

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

**REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL**

**SUBJECT: EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE – 9<sup>TH</sup> MARCH, 2021**

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

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**PRESENT: COUNCILLOR J. HOLT (IN THE CHAIR)**

Councillors: D. Bevan  
M. Cook  
M. Day  
L. Elias  
J. Hill  
C. Meredith  
J.C. Morgan  
J.P. Morgan  
L. Parsons  
B. Summers  
D. Wilkshire

**Co-opted Members**

T. Baxter

**AND:** Corporate Director of Education  
Strategic Education Improvement Manager  
Service Manager Inclusion  
Education Transformation Manager  
Youth Services Manager  
Partnerships, Funding and Contracts Manager – ALT  
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

**ALSO:** Ed Pryce, Assistant Director EAS  
Hayley Davies-Edwards, Principal Challenge Adviser  
Liz Counsell, Estyn – Observer

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
<b>No. 1</b>	<b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b>	

	<p>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.</p>	
<b>No. 2</b>	<p><b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors H. Trollope (Chair), G. Collier and T. Smith.</p> <p><b><u>Co-opted Member</u></b> A. Williams</p>	
<b>No. 3</b>	<p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
	<p><b><u>VERBAL UPDATE - COVID-19 PANDEMIC</u></b></p> <p>At the request of the Chair, the Corporate Director of Education provided a verbal update on the Education Directorate's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>The Director advised Members that the amount of positive Covid-19 incidences experienced across the County Borough had reduced to 38 per 100,000 population. That was the stable position over the last 10 days and showed that all of the collective work had contributed to making a difference.</p> <p>In relation to the schools' update there had only been one positive case in a school setting and from a workforce perspective the number of staff that were either self-isolating or had been identified as being in the shielding category was just over 20, again that was a very stable position and no significant workforce and staffing issues were being experienced across education at this juncture. He was pleased to update Members that engagement with schools had continued to be very encouraging and schools had agreed strategic decisions and taken a common approach in terms of our response. The Executive Planning Group meetings with Headteachers were continuing on a fortnightly basis and recently there was a move towards foundation phase learners now returning to school settings for face to face learning from 22<sup>nd</sup> January. He advised</p>	

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Members that these arrangements had run smoothly with no real difficulties and this was a credit to the primary sector for the way they managed those arrangements as they move towards increasing numbers of face to face learning.

Over the spring term, there was continued hub provision for both vulnerable learners and critical workers. In the last admissions round there were approaching 460 children that continued to be supported. Slightly worryingly, from a free school meals perspective, direct payments had increased to 1,768 learners and that excluded Foundation Phase learners, he felt that this demonstrated the economic impact locally of Covid-19 on some families across the County Borough. The direct payments to those families had been working effectively and were reviewed on a weekly basis.

From a remote blended learning perspective, there had been close liaison with colleagues in the EAS on the Celebrate, Share, Support and Refine (CSSR) pilot initiative across southeast Wales and he was pleased to report that out of Blaenau Gwent's 25 schools, 13 were participating in that pilot, more than 50% and that was the highest proportion of any local authority area within the region.

From an ICT perspective the amount of devices and support for learners and families was now approaching 1,600 devices that had been issued to families where there was identified need. The Education Transformation Manager and the team had worked closely with the SRS to ensure that support for learners was comprehensive.

Vaccinations for staff in special schools and those teaching and non-teaching staff in resource bases had started. With regard to testing, lateral flow tests had been delivered over the last 10 days and the Director confirmed that the initiation of lateral flow testing for staff started on Wednesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> March.

Some extraordinary meetings had been held with Secondary, Primary and Special School Headteachers, following the Welsh Government announcement, that also included engagement with the Trade Unions so that discussion could take place on some of the planning arrangements for an increased level of face to face learning from 15<sup>th</sup> March. The current position planned with

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Headteachers involved all of the primary learners returning from the 15<sup>th</sup> March and would include Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2. Also from 15<sup>th</sup> March a return would include secondary year 11's and there would be one day per week set aside for year 10's as part of the examination assessment requirements over the next 18 months. There was a planned approach for years 7's, 8's and 9's all of whom would receive at least one full day check-in prior to the Easter holiday period. There had been some initial dialogue with Headteachers across the board around the post Easter provision, subject to Welsh Government review, but with a view to a potential move towards full return for all learners.

