

Committee: **Cabinet**  
 Date of meeting: **4<sup>th</sup> December 2024**  
 Report Subject: **Improving Schools Programme**  
 Portfolio Holder: **Cllr Sue Edmunds, Cabinet Member People and Education**  
 Report Submitted by: **Luisa Munro-Morris, Corporate Director of Education**

| Reporting Pathway           |                           |                          |                            |                               |                    |          |         |                      |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|----------|---------|----------------------|
| Directorate Management Team | Corporate Leadership Team | Portfolio Holder / Chair | Governance Audit Committee | Democratic Services Committee | Scrutiny Committee | Cabinet  | Council | Other (please state) |
| x                           | x                         | 14.11.24                 |                            |                               | 12.11.24           | 04.12.24 |         |                      |

### 1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide Members with an update on the Blaenau Gwent Improving Schools Programme. It covers the reporting period of September 2023 – September 2024.

### 2. Scope and Background

- 2.1 The report covers all schools and settings within the County Borough that have been identified by the Education Directorate, supported by the Education Achievement Service (EAS), and/or Estyn as needing to improve. The Blaenau Gwent Improving Schools Programme operates within the regional arrangements for supporting schools across South-East Wales.

- 2.2 Blaenau Gwent has one school which is formally within the Schools Causing Concern category – The River Centre. This is a reduction from two schools in 2023, following the removal of Brynmawr Foundation School from an Estyn category, December 2023.

- 2.3 Two schools are in Estyn follow up, following their core inspections - Brynbach Primary School (Summer, 2023) and All Saints (Spring, 2024). Estyn follow up does not place a school in a statutory category, but the school will be visited by Estyn, or a tabletop exercise will be undertaken by Estyn, approximately one year after the core inspection is published. During this visit/exercise the school will be asked to provide additional information on their progress against the recommendations made by Estyn in the school's core inspection.

### 3. Options for Recommendation

- 3.1 The People Scrutiny Committee recommended Option 2, at its meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2024.

### 3.2 **Option 1**

Members are asked to scrutinise the information detailed within the report and contribute to the continuous assessment of effectiveness by making appropriate recommendations.

### **Option 2**

Accept the report as provided.

## 4. **Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

- 4.1 Education remains a priority in the Corporate Plan. The Welsh Government's statutory guidance for schools causing concern (2017) details a local authorities' powers of intervention in schools causing concern, the grounds on which those powers can be invoked and the procedures governing the intervention process.

## 5. **Implications Against Each Option**

### 5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

The Council allocated £53.7 million to schools in the financial year 2024/25, via the Individual Schools Budget (ISB) to provide high quality education and to improve pupil outcomes. In addition, Blaenau Gwent makes a financial contribution to the regional EAS model from the core Education Directorate Budget; £283,537 in the financial year 2024/25. Monitoring arrangements such as monthly LA/EAS Partnership meetings are in place to ensure the LA can hold the EAS to account for the support and challenge they provide to schools and ensure value for money for the Local Authority.

### 5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

Risk is associated with ineffective processes to ensure progress against priorities in identified schools. Failure to raise standards features in the corporate risk register of the Council in relation to schools causing concern. This risk is also reflected in the Education Directorate and EAS risk registers. A graduated response is in place to mitigate these risks; this approach is based on an early identification and support model:

**Universal support:** areas for improvement in relation to individual schools may be raised by a School Improvement Partner (SIP) or an LA Officer, and these are discussed in weekly LA/EAS meetings and more formally in monthly LA/EAS Partnership meetings, and appropriate courses of action agreed.

**NB.** Professional Discussions are held with all schools once per year. These are timetabled for the whole year. In schools where there are emerging risks they are prioritised early in the academic year.

**Targeted support/provision:** If a school is identified as needing more support by the LA, a 'Team Around the School' approach will be adopted in agreement with the Chair of Governors and Headteacher. Key partners are

brought together on a half-termly basis, to support and challenge a school with specific areas for improvement.

**Specialist support/provision:** A school that has been issued with a statutory warning notice by the LA or has been placed in an Estyn category will receive further bespoke support, in addition to half-termly meetings. For example, a school will be supported with creating and delivering against a Post Inspection Action Plan.

### 5.3 **Legal**

The Improving Schools Programme operates within the legal framework of the School Standards and Organisation (Wales) Act 2013.

### 5.4 **Human Resources**

There are implications arising from the actions created to support those schools identified as a school causing concern and/or in an Estyn category. This information is held within each school's Post Inspection Action Plan.

### 5.5 **Health and Safety**

As part of their inspection, Estyn will comment on any health and safety concerns that they identify. No Health and Safety letters were issued during this reporting period.

## 6. **Supporting Evidence**

### 6.1 **Performance Information and Data**

#### 6.1.1 **The River Centre**

The Governing Body of the school remains under statutory intervention because of the Statutory Warning Notice to improve dated November 2021. The school was placed in special measures following a core inspection in July 2022. Estyn re-visited the school in April 2024 and found that the school had not made enough progress against the recommendations from the core inspection and so remained in special measure.

The LA continues to provide enhanced support for the school, this includes additional support for school improvement from the Education Advisory Service (EAS). A number of changes have been made in the school in response to the recommendations. These changes include:

- A review of entry and exit criteria for the school.
- Further re-development of the secondary site.
- The secondary curriculum has been refined, for example KS4 pupils now access the new Sport BTEC and food hygiene and technology BTEC.
- The Post Inspection Action Plan has been reviewed and refined and now focuses more specifically on continuing to improve teaching and learning and further strengthening the curriculum offer. Actions in the PIAP have been supported through professional development opportunities for staff.

- School Councils have been established on each site using consistent structures, minutes are kept and shared with the Acting Headteacher.
- Appropriate baseline assessments are in place across the sites to aid with measuring progress from starting points for all pupils.

