

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

**REPORT TO:** **THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**SUBJECT:** **EDUCATION & LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 20<sup>TH</sup> APRIL, 2021**

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

---

**PRESENT:** COUNCILLOR H. TROLLOPE (CHAIR)

Councillors: J. Holt  
D. Bevan  
M. Cook  
M. Day  
J. Hill  
J.C. Morgan  
J.P. Morgan  
L. Parsons  
T. Smith  
B. Summers

**Co-opted Member**

T. Baxter

**AND:** Corporate Director of Education  
Service Manager Inclusion  
Service Manager - Education Transformation and Business Change  
Head of School Improvement & Inclusion  
Press & Publicity Officer  
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>SUBJECT</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
	<b><u>WELCOME</u></b>  The Chair welcomed Luisa Munro-Morris as the new Head of School Improvement & Inclusion to her first formal meeting of the Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee.	

No. 1	<p><b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b></p> <p>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.</p>	
No. 2	<p><b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Collier, L. Elias, C. Meredith and D. Wilkshire.</p> <p><b><u>Co-opted Member</u></b> A. Williams</p> <p>Strategic Education Improvement Manager</p>	
No. 3	<p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
No. 4	<p><b><u>EDUCATION &amp; LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></b></p> <p>The Minutes of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 2021 were submitted whereupon:-</p> <p>A Member requested that acronyms be shown in brackets after a title or phrase.</p> <p>The Chair requested that a list of acronyms be prepared for the first meeting of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee for the next Committee cycle.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 5	<p><b><u>ACTION SHEET – 1<sup>ST</sup> APRIL, 2021</u></b></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Education &amp; Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2021 was submitted, whereupon:-</p> <p><b><u>Welsh Government Grants</u></b></p> <p><b><u>School Summer Activity Project (SHEP programme)</u></b></p>	

	<p>A Member enquired if the scheme could be extended to other schools across the borough in the future. The Education Transformation Manager said there were strict rules around the grant spend and the criteria, for example, associated with free school meal status etc. and had undertaken engagement with a series of schools throughout the school estate. Moving forward she would look to engage with other schools in the borough regarding eligibility for the scheme.</p> <p>In relation to grants, a Member said that in the previous meeting he had requested an update on grants received from the Education Achievement Service (EAS) etc. He believed that nearly £2m had been received for Pupil Development Grant (PDG) etc. and felt it was important to have those figures. The Corporate Director of Education confirmed that finance officers were preparing a note for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee on the Pupil Development Grant (PDG). He advised that in broad terms the grant was to support the more disadvantaged learners, there were specific areas of spend and these would be included in the note to give Members a better understanding of where the grant money was planned and spent. He said it was a sizeable grant approaching £2m across the school estate and the Education Directorate needed to ensure that the grant was spent appropriately to ensure that through the schools; families, children and learners who were eligible for free school meals had the opportunity to take advantage of that funding to support their development.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the action sheet be noted.</p>	Director of Education
No. 6	<p><b><u>BLAENAU GWENT EDUCATION SERVICES SELF-EVALUATION AND BUSINESS PLANNING</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education which was presented to provide Members of the Scrutiny Committee with an opportunity to scrutinise the findings of ongoing self-evaluation and business planning processes undertaken within the Education Directorate, across the Council and with key partners.</p>	

The Corporate Director of Education advised Members that this was a new report but some of the data would relate back to 2019-2020 as there had been a relaxation of the performance and data management arrangements, however, this was an updated report on the current position from a self-evaluation perspective.

The Corporate Director of Education spoke to the report and highlighted areas where good progress had been made and where further improvement was required.

A Member referred to scrutinising 2019 data and enquired regarding the reason for this, as he felt that this data had already been scrutinised in a previous report. The Corporate Director of Education reiterated there had been a relaxation in reporting arrangements. A report had been presented to Scrutiny on the Key Stage 4 results, in particular within secondary schools, however, they were based on Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs). He pointed out that it was not possible to undertake stringent benchmarking linked to the fact that they were not externally verified results.

The Member raised concerns regarding the different methods of assessments and felt it was important that schools did not fall into a false sense of security moving forward.