In response to a Member's question regarding flow testing for teachers, the Corporate Director of Education confirmed that lateral flow testing for all teaching and non-teaching staff was in place and that included ancillary staff such as catering and cleaning staff. Testing would take place twice weekly and were self-administered tests, if there was a positive case identified via the lateral flow testing arrangements then a PCR test, which was more robust, would be arranged to ensure that any potential positive incidences that arise could be managed appropriately.

A Member referred to Legionella testing in schools and enquired regarding an update on the consultants who raised the issue of different ways of testing for Legionella. The Corporate Director of Education said that revised arrangements were in place in line with the report presented to full Council on water testing. There were now weekly monitoring arrangements in place whereby schools had to confirm that, for example flushing arrangements were reported through to Technical Services in line with the latest Legionella guidance and there was monitoring within the Education Transformation team. Where there was any non-compliance, schools were contacted and any recourse was taken with prompt action. He confirmed that schools had responded positively to the new and enhanced flushing regimes that were expected from a local authority perspective.

A Member enquired regarding the use of personal electronic devices taken into school and used for school purposes. The Corporate Director of Education said that

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1,600 reconditioned devices had been distributed to learners and many learning activities now took place by a 'bring your own devices' (BYOD). This was carried out in conjunction with the SRS to ensure that there were control measures in place to make sure that the activity was done in a safe environment so that the learners were not disadvantaged and not placed at any further risks through using their own devices. Moving forward he felt that this would become more of the norm especially in relation to blended learning.

The Member raised concerns regarding loss or damage to the devices. The Director of Education said that in relation to damage the Council had its own insurance arrangements. There would need to be localised arrangements within schools to ensure that those situations were kept to an absolute minimum and any personal devices were protected.

A Member raised concerns regarding the increase in free school meals and the effect this would have on the Pupil Deprivation Grant (PDG) and enquired if the Welsh Government were looking at the redistribution of the PDG in line with the pandemic and the number of pupils that are now receiving free school meals. The Corporate Director of Education said that at this point in time it was difficult to give a strong indication on how the Welsh Government would respond to the increased levels of free school meals eligibility across Wales. FSM levels were measured at the annual PLASC level returns in January and that should be reflected in the PDG, he confirmed that PLASC returns were used to assess PDG grants.

The Member raised further concerns regarding the reopening of schools and felt that a report needed to be prepared for consideration by the Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee. The Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee had met in February 2020 and due to the pandemic had not met again until September 2020, he felt that a record should be kept and a report be prepared to consider any discussion or concerns that Scrutiny Members may have on the reopening of schools. He also referred to Legionella and water testing for schools. The Corporate Director of Education said that an education Covid-19 update report had been presented in November that

	<p>covered aspects of the water testing issues that were faced over the summer term and he was happy to bring forward a further Covid-19 update report to the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee in April.</p> <p>In response to a Member's questions regarding vaccinations and PPA, preparation, planning and assessment, the Director of Education said that discussions around a regional approach had taken place with Headteachers and Trade Unions and some schools had confirmed they had capacity to undertake PPA under normal arrangements and other schools may have some difficulty and were considering a slightly earlier finish on a Friday to accommodate PPA, but this would be a matter for the Headteacher and the Chair of Governors to decide and that would allow the facilitation of statutory requirements around PPA. In relation to vaccinations he clarified that they were only being issued to staff in Special Schools and in Resource Bases at this point in time.</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 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2021 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 – 11<sup>TH</sup> FEBRUARY, 2021</u></b></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2021 was submitted, whereupon:-</p> <p><b><u>Verbal Update – COVID-19 Pandemic</u></b></p> <p>A Member requested a progress update in relation to the funding from WG for extra PPE equipment for schools.</p> <p>The Education Transformation Manager said that new PPE guidance along with training had been issued to all schools in February. Requests for additional PPE were monitored fortnightly and all schools had sufficient provision in place for the current phase of reopening. The training and</p>	

guidance would be updated with any new or emergent updates from the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales. WG funding had been received and allocated accordingly, and managed in line with the allocation of PPE in line with both the additional funding and the hardship fund.

A Member commented that a number of additional grants had been received and requested a progress update on the ALN Covid-19 support grant, the PDG access clothing grants and the EdTech programme.

In relation to the ALN Covid-19 support grant and the PDG access grant, the Service Manager Inclusion said that they were working with the EAS to allocate the ALN Covid-19 support grant to schools on a per pupil basis, this should be with schools shortly. The PDG access clothing grant had been extended until the end of June and the application process was now live on the Blaenau Gwent website. A letter was being prepared for schools to share with parents, and some schools had already included this information on their school social media account. Both grants were being made available either to schools or to parents.

