



## SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2023 – 2026 (Updated, September, '24)

**Directorate:** Education, Leisure & Lifelong Learning

**Service Area:** Child & Family Support

**Accountable Manager:** John Burge

### Purpose

The Child and Family Support Team provides an extended range of services to schools, governors, authority officers, pupils, parents and the wider community. Such teams bridge links between school and home supporting, enabling and resolving issues that might be impacting upon a child.

The service is sub-divided into eight areas:

- Admissions
- School Governance
- Education Welfare
- Safeguarding
- Elective Home Education
- Vulnerable Learners



- Case Assessment & Progression
- Education Other Than At School (EOTAS)

We support school governors by ensuring they receive high quality advice and training in order for them to undertake their statutory responsibilities at their respective schools. We ensure that all regulatory requirements are fulfilled in accordance with statutory provisions placed upon us as a local authority. We support schools and families on issues relating to pupil attendance, with the aim to assist and facilitate an early return to school through various strategies that encourage and improve regular attendance. We provide safeguarding advice and support across the whole of the Education, Leisure & Lifelong Learning Directorate and its schools ensuring the highest level of standards are maintained in order to protect our pupils. We manage the admission arrangements for pupils entering nursery, reception and secondary phases of education at all maintained schools across the County Borough, as well as by agreement the admission process for St. Joseph's RC Voluntary Aided School & 6<sup>th</sup> Form. We support families in financial difficulty with free school meals, school uniform grants, trust funds for postgraduate students and provide female pupils with free sanitary wear via the Period Dignity grant. We provide a welcoming, safe and reassuring learning environment for pupils whose first language is not English; including supporting Afghan refugees and Ukrainians fleeing war. We provide support and a voice for Gypsy/Traveller children ensuring they are heard and made to feel included and welcomed at our schools.

## Vision

As a service we are committed to the Council's priority that 'all children get the best start in life'. Within the Corporate Plan we have committed to working with schools and partners ensuring as many pupils as possible physically re-connect and engage with school reducing the number of pupils not within the education system. We will work hard to support schools to improve the attendance of pupils in both the primary and secondary phase. We will make sure what matters to children and families is at the centre of the way we plan and provide our services and support. We will make sure we do all we can for those children in need of protection to ensure they are safeguarded so they can grow up in a loving and stable family.



## Values

Our values are driven by our commitment to support schools, pupils and families to the very best of our ability. We will connect with our service users through regular newsletters and updates; by greater use of electronic means such as social media; organised coffee mornings for families educating their children at home, and by reaching out directly to communities including Gypsy/Traveller families. We will work collaboratively with our partners such as schools, other internal education services, other directorates and external agencies such as health and the youth offending service. We care by ensuring all children are seen as individuals, especially those who are vulnerable and need our support more than others. We are confident that our people within the team are passionate, knowledgeable and experienced at what they do, but we are never complacent and continue to seek improvement and to better ourselves.

## How well are we doing?

### **1. Delivering Priorities and Outcomes:**

The service is largely performing well to the benefit of pupils, families and schools within Neath Port Talbot. Staffing in all-but-one service area is stable with strong and experienced leadership of all teams. The manager of one service area has recently left our employment following a long period of ill-health. Arrangements are in place for a temporary job-share appointment which is working very successfully.

The annual pupil admissions round into schools (Secondary and Primary) for 2024/25 was completed ahead of schedule with some 2709 pupils being offered their first-place choice of school (99.7%) and just 8 pupils being offered their second-place choice of school (0.3%). There were no appeals. Officers have already commenced the process of managing the 2025/26 admission round.

As the time of the Covid pandemic we had to diversify our governor training offer which was moved online to allow the continuation of training during the lockdowns. This had a positive consequence when we saw governor attendance and participation increase. When



we moved away from the Covid period we re-introduce face-to-face training once more, however, we continued to offer online training as separate events. This has meant working governors or those with caring responsibilities do not miss out on these important training opportunities. Currently we do not have the capabilities to offer hybrid training sessions; however, this is something we are developing with our IT colleagues.