The Corporate Director of Education said that the results achieved at Key Stage 4 were in line with targets set in the School Development Plans. Future reports could include a connection between performance at Key Stage 4 against the School Development Plan, but the Council had to be cautious against holding schools to account against that data at this juncture.

A Member referred to paragraph 6.2 – Schools Causing Concern (SCC) and felt that the improvement work that these schools had undertaken over the last two years had not been recognised as Estyn had not been undertaking normal monitoring activity for some time. The Corporate Director of Education said that both schools had raised this issue as Estyn monitoring visits had been put on hold, which meant that both schools continued to be in an Estyn category for a period of time. Schools Causing Concern

meetings had been held and had highlighted that satisfactory progress had been made. A meeting with Estyn had been planned and they had strongly indicated, dependent on any potential increases related to Covid, that monitoring visits would recommence in the autumn term, which would provide both schools with the opportunity to have their progress assessed by the Inspectorate.

A Member enquired regarding the areas for improvement, in particular, poor language acquisition skills in very young children and suggested a possible solution would be to increase pre-school and nursery provision across the borough. He also enquired regarding the key area for improvement on school exclusions and commented that if school exclusions continued to rise and the number of pupils opting to self-educate increased, following Covid, it would be very difficult to improve attendance rates.

With regard to nursery provision and early years the Director of Education said that appropriate Early Years provision was fundamental for strong acquisition of language at an early age to enable children to have a good start, which would impact on their education throughout all key stages. The Director gave an example of one of the initiatives being taken forward, i.e. the new Glyncod development as part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century schools had attached Early Years provision. Work was also being undertaken with schools, as part of the wider transformation programme, to ensure that Early Years provision was available across most of the school estate.

With regard to exclusions and attendance, the Director said that the type of approach used was important to retain learners within school settings. There were parameters in place but exclusions were necessary on occasion, but only as a last resort. He felt the most appropriate approach was around positive behaviour management and good policies and practices within schools and believed that consideration of a preventative approach to exclusions could have a positive impact on attendance across the board.

The Service Manager Inclusion commented that the Children's Commissioners report looked at how exclusions at Foundation Phase could be significantly reduced across

Wales. In Blaenau Gwent, Primary school exclusions had increased over the last 3 years, and they were now looking at how to take the Children's Commissioners report forward. In relation to the connection between attendance and exclusions, the Service Manager said that exclusions did impact upon attendance figures. The team were currently looking at a regional exclusion approach and taking some of the practices that were in place across the region to see how they could develop these practices for the benefit of Blaenau Gwent schools.

The Head of School Improvement & Inclusion added that regarding the development of the recovery and renewal plan, a key priority was to engage with young people, including those at risk of being excluded, to understand their circumstances and draw from that experience to help and support them to not become excluded.

In response to a Member's question regarding double counting absenteeism, the Service Manager reassured Members that where a pupil was dual registered the attendance would only be recorded at the setting they attended on that day.

A Member referred to the low numbers of pupils who sat A levels last year and enquired if there was a percentage regarding the number of pupils sitting A levels that the Authority should be aiming towards. The Director of Education said that as part of a Member Briefing session, Coleg Gwent had presented their overall data across the last three years, which demonstrated an increase in both the amount of learners who had undertaken A levels and also the amount of learners who had pursued vocational courses of study, he felt that one of the advantages of a tertiary model was the broad range of curriculum on offer. There would be close monitoring of the amount of A level provision available with Coleg Gwent and that would feature as part of the Post 16 Partnership Board agenda. He felt that the data Coleg Gwent had presented was encouraging and showed an increase in the amount of post 16 participation across the board and also recognised and acknowledged the amount of young people within Blaenau Gwent who were pursuing more vocational based learning provision.

With regard to the learners choosing to take A levels, the Director of Education said there was a pattern across Wales, whereby the amount of learners choosing the A level route had reduced, so this was not unique to Blaenau Gwent. This would form part of the monitoring arrangements with the Post 16 Partnership Board and would ensure that data was brought back to Members as part of the Forward Work Programme via the Member Development section.