A Member commented that the WG had announced £72m for education and requested a report on what bids were being submitted to the Welsh Government.

The Corporate Director of Education said that as there had been several additional resources and funding opportunities over the spring term, it had been agreed with colleagues in Finance to produce one document that would highlight the resource and how that resource would be used. A Briefing Note would be prepared to provide details of grant funding being received by the Directorate.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the action sheet be noted.

**No. 6**

**ESTYN THEMATIC REVIEW - BLAENAU GWENT'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education which was presented 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.

The Corporate Director of Education spoke to the report and highlight the main points contained therein.

A Member referred to page 32 of the report and requested an update on the number of vulnerable pupils who attended hub provision between March and July. The Service Manager Inclusion confirmed that the current number stood at 120.

The Co-opted Member provided a response to the thematic review from a Headteachers perspective. He said the last few months had been very challenging in relation to trying to maintain a good standard of education for pupils when so many of the staff had to isolate. There had been two areas of rapid progress in Blaenau Gwent, the first being the considerable progress in using IT more effectively to support pupils with distance learning, the second was the level of collaborative working with schools and Local Authority Officers. There had been clear consultation, and totally unified agreement on all major decisions. This provided greater clarity for parents because there was a consistent approach from all schools and felt that it had helped to limit the spread of the pandemic. It was pleasing to note that Estyn had recognised this level of support, collaboration and trust and hoped it would continue in the future.

A Member referred to the first paragraph of page 33 - 'Neither the interim arrangements for the corporate director position or the lack of school improvement lead officer appear to have impacted negatively on the local authority's ability to support schools during the pandemic'. He felt it was important to mention that the current Director had taken over on a temporary basis at the beginning of the pandemic and felt the Director and all his staff should be congratulated on the work they had undertaken since the start of the pandemic.

The Chair and Members of the Committee expressed their appreciation and agreed with their colleague's comments.



A Member referred to the savings of £210,000. The Corporate Director of Education clarified that the report highlighted the portfolio underspend at that point in time linked to cost reduction, they were not revenue savings but just the financial position at that point in time. In relation to budget monitoring, the additional costs associated with Covid such as catering and cleaning were largely funded through Welsh Government support through the hardship fund, the Directorate would be in an adverse financial position.

A Member expressed his appreciation for the invaluable support for vulnerable learners from the Inclusion team and acknowledged the good work of the Youth Services team regarding the distribution of computers and dongles to allow youngsters to get online. He welcomed the Thematic Review report which highlighted the approach during the early days of the pandemic and the reopening of schools, however, he had concerns that it was not evidenced based. The Member was pleased to note that as a Local Authority we had put forward the five recommendations highlighted in the report to the Welsh Government.

The Member referred to the recruitment, recovery, raising standards and accelerated learning grant funding to support pupils to catch up and with learning and enquired what progress had been made on monitoring the impact of the grant and what evidence was available to measure pupil outcomes. He also enquired regarding strategic planning around what would education in Blaenau Gwent look like in September, for example what were the expectations of each school, how would pupil progress be measured and what had schools learned from blended learning.

The Corporate Director of Education said that in relation to the recruitment and recovery element of funding from the Welsh Government there were stringent monitoring arrangements in place that measured the impact associated with that spend. He was now a participant of the Welsh Government led Recovery Group and felt this position could help Blaenau Gwent shape recovery at a strategic level. Moving forward he felt that recovery in terms of the Covid response was going to be more of a medium to long term

arrangement and that was why managing pupil progression was the key priority put forward to the EAS business plan.

The Member referred to promoting learning and quoted from the document 'Officers considered the EAS provided good support to schools and blended learning approaches' and felt that Estyn would need evidence in relation to this. The Corporate Director of Education said that work was being undertaken with the EAS around celebrating, sharing, supporting and refining and a pilot was underway. He felt that Blaenau Gwent was at the vanguard of doing that work and there would be the opportunity to share practice across the school estate. Presentations were taking place from 13 out of 25 schools that were part of the pilot, they were also committed for the other 12 schools to participate in the next round of CSSR initiatives which would bring forward elements of good practice and felt that they were in a reasonable place to roll out that learning across the whole of the County Borough.