There is strong support in place to assist schools manage pupil attendance and exclusions. Pupil attendance rates in Neath Port Talbot stand at 90.97% (Primary) and 87.61% (secondary) with a combined whole authority rate of 88.0% [Sept '23 - July '24]. Whilst there are currently no published attendances rates across Wales that compare Primary and Secondary attendance, Welsh Government does publish the combined local authority attendance rate which for the same period has a Welsh average of 89.0%. Neath Port Talbot is currently 21<sup>st</sup> from 22 local authorities in Wales in terms of pupil attendance. Pupil attendance for the full year prior to the Covid pandemic was: 94.02% (Primary) and 92.96% (Secondary). There is no combined local authority data available for this period.

Currently there are no published exclusion rates across Wales, however, our own internal exclusion data highlights a clear concern that the rates of pupil exclusions within Neath Port Talbot are much higher than they have been in recent years. The number of pupils permanently excluded from Neath Port Talbot Schools was 37 [Sept '23 – July '24] and the number of fixed-term exclusions issued for the same period is 1886. This compares with 17 permanent exclusions and 1189 fixed-term exclusions issued during the full year prior to the Covid pandemic.

The Covid pandemic has had a clear impact on the wellbeing and routine of pupils across the globe which has been well documented. Schools are seeing an increase in behavioural issues, some of which are particularly challenging and have resulted in exclusion. As a result of these concerns the Education Senior Management Team created a new service to support schools where pupils were starting to display behavioural issues that could manifest into longer fixed-term or permanent exclusions. The Case Assessment and Progression Team has been setup to coordinate and hold to account multi-disciplinary services and agencies to ensure vulnerable pupils have the support they need and those services providing that support are being effective. The new service is young and has been soft launched through 2023/24.



The Education Safeguarding Team has a significant role in supporting schools to keep our pupils safe. This may be in conjunction with the Education Welfare Service and schools in tackling the over reliance on reduced timetables, which have a potential impact on both attendance and exclusion rates. It may be in providing safeguarding training to the service, schools and partners and being available for colleagues to raise concerns and be supported where child protection issue need to be escalated.

## **2. Understanding needs and engaging:**

As mirrored across every local authority in Wales the number of parents choosing to educate their child(ren) themselves via Elective Home Education (EHE) has been increasing year-on-year. Covid accelerated this number substantially, although Covid is not the reason for the increase. Currently [Jan '24] there are 339 pupils registered in Neath Port Talbot as EHE. To support families home visits are offered where there is an opportunity to discuss the education being delivered at home and to provide any support and advice parents may require on curriculum planning, sources of learning materials and links to other home educators and support groups.

As a result of the national increase in EHE numbers, Welsh Government has provided each local authority with additional funding to support EHE families. One method of expenditure Neath Port Talbot has made from the funding was to provide monthly coffee mornings for EHE families at a central venue where they are free to attend, meet one another and engage with local authority officers and guest speakers. These events have proved valuable in understanding the needs of the EHE community and the type of support they want and need. Recently we have started undertaking an annual survey of satisfaction of all EHE families. The overwhelming response was that parents were happy with the support they receive. They are also an opportunity to ensure we incorporate the views of the child/parent and carer voice into our planning for spending the Welsh Government funding.

We work hard at ensuring we maintain positive relations with the local Gypsy/Traveller community. We are regular participants at the Gypsy/Traveller Forum. The forum is made up of stakeholders who support the Gypsy/Traveller community in a range of ways with the aim of providing a joined-up approach to the delivery of services.



We contribute to meetings of the Neath Port Talbot's Black Minority Ethnic (BME) Community Association and have links with the Bengali, Polish, Romanian and Arabic communities through VLS' bi-lingual teaching assistants (BTAs) who support ethnic minority learners and their families. We also have established links with our Afghan and Ukrainian refugee communities through VLS' Farsi and Ukrainian/Russian speaking teaching assistants and through attending NPT's Ukrainian, Refugee and Asylum Dispersal Meetings.