A Member referred to the gender gap and enquired why this was not an area for improvement. The Director of Education explained that the list of areas for improvement was not exhaustive, the report provided a high level narrative of overall performance. There was more work to be undertaken in relation to the gender participation gap and gender performance gap. Males tended to perform less well in certain subjects and moving forward there would be a focus on a curriculum that is accessible to all learners e.g. STEM subjects i.e. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and the Directorate were working closely with Primary and Secondary schools and Post 16 to ensure that an attractive curriculum offer meets the needs and interests of both males and females 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

**EDUCATION DIRECTORATE - RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

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

The Corporate Director of Education spoke to the report and highlighted that verbal updates regarding the Education Directorate's response to Covid-19 had been provided at Committee meetings to ensure that Members were appraised of the latest developments. This report reflected

on the activity for both the autumn and spring terms and covered the most pertinent up-to-date information.

The Head of School Improvement and Inclusion commented, that as a Headteacher and from colleagues' experiences also, they all felt extremely supported by Blaenau Gwent and included in all discussions in terms of reopening schools and then the further lockdown, and also how they were going to get young people back into school safely.

The Chair thanked the officer for her comments and noted that the Committee welcomed the feedback from Headteachers' perspective.

A Member raised a question regarding pupils taking home IT equipment supplied by the Authority and pupils using their own devices in and out of school, and enquired how the Council would ensure that the pupils using their own equipment was adequate, and with face to face learning returning, would the children continue to be supplied with the IT equipment by the LA.

In response, the Director of Education said there would potentially be components of blended learning for the foreseeable future, in particular learners having the opportunity to learn in home settings with appropriate equipment was absolutely critical to making that successful. In relation to Bring Your Own Devices (BYOD) the Directorate were working closely with SRS to ensure that any learner using equipment that it was secure and did not create any potential risks for them, this was part of the wider infrastructure and connectivity project. There had been approximately 1,600 devices released to learners and a number of them had benefited from blended learning, he felt there were strong elements of learning that had taken place over the last year that could be built upon moving forward.

The Service Manager - Education Transformation and Business Change added that the team had been working closely with schools looking at the needs of digitally disadvantaged learners, the current plan was for the devices that had been distributed to be retained by the learners until the summer term, this would include laptops and mi-fi units which enable connectivity. This would be



reviewed going forward but the Authority was committed to providing support for the remainder of the academic year. Currently the team were working with schools, the EAS and SRS on the development of the ICT Strategy looking at how best to enable learners to have access across the board both at home and in school. There was approximately 1 device to every learner throughout the school estate and the aspiration was to retain and possibly increase this wherever possible. With the Hwb Ed-Tech initiative and Welsh Government funding associated with that, this would allow the team to look at the replacement of approximately 25% of end of life devices throughout the school estate and this was being looked at as part of the sustainability planning in line with the ICT Strategy.

A Member raised a question regarding loaned devices and whether maintenance of those devices remained the responsibility of the Council.

The Service Manager explained that at this point in time they were still very much owned and maintained by the Local Authority and if there were any issues with those devices then the Authority would respond immediately, both the schools and the SRS were working with the Local Education Authority to respond to any issues, there would be a review of requirements and a plan developed throughout the summer term. The Directorate was working with the Welsh Government to look at their plans around funding and also working closely with schools to look at their plans around delivery. At this point in time there was no formalised plan, however, a plan would be established over the course of the summer term which would come into effect from the beginning of the autumn term which would enable learners to maintain full inclusion both at home and at school.

A Member referred to the class bubble arrangement that schools were operating within and hoped that this arrangement would not be relaxed too soon and schools regress. The Director of Education said this had not been relaxed as the latest Welsh Government guidance had been released and it retained the same type of practices around creating class bubbles. He felt that it was still a precarious position and relaxation of class bubbles too early would have a detrimental impact on the overall cases.

The Service Manager - Education Transformation and Business Change added that they were extremely mindful around relaxation of rules and the management of risks, bubbles had worked well to date and they hoped to retain those arrangements for the remainder of the summer with a view to undertaking a full scale review around the operational arrangements for September in line with Welsh Government and Public Health Wales guidance.