The Assistant Director EAS stated that a distance and blended learning session for Members had been held recently, the latest of a series of those where two schools in Blaenau Gwent presented what work they were doing to Members. It had been well attended and the EAS would continue, through the Local Authority, to offer similar sessions moving forward.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the report be accepted as presented.

**No. 7**

**EAS BUSINESS PLAN 2021-2022**  
**(Draft for consultation)**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education which was presented for members to consider the full contents of the draft EAS Business Plan 2021-2022, as part of the regional consultation process. Through this activity, members will ensure that the plan enables appropriate support for schools and settings in Blaenau Gwent.

The new EAS Principal Challenge Adviser briefly introduced herself to Members. There had been a change in EAS

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arrangements Hayley Davies-Edwards was the new Principal Challenge Adviser attached to Blaenau Gwent from January 2021.

The Assistant Director EAS spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

The Co-opted Member stated that the EAS had adapted the way they worked and had adopted a more supportive role over the past year which had reduced the additional demand on how teachers provided additional support in delivering improved blended learning. He had one concern with the business plan that related to the ambitious aim in relation to the new curriculum for Wales and felt it would be a shame to rush to implement it now at the expense of ensuring that all pupils had caught up and sought assurances that moving forward would not be at the expense of catching up.

The Assistant Director EAS responded that as a region they were responding to the national interpretation requirements of moving towards curriculum for Wales and saw it as an opportunity. He acknowledged the sensitivity around the individual context of individual schools and the population they served, if pupils required different forms of support in order for them to re-learn some of the basics they may need, that would be appropriate within that individual school setting and the EAS and teams would support schools doing this.

In response to a Member's questions regarding how the EAS would assess where children's education was at present, and whether the Authority was getting value for money from the EAS. The Assistant Director EAS said in relation to the data for accountability, in summer 2020 there were no assessments at Foundation Phase or Key Stage 2, and Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 data was based on school assessments. In 2021 the Welsh Government were currently consulting on the reporting of data, the consultation closes at the end of March, so it was unlikely that there would be a full range of end of key stage data. Critically schools knew their learners and the progress they need to make to return to learning. The EAS would work with schools to support their understanding of where their learners are, he explained there were still, for example

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national tests available but the requirement to actually have to take those national tests on an annual basis had been modified, it was on a best endeavours basis during the year because learners had not been in school for much of the year to actually take those adaptive national tests. What was critical was when schools used tools like that they are used in a way to assess where learners were and to assess their needs rather than for accountability.

In relation to value for money, an annual value for money report had been delivered to every local authority and the conclusion provided at the time by the external consultant was that the EAS provided good value for money.

In response to a Member's question regarding what the EAS was doing to encourage schools that were not engaging, the Assistant Director EAS said that high levels of schools had engaged in the CSSR process and through the Principal Challenge Adviser process schools were approached where there were concerns around engagement to address any issues.

With regard to priority J on the EAS Business Plan a Member felt that the words 'celebrating success' should be added to the phrase '*To further develop a culture around accountability that identifies and values a broad spectrum of characteristics of effective schools and settings*'. The Assistant Director EAS hoped that 'celebrating success' permeated throughout the document. Priority J reflected on some of the statutory responsibilities that the local authority had, which the EAS deliver on as their partners in relation to the accountability elements.

The Assistant Director EAS confirmed that the recommendations coming from Estyn to the Welsh Government would be fully integrated into recommendations going to local authorities and schools.

In relation to value for money, the Corporate Director of Education said there were two variables; one was an assessment of whether or not performance was improving, and the second was whether that assessment could be done more efficiently with less resources. The current allocation of resource that the Council commissioned the EAS was just over £350,000 and he confirmed a 2%

reduction in that budget for 2021/22. He felt this provided good value for money.

A Member raised concerns regarding blended learning and how pupils' progressive progress was measured in relation to literacy and numeracy and how that data was analysed as this was the second year for pupil assessments. The Assistant Director EAS said there was no blueprint for how learning from home could be delivered, learners would have spent different periods of time at home, due to isolation etc. schools had learned from scratch and that was one of the key elements that was covered at the distance and blended learning's seminars. As learners return, schools would be in a position to assess learner's capabilities, abilities and future needs would be picked up. He felt that schools were developing their approaches now and the EAS would support schools and share best practice on how to address the needs of individual learners. He explained that no Consortia was involved with the GCSE or A level results, the EAS were never involved with the assessment, as it had to be undertaken by independent organisations such as the WJEC, the EAS only acted as a conduit between Qualifications Wales, the WJEC and the secondary schools. With regards to the business plan the EAS would continue to work with national organisations and school colleagues to communicate with clarity the messages that come at a national level on national assessments.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the Business Plan be accepted as presented.