We have a very successful relationship with our governing bodies and individual governors. There are approximately 850 governors serving on governing bodies in Neath Port Talbot schools. Principally we work very closely with the Chair and Vice-chair of Governors from each school. The Education Senior Management Team and Officers from with the School Governance Team meet with Chairs and Vice on a termly basis where they are provided with presentations, speakers, information and opportunity for a Q&A session on any subject matter they wish to raise. These meetings are usually well attended with positive feedback. We engage further with governors via a seat on the Governors Management Group and we provide all governors with a termly newsletter. We have a dedicated governors email address where we receive a number of queries from governors seeking support and advice. Governor training feedback sheets are nearly always positive with all responses read and considered for improvement. We trialled communicating with governors via social media, however, our engagement was hampered by our lack of ability to communicate simultaneously in Welsh and with the delay in translation this ended. We would like to reinstate this one day.

We have a strong presence on the Council's website (<https://www.npt.gov.uk/1347>) where we offer information about what we do and what we can assist with. A number of our services are now available to residents/families online, such as applying for school admissions, free school meals or for a clothing grant.

We are regular contributors at Council Cabinet meetings and also at Education Scrutiny Committee where we submit reports on various areas of the service. During the past 18 months we have submitted reports on pupil attendance, exclusions, elective home education, period poverty, pupil admissions, safeguarding and school term-dates.

### **3. Collaboration:**



All services within the Child & Family Support Team rely heavily on good positive partnership working with other internal service areas and external agencies. There is a strong relationship between colleagues that allows for a constructive dialogue that benefits the children we work with. Officers know their areas of expertise well and in return many other service areas approach us for help, support and guidance which we are pleased to assist with. Officers are not afraid to raise contentious issues or challenge others where necessary when they feel it is required.

Officers have well established networks with their counterparts across Wales sharing good practice, learning from one another and helping Welsh Government to shape strategic direction, policy and guidance. Pre-Covid, meetings used to take place face-to-face often in Mid-Wales where whole days would be consumed with travel; however, nearly all network meetings are now held remotely allowing more people from around Wales to attend and making the input much sharper and shorter.

The success of the new Case Assessment & Progression Team revolves wholly around collaborative working, utilising diplomatic and persuasion skills in order to ensure other services/agencies, both internal and external, are supporting individual pupils as best and as promptly as they can. Agencies/practitioners are often supporting the same pupil and without a joined-up approach there is often a duplication of input. Instead, the Case Assessment & Progression Team bring those agencies/practitioners together to coordinate interventions in the best interest of the pupil. To date there have been a number of successes from this collaboration with support for vulnerable pupils being stepped-up and interventions delivered much quicker. This in turn allows for better engagement by pupils in schools, better attendance rates and lower rates of exclusions.

The Gypsy/Traveller Team within the Vulnerable Learners Service has established some positive relationships recently with both the Elective Home Education Team and Youth Service. Home visits and family introductions are underway and going well despite some challenges. This process of working together is much improved on previous years where regular meetings are planned and it is hoped that we will begin to see the impact on attendance and engagement with education over the coming months.



There are several collaborative projects underway which include Swansea University, Afan College and Tir Morfa with a focus on engaging Gypsy/Traveller pupils and adults in education. 'There and Back Again' will be engaging with the community to get them cooking and talking. Also, the EM/EAL provision within the Vulnerable Learners Service has provided translation support for the Education Welfare Service to ensure correspondence is now available in the six commonest ethnic minority languages within the Local Authority as well as working closely with the service to support families from ethnic minority communities most noticeable the Romanian (ROMA) community within Neath Port Talbot. The Vulnerable Learners Service is part of the MEGRT Local Authorities Group which represents EM/EAL/GRT services across Wales and meets every two months to share information and good practice as well as to influence policy makers from the Welsh Government, ESTYN and Welsh Local Government Association who also attend this meeting.

The Education Safeguarding team has built excellent and productive working relationships with schools, the directorate and other agencies. This enables difficult conversations to take place in a mutually respectful environment. Ultimately this plays a key role in achieving positive outcomes for children and young people.

