

19.07.21

Dear Michelle Morris,

The purpose of this letter is to provide you with an overview of the progress you have made in relation to recommendations from the overarching thematic report we published in January. The narrative reflects the information and views you shared with our link inspectors during their engagements with you throughout the term,

The thematic identified five recommendations for the Welsh Government and recognised that a whole system approach was needed to address these. The first three recommendations were more immediate and urgent in nature, whilst the last two recommendations will take longer to address. From our discussions with you, feedback from learners and our engagement work with schools, it is clear that, through collaboration, progress was made across Wales in equipping schools and learners to provide better remote learning experiences during the second lockdown.

In line with our new approach for thematic reports, we will be writing to the Welsh Government in early 2022 to seek feedback on the work they have done to address the recommendations we made to them.

We hope you will find this summary a helpful affirmation of the work that you have done to support your learners and learning communities during the last six months.

### **R1 Urgently address barriers to learning at home, particularly where this is due to a lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity**

The local authority has appointed a designated officer to oversee securing devices for pupils in need. This officer works closely with school leaders to carry out weekly assessments of the provision needed for individual pupils. The officer also attends a monthly monitoring meeting to consider the local authority's overall digital support for schools and families. The local authority commissions the Shared Resource Service (SRS) who acquire, build and distributes devices and Mi-Fi units to digitally disadvantaged learners within seven days of a need being identified. Feedback from head teachers is that this arrangement has worked very well, and in most cases the local authority has provided a device within 48 hours. The local authority has planned to continue with these arrangements until at least the end of the summer term 2021, with pupils able to retain devices at home during this period.

As of May 2021, the local authority has loaned 1,359 devices and 161 Mi-Fi units to pupils. During the first lockdown, the local authority was aware that a minority of pupils had to share devices with siblings. However, in more recent months, officers have ensured that nearly all pupils have access to a suitable individual device.

Officers are carrying out a review of the 'Digitally Disadvantaged Device' project plan future provision to allow all families continued digital access. Officers feel that they reacted responsively at the start of the pandemic but have now had time to reflect and look at the digital learner journey more strategically. Officers are mindful of the sustainability of their ICT support programme and are looking at how they will continue to provide support for home learning in the years ahead.

The local authority has recognised that many parents have a lack of pedagogical understanding and that their children have become disadvantaged as parents 'do it differently' to their teachers. The local authority recognise that in the future, they need to provide more learning opportunities for parents on how to support their children's literacy and numeracy at home, should there be a third wave of the pandemic.

## **R2 Improve the quality of the distance and blended learning experiences for pupils by supporting more effective teaching across and within schools and PRUs**

Local authority officers are very positive about the work of Blaenau Gwent schools in developing and improving regional blended learning approaches. The Celebrate, Support, Share and Refine (CSSR) pilot involved 13 out of 25 local authority schools and will be extended in the summer term to include all schools. Officers feel that this project will help identify and share good practice in individual schools to help strengthen practice across the local authority. Local authority officers have monitored each school's provision using a blended learning survey. This has helped them identify areas that schools need to improve and to celebrate and share successful practice.

All schools in the local authority have access to the extensive EAS blended learning offer, resources and training. School leaders have reported that they find the EAS distance learning website helpful in supporting them to develop and improve distance and blended learning approaches, including improving teaching. Schools have appreciated that, through this offer, they have had access to external consultants and a range of influential speakers for training sessions.

The local authority's recovery and renewal plan outlines how they aim to build on the responses to their pupil survey to further strengthen distance learning should there be another wave of the pandemic. In the coming months, the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion will be meeting with various groups of pupils to gain more information on the impact of blended learning experiences on their education. She intends to use the findings to work on a plan to further improve blended learning provision across all schools in the future.

## **R3 Develop a coherent approach to improve progress in literacy, numeracy and the personal and social skills of vulnerable pupils disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example pupils eligible for free school meals**

The local authority's Head of School Improvement and Inclusion is taking lead responsibility for the 'Education Recovery and Renewal' working group. This group's membership includes headteachers and other key partners. One purpose of the group is to support the progress of all learners, with a strong focus on supporting vulnerable pupils who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The work of this group will be complemented by a local authority review of their Inclusion Services to enable support to be targeted effectively at vulnerable pupils.

The EAS has provided useful guidance for schools within the local authority on how to effectively use their recovery grant with a focus on catch up skills in literacy and numeracy and support for pupils' wellbeing. In addition, head teachers and other school staff have the opportunity to attend sessions on effective approaches that could be funded through the grant. Headteachers appreciate the proportionate approach that the local authority has taken to evaluating their use of additional funding.

Officers have used the findings from a school survey to identify groups of pupils with particular concerns. They are concerned with the lack of engagement of many Gypsy, Roma or Traveller families and the impact that this has had on pupils' progress. To help overcome this, the local authority has used a Welsh Government grant to appoint an additional member of staff to their Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupil support team. The team are now visiting schools to work individually with pupils on face-to-face catch-up interventions and provide additional support to families.

