Childcare Grant. The grants were awarded in line with the proposal to create a new 210 place Welsh-medium primary school and associated childcare facility in the Tredegar/Sirhowy valley. This proposal is currently subject to statutory processes.

The 21st Century Schools Programme is instrumental in securing delivery aligned to the Blaenau Gwent Corporate Plan (2020/22), the outcome statements associated with the plan are:

- Protect and enhance our environment and infrastructure to benefit our communities
- Support a fairer sustainable economy and community
- To enable people to maximise their independence, develop solutions and take an active role in their communities
- An ambitious and innovative council delivering the quality services we know matter to our communities

The 21st Century Schools Programme (Band A) features as a key priority in the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

7. The Welsh in Education Strategic Plan

In 2017, Welsh Government carried out a rapid review of Welsh in Education Strategic Plans throughout Wales. The review acknowledged the need for change, not only in terms of individual plans' ambitions, but also in terms of the legislative framework set out by Welsh Government. The review also highlighted a need to change the regulations and guidelines, along with a significant change in the Welsh Government and local authority approach to planning. Consequently, Welsh Government reviewed the legislative framework associated with the WESP, with the key focus being the creation of a framework which enables local authorities to develop long-term strategic plans.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Welsh Government required Local Authorities to submit their first draft 10-year plan to the Welsh Ministers by 31 January 2021; however, in light of the pandemic and associated emergency response requirements, the submission timeline has been updated. Following the drafting and subsequent consultation period, the Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (Wales) Regulations 2019, along with the draft guidance were laid on 5 December 2019 and came into effect on 1st January 2020. Local Authorities must submit their first draft 10-year Plan to the Welsh Ministers on 31st January 2022, with the plan operational from September 2022.

The Blaenau Gwent Welsh in Education Forum has already begun working on a draft 10-year plan for consultation and approval by 31st January 2022. Within Blaenau Gwent and throughout the South East Wales Region, there is a focus on the growth of Welsh-medium education. The Council are currently at statutory notice stage on a proposal to develop a second Welsh-medium primary school. A key priority going forward, will be to work with neighbouring authorities to secure Welsh-medium provision at secondary, ensuring effective and sustainable progression opportunities for Blaenau Gwent learners from 2028 onwards.

8. Information and Communication Technology in Schools

In 2017, Education and the Shared Resource Service (SRS) worked in partnership with schools to review the status of and to enhance ICT infrastructure and connectivity throughout the school estate, whilst also addressing gaps and consistency issues. As a result, the Education Infrastructure and Connectivity Project was established implemented between 2019 and 2021. The project sought to improve the delivery of teaching and learning, whilst also facilitating delivery in line with the Digital Competency Framework, and effectively contributing to the overall curriculum aspirations for Wales. This work also built upon the outcomes realised as a result of the Living in Digital Wales (LiDW) Programme, 2014.

During 2019, the Welsh Government launched the Hwb EdTech (HET) initiative, which over a 3-year period, will realise an investment of over £2 million throughout the school estate, with future Waves of the programme currently under development. The status of the Infrastructure Connectivity Project placed Blaenau Gwent strong position to further enhance the infrastructure in line with the Hwb EdTech initiative. Strong progress has been made to date in line with infrastructure, connectivity and device upgrade throughout the school estate. The key focus for 2021/22 will be the development and implementation of an Education ICT Strategy, which establishes a clear vision for school's ICT, whilst enhancing the delivery of teaching and learning, and positively influencing pupil outcomes.

Appendix 1

Differences between types Federations (NFER)

Characteristics	Informal Loose Collaboration	Soft Federations	Soft Governance Federation	Hard Governance Federation
Statutory/non-statutory	Non-statutory – schools can form informal collaborations without having to follow regulations.	Non-statutory – schools can set up soft Federations without having to follow regulations.	Statutory – soft governance Federations are established using Collaboration Regulations made under Section 26 of the Education Act 2002.	Statutory – hard governance Federations are established using Federation Regulations made under Section 24 of the Education Act 2002.
Governing body	Each school has its own governing body, with representatives on a joint committee that meets informally on an ad hoc basis.	Each school has its own governing body, with representatives on a joint committee that meets.	Each school has its own governing body, with representation and delegated powers on a joint governance/ strategic committee.	Single governing body, shared by all schools in the Federation.
Common goals and plans	All schools share common goals and work together on an ad hoc basis and through informal agreements.	All schools share common goals; joint committee recommendations, but it is up to the individual governing bodies to authorise decisions/ plans.	All schools share common goals through the Service Level Agreement (SLA) and protocol; Joint committee can make joint decisions/ recommendations in specified agreed areas, but not all.	All schools share common goals through SLA and protocol; having a single governing body allows for efficient, streamlined decision-making in all areas.
Common budget	No, but if the schools want to commit to a budgetary decision affecting all schools, each individual school's governing body would need to approve this.	No, but it could make budgetary recommendations for the group which in turn would have to be approved by each individual school's governing body.	No, but if the joint/strategic committee has budgetary powers delegated to it, it can make prompt budgetary decisions on behalf of schools in the Federation.	No (technically), but whilst each school receives and must account for its own separate budget, there is considerable scope, through the single governing body, to use the pooled budgets across the schools in the Federation.
Shared Staff	Unlikely to have common management positions, but if they do exist, they would have to be agreed in a protocol or contract.	Common management positions and appointments but need to have a protocol or contract to underpin commitment to shared posts.	Common management positions and appointments but need to have a protocol or contract to underpin commitment to shared posts.	Common management positions and appointments agreed by single governing body in a simple and effective manner. Schools can agree to have a single executive head teacher responsible to the schools in the hard Federation.

Appendix 2

Overall Building Condition and Suitability Ratings - The 2019/20 position for building condition and suitability is categorised as A (good) to D (bad) and summarised below:

	A	B	B/C	C	D
Primary (19 Schools – 19 buildings)					
Condition	0	11	0	7	1
Suitability	3	7	9	0	0
Secondary (2 schools – 2 buildings)					
Condition	0	1	0	1	0
Suitability		1	0	1	0
Middle (2 schools - 6 buildings)					
Condition	4	1	0	1	0
Suitability	4	1	0	1	0
Special (2 schools- 4 buildings)					
Condition	1	1	0	2	0
Suitability	1	2	0	1	0