The substantive Headteacher remains absent from work. The school has continued to be supported through an acting up leadership arrangement. The senior leadership team has been strengthened by a secondment to the position of ALNCO summer term 2023, and the recent appointment of a permanent assistant headteacher with responsibility for the secondary campus, taking up post September 2024. However, high staff absence levels continue to impact upon the effectiveness of the staffing structure.

Since the core inspection in June 2022 overall attendance has improved from 63% to 73%. The majority of pupils on the secondary campus have improved rates of attendance. However, the overall attendance of pupils on the primary campus and at Ty Afon is markedly higher than those on the secondary campus

#### 6.1.2 **Bryn Bach Primary School**

Bryn Bach Primary School was inspected in July 2023. Estyn commented in their report that ‘Nearly all pupils enjoy coming to school and participate in school life enthusiastically. They feel safe and secure and know who to talk to if they need help or support.’ However, they also commented that ‘While teachers are beginning to develop an overview of how well pupils are progressing in their learning over time, they do not always use on going assessment effectively enough to ensure that teaching provides sufficient challenge for all pupils’.

The report outlines 4 recommendations:

- Sharpen self-evaluation and improvement processes so that they impact more positively on the quality of teaching and learning.
- Improve standards of writing.
- Improve pupils’ Welsh oracy skills.
- Ensure that learning experiences meet all pupils’ needs and develop their skills systematically.

Due to Estyn’s findings the school has been placed under Estyn Review. This is the lightest touch of follow-up, as it is not statutory. It involves reviewing the progress the school has made towards addressing the recommendations highlighted in the report about 12-18 months after the publication of the inspection report.

The school has put in place a number of changes in response to the recommendations. These changes include:

- A range of professional development opportunities for staff focused on teaching and learning.
- Setting up a Digital Learning Den - progression development of digital skills from Nursery to year 6.
- A new scheme has been introduced to promote a healthy lifestyle and approach for all learners Nursery-Year 6.
- Topic overviews have been embedded across the school.

The school is expecting that they will be reviewed by Estyn in the autumn term 2024.

### 6.1.3 **All Saints Primary School**

All Saints Primary School was inspected in April 2024. Estyn commented in their report 'the staff at All Saints Roman Catholic Primary School create a warm, friendly and inclusive environment with the pupils' well-being at its heart. Nearly all pupils are happy and enjoy coming to school. They show respect to all staff and visitors and show concern for each other. Pupils' behaviour across the school is very good. Most pupils have positive attitudes to their learning and when given the opportunity, contribute well to what and how they learn. However, teachers' expectations of what pupils can achieve are often too low and over-direction from adults impacts on pupils' ability to develop as independent learners. Although staff praise pupils for their achievements, written feedback does not help pupils improve their work well enough.'

The report outlines 3 recommendations:

- Strengthen self-evaluation and planning for improvement procedures in order to address the most important areas for improvement.
- Ensure that the curriculum builds systematically and coherently and allows pupils to make choices in how and what they learn in order to develop their skills as independent learners.
- Ensure that teaching consistently provides appropriate challenge and feedback from staff and helps pupils improve their work.

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The school has put in place a number of things in response to the recommendations. These include:

- The school has developed a Post Inspection Action Plan which sets out how they are going to address the recommendations in their core inspection, with the support of the School Improvement Advisor.
- The headteacher and governors have undertaken a restructure of the senior leadership team to add capacity.

- The school have received enhanced support from the EAS focused on further developing pedagogy.

### 6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

The River Centre, Brynbach Primary and All Saints Primary are all participating in a Team Around the School approach. This is a multi-agency meeting where the school is both supported and appropriately challenged. The School Improvement or the Principal School Improvement Partner from the EAS attends this meeting to consult on ideas for supporting the school and to discuss engagement with opportunities such as EAS reviews.

### 6.4 ***Thinking for the long term (forward planning)***

Monitoring school progress against priorities facilitates support for schools to ensure that they achieve and maintain high quality outcomes in the long term.

### 6.5 ***Preventative focus***

Through effective monitoring and evaluation of school performance for example through annual Professional Discussions and termly Supported Self-evaluations, early identification of emerging areas for improvement can be achieved with consequent early intervention to secure improvement. The effectiveness of the LA's monitoring, evaluation and intervention programmes ensure that preventative action is taken early in order to minimise the escalation of concerns.

### 6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

The LA collaborates with neighbouring local authorities through the Southeast Wales Consortium for the provision of School Improvement services through the Education Achievement Service (EAS). The LA also works closely with colleagues in the SEWC region, in particular in Torfaen.

The LA also secures a range of pupil support services such as Hearing Impaired, Visually Impaired, Speech and Language, and Ethnic Minority support services through regional collaboration. Within the LA, the Head of School Improvement and Inclusion ensures that there is a co-ordinated approach to supporting schools within the Education Directorate and across the Council corporately as a whole.

### 6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

The LA commissions its school improvement function on a regional basis.

### 6.8 ***Decarbonisation and Reducing Carbon Emissions***

There are no implications arising from this report.

### 6.9 ***Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA)***

There are no implications arising from this report.

## 7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

- ### 7.1
- Monitoring of improvement pathways is an important mechanism for ensuring that Members of the People Scrutiny Committee and the Cabinet

are sufficiently informed to enable them to hold the authority to account effectively for the quality of education provision and hence pupil progress and outcomes.

Schools causing concern is a standing item on weekly DLT agendas. This provides the opportunity for DLT members to scrutinise and challenge progress of schools that are causing concern, and to offer additional support e.g. from the youth service.

Weekly Cabinet Member briefings provide the opportunity to discuss schools causing concern with the Cabinet Member for Education.

### **Background Documents**

N/A