

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

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

**SUBJECT: EDUCATION AND LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 1ST APRIL, 2021**

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

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

Councillors J. Holt (Vice-Chair)  
D. Bevan  
M. Cook  
M. Day  
L. Elias  
J. Hill  
C. Meredith  
J. C. Morgan  
J. P. Morgan  
L. Parsons  
T. Smith  
B. Summers  
A. Williams (Co-opted Member)

**WITH:** Corporate Director of Education  
Education Transformation Manager  
Head of School Improvement & Inclusion  
Press & Publicity Officer  
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

| <b>ITEM</b>  | <b>SUBJECT</b>  | <b>ACTION</b> |
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| <b>No. 1</b> | <b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b><br><br>It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service. |               |

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| <p><b>No. 2</b></p> | <p><b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b></p> <p>Apologies for absence were received from Councillors G. Collier and D. Wilkshire.</p> <p><b><u>Co-opted Member</u></b><br/>Tim Baxter</p> <p>Service Manager Inclusion</p>   |  |
| <p><b>No. 3</b></p> | <p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS 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 the latest update on the Directorate’s response to the Covid-19 Pandemic.</p> <p>The Welsh Government announced on the 5th March that more pupils were to return to face to face learning. The Directorate worked closely with Headteachers to adopt a common approach across the school estate for the wider return of learners and from 15th March that included all primary pupils attending their school full time. Year 11 learners attended from the same date, but there was a degree of flexibility for an element of remote learning and that was determined by the individual school and communicated to parents appropriately. There was also provision for year 10 pupils in preparation for Key Stage 4 assessments during the summer term. In addition to that all year 7, 8 and 9 learners were offered a full day check in session prior to the Easter holiday period to check on their progress and general well-being.</p> <p>In relation to the position around positive Covid-19 cases, there were 5 schools that were affected, the number of positive cases for pupils was 5 and the number of positive staff cases, including one member of staff from Second Chances, was 4. Prior to the end of the spring term, the number of people affected due to self-isolation because they were categorised as being part of a contact group was 180 learners. The Director was anticipating an announcement from Welsh Government around a full return for face to face learning for all learners from 12th April. He confirmed that schools were well prepared for such a decision post Easter</p> |  |

break and all schools had received the outstanding lateral flow tests for staff.

In response to a Member's question regarding mobile testing units, the Director of Education confirmed the intention to bring mobile testing units back into Blaenau Gwent, he explained that it was likely there would be an increase in positive cases due to the Easter bank holiday and the return to face to face learning but assured Members that schools were well prepared and Covid secure risk assessments were in place.

**No. 4**

**ACTION SHEET - 9TH MARCH 2021**

The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Education & Learning Scrutiny Committee held on 9th March, 2021 was submitted, whereupon:-

**Grant funds awarded to the Education Directorate**

It was noted that, due to an error, Appendix 2 would be replaced on the Modern.Gov system following the meeting.

With regard to Tranche funding, the Director of Education advised that he would liaise with finance colleagues and provide an update for Members.

A Member enquired why PDG funding was not listed on Appendix 2, the Director of Education explained that Appendix 2 only listed funding received directly from the Welsh Government as per the original request, the PDG was administered through the EAS.

The Member felt that it was important to have information on the PDG's funding as it was now assessed every 3 years and schools could see a significant decrease. The Director of Education advised Members that information would be provided regarding PDG funding for the years 2019/20 and 2020/21 for the next meeting via the Action Sheet and reiterated that it was administered by the EAS regionally. The Director explained that it was Welsh Government criteria that the PDG was issued through the regional consortia, however, the EAS used the information that was presented from the Council in relation to the number of pupils who were eligible for free school meals to determine the level of PDG issued to the Council. There had been an increase in the number of learners eligible for free school meals and the number

who were receiving direct payments was approximately 1,700. The process was monitored weekly and application runs launched in line with requests from schools and liaising regularly with parents in order to meet the needs of the families.

A Member enquired if administration fees were taken from the grants listed. The Director said the Welsh Government did offer a very small amount of funding for the administration of the grant. The overall amount of delegated budget that was transferred directly to schools was approximately 86%.

The Chair referred to Appendix 1 and raised concern regarding the small amount of grants received for projects such as School Counselling and Schools Summer Activity Project. The Director of Education clarified that this amount was in addition to the Welsh Government funding already received for the School Counselling service, it recognised the extra demand against the service and would complement the budget already received. In relation to the £6,000 Schools Summer Activity Project this was linked to the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP) to support learners in school holiday periods. The Education Transformation Manager would share the outcome report from last year's initiative to demonstrate some of the work that had been undertaken.

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

**No. 5**

**PROPOSAL TO CONSULT ON PEN Y CWM CAPACITY INCREASE**

A Member referred to a conflict of interest as some Members of this Committee were also Members of the Planning, Regulatory & General Licensing Committee. The Director of Education said that, in his opinion, there would not be a conflict of interest as the discussion would cover the potential for remodelling of the current Pen y Cwm School building but would not focus on details from a planning perspective and felt that Members could engage and offer their views and opinions around the proposal.