**No. 8**

**INSPIRE 2 ACHIEVE AND WORK PERFORMANCE  
REPORT JANUARY – DECEMBER 2020**

Consideration was given to the report of the Youth Services Manager which was presented to provide Members with an opportunity to scrutinise the local Inspire 2 Achieve and Inspire 2 Work projects funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). These projects are part of the Youth Service team's approach to reducing the numbers of young people becoming Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET).

	<p>The Youth Services Manager spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>A Member referred to paragraph 6.1.11 and the reduction of staff from 6.5 to 4.5 this year as two members of staff had temporarily supported the youth homelessness team and enquired regarding future funding for the service. The Youth Services Manager explained that they had been successful in securing another years funding for the work linked to homelessness from the Welsh Government, the intention was that the two members of staff expressing an interest to remain within the youth homelessness team and recruit separately into the two vacant posts. In relation to ESF, this was highlighted as a risk within the report and the team were in discussions with regional partners to look at funding coming from the UK Government called Shared Prosperity Funding. There were also other avenues of funding being considered in the immediate short term but there were uncertainties regarding timings, however, the Youth Services Manager was fairly confident that funding would become available.</p> <p>In response to a Member’s question regarding training providers, the Youth Services Manager said they work closely with a number of training providers within the area, as part of the raising aspirations group partnership. They worked together to understand the needs of young people and to ensure that the training needed was available to them. There were also alternative curriculum sites established where the team worked with young people in those settings.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that Members scrutinised the information detailed within the report, and recommend to the Executive Committee that the report be accepted.</p>	
<p><b>No. 9</b></p>	<p><b><u>WELSH PUBLIC LIBRARY STANDARDS (WPLS) ANNUAL RETURN 2019/20</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Youth Services Manager which was presented for Members to consider the attached report (appendix 1) received from the Museums, Archives and Libraries Division (MALD) of Welsh</p>	

	<p>Government with respect to the third year of the Sixth Assessment Framework for the Welsh Public Library Standards (WPLS) return 2019/20.</p> <p>The Corporate Director of Education spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>A Member referred to page 91, quality indicator 9 and commented that the Leisure Trust had failed to meet its measure regarding reading material and he felt that coming out of the pandemic it was important that a variety and quality of reading was available for all ages, and also for reading for pleasure and for study. He hoped that the investment shown in the report would come forward and there would not be a lack of provision for reading material and other media ways of learning.</p> <p>The Corporate Director of Education responded that they would report back on progress against the spend element of the book fund and also recognising the different access to reading and materials such as electronic versions. This report would be presented to the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis.</p> <p>In response to a Member's question regarding mobile libraries, the Partnerships, Funding and Contracts Manager said that currently two mobile library services were operational but during the pandemic only operated 3 out of 5 days per week. After Easter the mobile library service would be fully operational 5 out of 5 days per week.</p> <p>A Member commented that he welcomed a further report year on year to ensure that the book fund was utilised in the correct way.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that Members scrutinised the information detailed within the report and recommend to the Executive Committee that the report be accepted.</p>	
<p><b>No. 10</b></p>	<p><b><u>BLAENAU GWENT EDUCATION ADMISSIONS POLICY FOR NURSERY AND STATUTORY EDUCATION 2022/23</u></b></p>	

	<p>Consideration was given to the report of the Education Transformation Manager which was presented to outline the outcome of the annual review and consultation process associated with the Blaenau Gwent Admissions Policy for Nursery and Statutory Education. Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee are asked to provide their views and comments on the document in preparation for the 2022-23 admission round, prior to its determination and publication on the 15th April 2021.</p> <p>The Education Transformation Manager spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the policy document be accepted.</p>	
<p><b>No. 11</b></p>	<p><b><u>FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – 20TH APRIL 2021</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>The Corporate Director of Education requested that due to the pandemic the report on Education Accessibility Strategy be moved to a future meeting to allow the Education Transformation team more time to prepare the document and suggested that this could be replaced on the agenda with a Covid-19 update report.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the report on Education Accessibility Strategy be moved to a future meeting and be replaced on the agenda with a Covid-19 update report.</p>	