Across the local authority, there has been an increase in demand for counselling services. As a result, the local authority has increased their counselling team. Until recently, direct contact has been difficult,

but counsellors are now fully back in schools and youth centres providing face-to-face support for pupils in need.

Since the start of the pandemic, the local authority has seen an increase in demand for elective home education (EHE). This has mainly been due to anxiety issues and officers are hopeful that many of these pupils will return to school in the future. Educational Welfare Officers have been keeping in touch with these families and has been linking them with schools so they can have support from professionals with home learning. Officers realise the importance of maintaining strong links between the families and schools to support pupils' return to school in the future.

#### **R4 Establish strategies to monitor and address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of pupils**

The local authority's 'Education Recovery and Renewal' working group has a strong focus on supporting the physical and mental health of pupils. Officers feel that, over the last year, supporting pupils' wellbeing has been a strength in all schools. This was recognised in pupil surveys and from schools' engagement with parents.

The long term impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of pupils is one of the local authority's strategic level corporate recommendations. The Head of School Improvement has considered a range of evidence on the physical and mental health of pupils to help the local authority plan their support for pupils. She will also be engaging with a wide range of stakeholders during the summer term to obtain first-hand evidence of the impact of the pandemic on pupils' mental and physical health. The local authority's current recovery and renewal action plan for Summer 2021 to Summer 2022 will then inform a three-year plan to support the long-term actions needed to improve the physical and mental health of pupils.

Breakfast provision has now resumed in schools and from September 2021, the local authority plans to resume the 'normal' arrangements for breakfast clubs and after school clubs to help support pupils' health and wellbeing.

Members of the Aneurin Leisure Trust have recently undertaken an analysis of the quality of provision of school sport and swimming in Blaenau Gwent, recognising the impact of the pandemic on their ability to deliver physical activity programmes. The local authority is committed to continue to deliver a wide range of sport, physical activity, community engagement and swimming opportunities across Blaenau Gwent. The Trust intends to build on their current 'Family Engagement' project to inspire the most vulnerable families across Blaenau Gwent to be active, healthy and to participate in activities as a family. They will identify those most in need of support and will then provide a programme of free activities and access to free leisure centre membership. They will undertake regular health checks throughout the programme to monitor its success.

Following very positive feedback from last year's project, the local authority has secured funding to pay for the six schools with the highest number of eFSM pupils to run the School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP). This is a school-based education programme that provides food and nutrition education, physical activity, enrichment sessions and healthy meals to children in areas of social deprivation during the school summer holidays.

The local authority's Youth Service are continuing to offer support to young people in schools and across communities. They are continuing to work closely with organisations, such as the Rotary Club, to help fund essential items such as food hampers. Officers are also engaging with schools to address the

period dignity agenda, including working with third party organisations to help with the distribution of products for all family members.

### **R5 Create opportunities to take stock and evaluate the impact of policies and practices developed since the start of the pandemic to inform future ways of working and curriculum design**

Education officers present regular reports to the Education and Learning Scrutiny and Executive Committees to reflect upon and to evaluate the effectiveness of the local authority's response to the pandemic. The top priority for education officers and the EAS business planning for 2021/22 is to maximise pupil progression and minimise the impact of the pandemic on learners.

The local authority has developed local policies, guidance, risk assessments and operational plans for and with schools. Officers ensure that they regularly review their plans, and they discuss progress at their fortnightly Executive School Planning meetings. These group meetings have been operational throughout the 2020/21 school year, to support effective communication and engagement between education officers and headteachers.

Officers feel that they have clear processes to monitor this work and are mindful of the need to plan strategically. This includes supporting schools who have large school balances to ensure that leaders are aware of the need to plan for the medium and not just the short term.

The local authority has established a head teacher curriculum reform group with representation from all sectors. In this group, schools are invited to share their progress with curriculum reform. Representatives then highlight which schools have good practice to share and which schools need additional support in implementing the new curriculum. There is a representative on the group from each school cluster and they then liaise with other cluster schools to ensure that information is shared, and support is provided when needed. Officers feel that the EAS has provided very good curriculum training sessions for all schools and the uptake from Blaenau Gwent schools has been high. They feel in a good position to build on the positives from their blended learning approach to enhance curriculum reform. This includes enhancing opportunities for pupils to work independently using blended learning approaches.

In the summer term, the school improvement officer will be visiting each school to discuss curriculum reform with each head teacher and to determine support that each school needs. In conjunction with the EAS, the local authority will organise bespoke training packages to avoid duplication. Officers feel that the local authority are in a good position for schools to support each other on their journey.

Thank you for your work and for your ongoing professional dialogue with our inspectors.

Regards,



**Jassa Scott**  
Strategic Director