The Education Safeguarding Officer works very closely with her counterparts across Wales and with Welsh Government and Estyn as part of the Safeguarding Education Group (SEG). This group has become very influential and now has significant input into Welsh Government planning and delivery of safeguarding of children in schools.

The Education Safeguarding Officer represents the Directorate on a number of regional meetings e.g.: West Glamorgan Safeguarding Board management groups, Channel panel, Western Bay Anti-Slavery Forum. This increases positive working relationships across multiple agencies and supports the work of schools and Directorate staff.

Additionally, the Education Safeguarding Officer oversees and participates in the process of School Safeguarding Peer Reviews. This process helps schools identify areas for development where peer reviewer takes the role of a critical friend. These reviews are positively received by schools who value this direct support.





We have re-started truancy patrols in both Neath and Port Talbot Town Centres working in partnership with the Police. Such patrols allow for pupils to be identified who should be in school during the school day and also to reduce the amount of anti-social behaviour taking place in the town centres resulting in complaints being made by local businesses.

#### **4. Decision Making, Planning and Risk:**

Each of the service areas within the team are managed by experienced professionals who are specialists in their field of work. As a group of managers we meet collectively every half-term for team meetings which include briefings updates, feedback, sharing concerns and to discuss whole service issues such as staffing, future strategic direction of the service, planning, budget and identifying where improvement is needed.

Data analysis and trends is an important measure for some of our services, most notably the Education Welfare Service who use pupil attendance data to better understand the picture at each of our schools and how this compares both across schools in Neath Port Talbot and across Wales benchmarked against other local authorities. Currently there is only one pupil attendance measure published across Wales that allows for benchmarking. This rate show Neath Port Talbot to be 21<sup>st</sup> out of 22 local authorities. As a result of this a lot of work and effort is going in to better understand why the pupils of Neath Port Talbot have not returned to our schools in numbers as they have in other authorities. One explanation links regular attendance with poverty. We already know that Neath Port Talbot has one of the highest levels of poverty in Wales. We also know from national research that disadvantaged pupils are more likely to have higher absence rates than pupils who are from more affluent backgrounds. Both pupil attendance and poverty are identified as important well-being objectives within the Council's Corporate Plan [Well-being Objective 1: To improve the well-being of children and young people, and Well-being Objective 2 - To improve the well-being of all adults who live in the county borough].

Our School Governance Team have a high level of knowledge of legislation and regulations surrounding governing bodies. We have supported 13 brand new governing bodies from the point of creation through to being fully operational. We have supported 21 other governing bodies to wind-up their affairs and cease operating. The legal complexity in these areas along with the potential consequences of getting it wrong cannot be underestimated in terms of reputational and financial damages for the Council.



Our Vulnerable Learners Service and Admissions Team have both been wholly involved in the planning arrangements for the influx of Ukrainian refugees as a result of the war by Russia. Multi-agency partnership working by the service was undertaken to provide housing, financial and educational support for refugees arriving in Neath Port Talbot. The response to date has been very successful.

The team is good at service planning, identifying various priority areas of work and preparing for known busy periods. The Admissions Team are adept at managing exceptionally busy periods during the annual admissions round from their pre-planning and preparations. Thousands of families apply within a time window for access to school rolls. This is a statutory function with statutory timescales where we consistently achieve a 100% success rate.

Currently the service does not have a succession plan in place, however, work will commence towards completing this by June, '23.

Staff sickness rates across the service are generally very low. Hybrid working has resulted in fewer days of sickness being reported.

## **5. Value for Money:**

The Admissions Team have streamlined their operation in recent years with greater use of technology meaning their staffing complement has successfully reduced by natural turnover whilst workload has increased. This has resulted in a higher level of service for families and residents providing better value for money.