In response to a Member's question regarding refurbishing devices, the Service Manager - Education Transformation and Business Change responded that a significant amount of work had been undertaken to build and re-purpose the devices so they could be distributed, that had been done on a staggered basis over the course of the last academic session in line with new and emergent digitally disadvantaged learners. At this stage, the laptops and the software that was on the devices was fit for purpose, there were monitoring procedures in place whereby any issues that arose, the device could be returned. They were working with the SRS to look at whether or not further work needed to be undertaken on those devices and if so, would be proactive in ensuring there was timely collection and redistribution of those devices. The Directorate was aware of potential risks around further spikes but would maintain the device distribution for the foreseeable future.

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

**No. 8**

**SCHOOL ORGANISATION POLICY (2021/24)**

Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Education which was presented to seek the views of Education and Learning Scrutiny Committee in relation to the review of the School Organisation Policy (2021-24), prior to presenting the policy to the Council's Executive Committee. It is proposed that the revised policy is adopted and implemented from the start of new academic year 2021/22.

The Service Manager - Education Transformation and Business Change spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

A Member enquired if an aspect of well-being could be included in the policy. The Service Manager said that the policy focused on school organisation priorities such as the management and vision for the school estate going forward, the well-being aspect would form a key part of the recovery plan and could look to potentially include that in the policy in line with education recovery plans.

In response to a Member's question regarding federation models, the Service Manager said they would consider this as one of the options associated with the Welsh-medium school. The Director of Education said that several years ago Blaenau Gwent was one of the first Local Authority's to have a federation school i.e. Briery Hill School, in line with the Ebbw Fawr Learning Community. He felt that across the school estate there were highly effective Headteachers and Leaders which well placed the Authority to consider federation models going forward to have quality leadership spread across the school estate. He pointed out that Federation models could be taken forward in two approaches; a Local Authority led federation model or by Governing Bodies, and felt there were opportunities going forward, particularly in supporting schools with low pupil population numbers. In relation to 6<sup>th</sup> Form collaborations the Director said there had been a number of federated models across Wales for post 16 provision because of the relatively small number of pupils that schools catered for. Within the context of Blaenau Gwent, however, a tertiary model had been established with Coleg Gwent in the County Borough. With regard to the Welsh-medium school the preferred option would be to have collaboration between Ysgol Bro Helyg and the new school once it was developed but this would form part of the consultation exercise.

A Member referred to secondary schools being no smaller than 600 places. The Service Manager - Education Transformation and Business Change said that they were in the process of establishing pupil projections and had undertaken an annual review of capacities. There were a few schools who were relatively close to this number but none that fell into this category at the moment. With the

annual review of capacities and the annual review of projections they would work closely with Secondary Headteachers to monitor this going forward.

The Director commented that from a strategic perspective in line with the school organisation policy, they had undertaken significant secondary school reorganisation over the last 10 years and Blaenau Gwent was very much a four secondary school setting, and unless there was a dramatic change none of the secondary school settings were under significant review at this time, and he felt that was an appropriate level of provision moving forward that they anticipated the school estate requiring. He pointed out that part of the policy was having the right school, the right size in the right place.

The Chair enquired regarding how to ensure best practice was passed on to other schools, the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion said that there was a lot of good information sharing across schools, particularly across clusters and the EAS had been instrumental in setting up those arrangements and partnerships. She was keen to ensure that message gets across to all schools in relation to the recovery and renewal plan, and part of this work was to develop school to school partnership working and sharing of best practice and that was factored into these plans moving forward. Further relationships across secondary schools and Coleg Gwent would be established and discussions held on how to develop partnership working and how to get provision from them into primary schools especially year 6 and transition year 7.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the proposed changes to the Blaenau Gwent School Organisation Policy 2021 be agreed.

As this was the last meeting in the Committee cycle the Chair thanked the Vice-Chair, Members and Officers for their support and contribution over a very challenging year. He felt this Committee had gone from strength to strength and hoped this would continue in the next Committee cycle.

The Corporate Director of Education thanked the Chair for his positive comments and said that Estyn had made

	constructive comments on the effectiveness of Scrutiny in Blaenau Gwent.	
--	--------------------------------------------------------------------------	--