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 proposal to extend the capacity of Pen y Cwm Special School from 120 to 175 pupils, accommodating the demand for places. Education and

Learning Scrutiny Committee will be a statutory consultee, should proposal to proceed to consultation be granted by Executive Committee.

The Director of Education introduced the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

The Director of Education highlighted an amendment in the report to paragraph 2.13 in that the consultation is to conclude on Sunday 6th June 2021, not 6th May as identified in the report.

A Member enquired regarding additional staff if the school reached its fully capacity. The Director of Education said any additional staffing implications could be dealt with in the potential differential between the current budget and the proposed budget, which would be an additional £575,000, dependent upon the needs of learners, that component of budget would potentially need to fund additional staff to support learners in the setting.

A Member raised concerns regarding the small number of out of county placements being accommodated. The Education Transformation Manager said that the initial review had been undertaken by the Inclusion team, however, a more detailed review would be required going forward. Out of county placements were determined upon the needs and circumstances associated with each individual pupil and upon the initial review it was anticipated that the maximum number, at this point in time, that could be brought back into the Local Authority was 5. Where there was capacity and the individual pupil's needs could be met within the Local Authority then the team would look to bring more out of county placements back to the Local Authority.

In relation to capacity the Director of Education informed Members that in the short term capacity was 175 pupils, phase 2 would consider the more medium to long term arrangements and the potential to further increase capacity in subsequent years.

A Member enquired if the capacity of 175 pupils would be sufficient in the near future or would the school be oversubscribed again with the increase in the number of ALN pupils. The Director of Education said the focus was on dealing with demand in the foreseeable future, but moving forward capacity at the school would need to be reviewed as part of phase 2. The Education Transformation Manager added that the focus was on immediate

priorities and addressing the work that the school had already undertaken around reconfiguring the teaching and learning environment. With regard to increasing capacity for the school in line with potential future demand, there were a series of options being considered such as potential expansion or extension of the school, or satellite locations with schools with sufficient capacity to accommodate this. She reiterated that the focus was on addressing short to medium term issues which had occurred as a result of the increases in demand that were currently projected, then looking at long term with a sustainable and best solution for Pen y Cwm.

In relation to the building suitability categorisation, the Education Transformation Manager explained that one key factor to achieve an A categorisation, would be that capacity would need to be extended as the school was currently over-subscribed and not offering the level of provision that was offered previously, as some specialist areas, such as technology and art areas, had been reconfigured to be used as teaching and learning spaces as opposed to being used as specialist areas. She confirmed that if the proposal to increase capacity at Pen y Cwm School was approved the building suitability categorisation would change to A.

A Member referred to the 20 out of county placements and enquired what issues prevented Pen y Cwm School taking more of these placements. The Education Transformation Manager explained that this fell under the Inclusion team's remit, but one potential barrier could be regarding Children Looked After who may require out of county placements due to their individual circumstances. The Directorate were committed to a full review of those pupils' needs and if their needs were associated with facilities, capacity or something that could be developed more locally then that would be taken forward.

In response to a Member's question regarding capital costs circa £250,000, the Director of Education clarified that there were capital costs associated with the remodelling, however, these would be funded via Welsh Government grants that had been allocated so there was no direct impact upon the Council's capital programme.

The Chair enquired regarding how Health & Safety considerations would be managed in relation to pupils, staff and contractors whilst the remodelling work was being undertaken. The Director of Education said that most of the significant remodelling works

would be undertaken outside of the times when learners were present, but this could mean an extension to the contract period post September 2021. The Education Transformation Manager said that a Project Management team would be established to oversee the construction phase, working closely with the school and the contractor. Works would be phased accordingly with the bulk of the works taking place in areas which were not currently used from a teaching and learning perspective. The works taking place in the main body of the building, that could potentially affect learners, could be undertaken outside of the school opening times. This could mean a slight extension to the contract, the Project Management team would liaise very closely with the school regarding temporary management solutions to minimise disruption to learners.

The Chair commented that with the increased capacity at the school had parking issues been considered. The Education Transformation Manager said that a transport impact assessment would be undertaken to look at the associated implications. The majority of pupils were transported to the school and the majority of pupils on the waiting list would also require home to school transport. Consideration was being given to reconfigure home to school transport by age as opposed to area. The school was looking to consult upon changes to session times i.e. primary pupils brought in separately to secondary and post 16 pupils to ensure a more efficient flow of traffic to the site. During Covid changes had been made to the regulations around the school days and school session times which had allowed the school to pilot the potential changes to session times, as this had worked well for the school they would look to take this forward subject to consultation.

The Chair suggested that an appropriate representative from Pen y Cwm Special School be invited to attend and engage in the consultation session. The Director of Education confirmed that a representative from the school would be invited to participate in the consultation session.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the report, associated document and course of action be accepted.