We maximise income opportunities by offsetting any staff salaries against any Welsh Government grants that allow. Where offsetting is not permitted under the terms of reference we ensure an administration allowance is applied, again where permissible. We have increased our income charging structure to an almost full cost recovery for those governing bodies who have a service level agreement with us for the professional clerking service and should be in a position of actual full cost recovery within the next 12-18 months. We have been working with Supporting Service Children in Education Cymru (SSCE) where we have been given a grant to specifically assist



pupils who are children of Armed Forces personnel. This has allowed us to undertake activities outside of our core funding stream which would not otherwise have been possible.

Our Education Welfare Service was recently successful with a business case put forward to Welsh Government to fully fund a Wales-wide attendance conference for the 22 local authorities. Not only did this allow for a training opportunity for our staff to learn from successes from other local authorities, but it was hosted in the Princess Royal Theatre allowing for other Neath Port Talbot services to benefit from the income generation.

The Co-ordinator of the service meets regularly with the Group Accountant to go through the budget and identify any financial pressures. Arising from the closure of the 2023/24 financial year a significant saving had been achieved from prudent budgeting. The Co-ordinator successfully applied to the Corporate Director's Group for £50k to be carried forward into the new financial year to allow for the recruitment of an additional temporary Education Welfare Officer to assist with the Council priority of improving pupil attendance.

## **6. Duties and Standards:**

Our Vulnerable Learners Service work wholly with pupils and families from minority ethnic backgrounds and those who have English as an Additional Language (EAL) to ensure every child is offered the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential. We work closely with Gypsy/Traveller families and BAME learners. We have and continue to assist families who have had to flee from countries of war such as Syria/Afghanistan and more recently Ukraine. We work with schools to encourage an inclusive and anti-racist approach to teaching and school experiences. We believe that minority groups of pupils should have their voices heard and listened to and never feel they are judged by their colour, ethnicity or sexual orientation. The Vulnerable Learners Service has worked with the Youth Service to ensure Neath Port Talbot's Youth Council has representatives from ethnic minority backgrounds and refugee backgrounds. Governors are provided training on issues relating to inclusion and diversity both internally by our ALN Service and externally by organisations such as 'Show Racism the Red Card' and 'ASDinfoWales'.



All staff working with schools, children and their families have undertaken training in safeguarding, equalities and diversity practices. Officers who write reports for Council scrutiny or Cabinet meetings have been fully trained in considering and writing Integrated Impact Assessments (IIAs).

The service is currently in the process of upgrading all of our online content to make it accessible to assist our users who might have sight or hearing difficulties. Given we have a significant number of documents on the Council website, some of which are very large in size, this is a task that will take some time. We plan to have all documents in accessible format by the end of the year which will assist with our obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Public documents are mostly published bilingually. We are aware that some older documents need translating into Welsh and this is currently being done to ensure full compliance with our Welsh Language Standards.

## **7. Socio-Economic Duty:**

The Welsh Government have previously said that “attendance has a strong impact on learner outcomes, standards and progression and that examination outcomes strongly correlate to attendance rates”. This ultimately impacts on a young person’s longer-term education, training and employment opportunities. Missing school may also have an impact on pupils' wellbeing. This includes mixing with friendship groups, building resilience and accessing the mental health support that schools can offer to its learners. The current economic crisis has a significant impact on inequality, the evidence demonstrates that the poorest areas have experienced the greatest impact both in terms of health, education and financial impacts. Addressing these inequalities is highlighted in the Council’s Corporate Plan and Strategic Equality Plan under each wellbeing objective to try to explicitly close the gap between those who have experienced socio-economic disadvantage and those who have not.

There is a significant attendance gap between pupils who are categorised as eligible for free school meals and non-free school meals. This gap was identified pre-Covid, however, grew wider during the Covid period. The local authority provides additional support to narrow this gap in terms of identifying and intervening with disadvantaged pupils and families at an earlier stage before persistent



absence becomes an issue; working far closer with other service areas both within and external to the Council in order to provide a more cohesive and interconnected level of support, and acting as an advocate for pupils where there are issues between school and home preventing regular attendance.

The Child & Family Support Team administers several Welsh Government poverty-based grants, including:

The School Essentials Grant which is available to pupils who are eligible for assessed free school meals. The purpose of the grant is to assist families on low incomes for the purchase of: School uniform including coats and shoes; School sports kit including footwear; Uniform for enrichment activities; Equipment e.g. school bags and stationery; Specialist equipment where new curriculum activities begin such as design and technology; Equipment for out of school hour's trips such as outdoor learning e.g. waterproofs, and laptops or tablets.

Elective Home Education grant in the form of providing Laptops, vouchers to help towards the cost of purchasing books, pens and resources; swimming lessons; free access to Margam Park; Welsh lessons have been provided in the last two years and will resume when a new provider is sourced to continue the offering at either beginners, intermediate or advanced level. Parents can attend and participate in Welsh lessons along with their child. The authority also uses the grant by purchasing tickets to educational centres/activities such as Dan Yr Orgof Caves and Techniquet; plus the opportunity to learn via distance learning through online subscriptions such as Twinkl and sourced on-line iGCSE provided by a nearby college.

Period Poverty grant where secondary schools in Neath Port Talbot are funded to purchase and distribute to female pupil's period products of their choice. Primary schools are issued with products of their choice free of charge upon request. Foodbanks, libraries, community centres, churches and sports clubs are also contacted along with specific services within Social Services who deal with families and are supplied with their choice of products free of charge. The supply of free period products assists in taking away the stress of paying for these items so that families can try and deal with other financial pressures they might have.



## **8. DARE Strategy:**

All officers across the team have the provision of laptops with full remote access to all software packages they need to undertake their jobs. This allows for remote working and the participation in online meetings rather than time-consuming and unnecessary travel. Approximately 50% of the team utilise the Council's Agile Working Policy allowing staff to work from alternative locations and from home. Again, this saves on unnecessary travel to and from a place of work and contributes towards the Council's reduction in carbon emissions.

## **9. Digital Opportunities:**

The Covid pandemic accelerated the modernisation and deployment of digital opportunities for all service areas within the Child & Family Support Team. From the initial lockdown officers were forced to move away from traditional desktop PCs to laptops. This allows for far greater efficiencies in terms of working time and arrangements. A number customer facing services have been transferred online, including the roll-out of the annual admissions application process where several thousand applications are processed each year. Traditionally applications would be paper based, submitted online and responded to via hardcopy letter. Now the process is entirely online with responses to parents provided by email.

Nearly all policies, procedures and guidance documents that are produced by the Child & Family Support Team are available on our pages within the Council's website and/or internal intranet site. This has removed the need for thousands of pages of policies being posted to schools on an annual basis. It also allows for the most up-to-date version to be available at all times to avoid confusion as what is the current document.

Applications for free school meals and school uniform grant are now conducted via an online application with financial assistance provided direct into parents' bank account rather than paper cheques being posted out.



Each Chair and Vice-chair of Governor is provided with an official HWB email address which is secure and authorised allowing them to correspond with the headteacher of the school and local authority officers regarding confidential matters without breaching GDPR Regulations.

Governor training is now offered face-to-face and online for those governors who are working or who have caring responsibilities; however, these are sessions independent of each other. Further work is required in order to consider offering simultaneous hybrid training opportunities rather than single sessions.

## How do we know?

We use a number of different methods for understanding how well the service is performing. Principally we are a service that supports others to achieve their outcomes, such as schools, pupils and families. We measure our performance by the number of compliments and complaints received; training feedback sheets and regular discussions with various stakeholders. Our Elective Home Education Team have recently started collating formal feedback from parents on the level of support and advice they receive and whether any improvements are necessary.

We also use hard data to understand the impact our services are having when supporting schools, such as pupil attendance and exclusions data. Internally we know the attendance and exclusions rates of every school in Neath Port Talbot. Currently we are unable to compare these with other schools across Wales as Welsh Government are not collecting this data, however, we can compare high level local authority data. This is a useful measure and enables us to challenge schools more directly where there is need.

Each service area has been held to account by Elected Members when presenting reports to Cabinet and Education Scrutiny Committee on the work of that area. Members provide robust challenge and compliment officers where and when they see fit.



The Education Welfare Service was nominated and shortlisted at the 2021 national APSE local government frontline service awards for its involvement with families at the height of the Covid pandemic; and more recently received an endorsement of their work from Estyn following an extended LA Link Inspection (June '24).

Education Safeguarding was heavily involved and complimented for its work and participation in a recent Joint Inspectorate Review of Child Protection Arrangements (JICPA) where statutory inspection services ESTYN, Care Inspectorate Wales, Health Inspectorate Wales, HM Constabulary and HM Probation Inspectorate came together to perform a deep dive on several vulnerable children living in Neath Port Talbot.

We also must report regularly to Welsh Government as part of the grant conditions for the funding of Period Dignity; Elective Home Education and School Uniform. The terms and conditions of the grant require regular updates of the work we are doing otherwise the Council is at risk of having the grant withdrawn.

## How and what we can do better?

Our ability to support schools in managing pupil attendance is good and the team is strong; however, whilst attendance improves year-on-year Neath Port Talbot remains too close to the bottom in Wales amongst other local authorities. Pupils' attendance in both the primary and secondary sectors needs to improve at a faster rate than it has to date. Together with our school partners we need to consider new strategies and tactics to achieve this.

Exclusion rates from schools are too high and need to be reduced. We know behavioural reasons are the main driving factor behind the increase, however, we need to work with schools to understand the reasons for the rise in behavioural problems and, together with other LA services, support schools with more creative solutions where pupils have more welcoming and positive experiences at school.





Whilst significant improvements have been made with shifting parental applications for school admission places from paper-based applications to online applications further work is needed to improve uptake of online applications amongst the nursery sector.

With priority within the safeguarding team being diverted to tackling the review and audit of Pastoral Support Programmes (PSPs) and Reduced Timetables (RTTs).

The Vulnerable Learners Service has received additional council funding from reserves to provide support for schools with refugees. The funding is no longer available and service needs have changed. Therefore, a service restructure is being undertaken. This is likely to result in a small number of compulsory redundancies.

Despite funding being available to allow for supply cover in schools to release staff members, there remains a reluctance by some schools in releasing staff to attend CPD events to better support the children of Armed Forces personnel. We need to find ways to encourage a better take-up to support this group of pupils.

Communication between the various agencies in regards to Gypsy/Traveller pupils needs to improve, information isn't always being shared which can be vital to continuing positive relationships with our families and protecting staff visiting families. We need to work closely with the Gypsy/Traveller Forum to look at ways to improve this.

## Budget, Resource Management and Organisational Development

The total budget of the Child & Family Support Team for the 2024/25 financial year is £3.1M. This is predominantly made-up of Welsh Government grants, employee salaries and associated costs such as the need for IT equipment, resources and travel expenses.

There are 55 staff employed across the various teams within the service. Capacity is currently a concern given that a number of the Council's priorities identified in the Corporate Plan either sit or straddle a number of the teams within the service e.g., increasing pupil attendance; decreasing pupil exclusions; reducing the dependency on reduced timetables is linked with safeguarding and anti-social



behavioural issues in town centres; supporting refugees arriving from Ukraine; alternative educational providers are not currently being checked for safeguarding issues and funding for Afghan and Ukrainian refugee learners supported the Vulnerable Learners Service is at risk of being withdrawn. We utilise the Welsh Government Elective Home Education grant to cover the cost of one of our EHE Coordinator posts which saves the Authority £50k per annum in core funding. We also use the Welsh Government Attendance Grant to employ four temporary Attendance Support Officers. The funding issue relating to the Vulnerable Learners Service is unlikely to be known until January '25 when the Council considered its next cycle of budgets

We have increased our income charging structure to a near full-cost recovery for those governing bodies who have a service level agreement with us for the professional clerking service with the aim for a full cost recovery within the next 12-18 months.

In terms of our interdependencies, all services within the Child and Family Support Team rely heavily on a number of different IT systems and support from both internally by the Digital Services Team and externally by software providers such as EMS CAPTIA. Several of our functions also depend on other internal services areas such as the Finance Department for processing free school meals and uniform grant payments, and on our Social Services colleagues when working with vulnerable children.

SWOT Analysis	
<p><b>KEY STRENGTHS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Services that are respected by our customers;</li> <li>• Experienced and knowledgeable staff;</li> <li>• High level of customer satisfaction;</li> <li>• Solid track record of partnership working;</li> <li>• Low staff sickness levels;</li> </ul>	<p><b>MAIN WEAKNESSES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff capacity and wellbeing issues due to continuous heavy workloads;</li> <li>• Service continuity difficulties in some areas should key individuals be absent from their roles long-term;</li> <li>• Succession management;</li> </ul>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Year-on-year budget savings achieved.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large service covering many different areas of work.</li> </ul>
<p><b>KEY OPPORTUNITIES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Availability of externally funded grants;</li> <li>Representation on a number of national groups and forums allows us to help shape future guidance/policy;</li> <li>Agile working has brought about a better level of work/life balance for some staff than pre-Covid;</li> <li>To build on successful relationships with other internal and external service providers to improve our offer of support further.</li> </ul>	<p><b>MAIN THREATS (see also risk area below)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff wellbeing due to increased work demands and pressures;</li> <li>Inability to offer key statutory services or functions with staff absences;</li> <li>Pending Local Authority Estyn Inspection;</li> <li>Key performance indicators, such as pupil attendance and exclusions not improving quickly enough;</li> <li>Budget reduction and grant withdrawals, specifically for the Vulnerable Learners Service.</li> </ul>

Risk Management				
Risk Title	Date From	Date To	Risk rating	
			Original	Latest
<b>Risk 1: Pupil attendance fails to improve</b>	<b>04/23</b>	<b>03/24</b>	<b>20 (5x4)</b>	<b>20 (5x4)</b>
Risk action 1: Full review of current support provision required to better understand what works and what doesn't work.	04/23	06/23	N/A	N/A
Risk action 2: Additional capacity/posts are created using new WG Grant.	05/23	08/23	N/A	N/A
Risk action 3: Promote attendance and managing pupil absences amongst Headteachers/Governors and partners.	04/23	03/24	N/A	N/A



<b>Risk 2: Long-term absence of key service staff</b>	<b>05/23</b>	<b>03/24</b>	<b>12 (3x4)</b>	<b>12 (3x4)</b>
Risk action 1: Additional internal training required.	05/23	03/24	N/A	N/A
Risk action 2: Need to identify spare capacity.	05/23	03/24	N/A	N/A
Risk action 3: Complete succession plan	05/23	06/23	N/A	N/A
<b>Risk 3: Significant safeguarding issue within an alternative provider</b>	<b>05/23</b>	<b>03/24</b>	<b>10 (2x5)</b>	<b>10 (2x5)</b>
Risk action 1: Engage additional member of staff to kick-start and create a system of checking-the-checker for additional providers.	06/23	12/23	N/A	N/A
Risk action 2: Reducing capacity elsewhere in order to increase capacity here.	01/24	03/24	N/A	N/A
<b>Add more risks if required</b>				

Key Actions		Responsible Officer	Start Date	End Date	Well-Being Objective / Governance & Resource <i>(contributes to)</i>
1	Expenditure forecast to be contained within budget.	John Burge	04/24	03/25	Gov. & Resource
2	Support schools to increase pupil attendance across the board	Hayley Thomas	09/24	07/25	WBO1, WBO4,
3	Re-evaluate the Vulnerable Learners Service to consider the reduction of agency workers, financial security of the service and ensure appropriate staffing levels are in place based on demand/need.	Julie Stapleton/Heather Thomas	05/24	12/24	WBO1, WBO 2, WBO3, WBO4, Gov. & Resource



4	Make arrangements for a greater number of nursery admissions applications to be made online rather than paper based.	Helen Lewis	09/24	11/24	WBO1
5	Increase options available to governors to participate in training via face-to-face, online or both options for each session.	Kath Gilbert	09/23	12/24	WBO1, WBO4, Gov. & Resource