

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Education Skills and Culture Scrutiny Committee

14 October 2021

Report of the Director of Education Leisure and Lifelong Learning

Matter for Information

Wards Affected: All Wards

Estyn's Five Recommendations in response to Covid 19

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of the report is to inform Members on progress through Estyn's Thematic Report - "Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and Public Referral Units (PRUs) in response to COVID-19"

1. Executive Summary

This report is to give an update on the progress against the five recommendations set by Estyn following their thematic report on Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19". In line with Estyn's new approach for thematic reports, they will be writing to the Welsh Government in early 2022 to seek feedback on the work they have done to address the recommendations made to them.

2. The five recommendations are;

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

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

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

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

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

Background

The original report was written in response to a request for advice from the Minister for Education in July 2020. It provides an overview of how local authorities and regional consortia have worked with schools and pupils referral units (PRUs) to promote learning and support vulnerable pupils during the COVID-19 period between June and November 2020 that is the period after the initial lockdown when schools were reopening. It captures the ways local authorities and regional consortia have adapted their work to respond to the challenges resulting from COVID-19.

In late June 2020, nearly all schools reopened to pupils to provide an opportunity for them to 'Check in, catch up and prepare for summer, and September'. In July and August 2020, the Welsh Government published guidance to support schools to reopen to all pupils, on supporting learning and on supporting vulnerable learners (Welsh Government 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Schools and PRUs reopened to pupils in September 2020, with a transition period leading up to all pupils attending by 14 September 2020. Almost immediately, schools began to experience their first positive COVID-19 cases among pupils and staff, reflecting the situation in their communities, and the first of a series of local restrictions to reduce transmission was announced. During September and October 2020, individual pupils, classes or whole year groups were required at times to

self-isolate, leading to the need for remote learning provision. The length of self-isolation periods varied from one day to 14 days depending on the reason and personal circumstances¹.

Positive COVID-19 cases continued to rise and the Welsh Government announced a two-week firebreak lockdown from 23 October 2020. Schools and PRUs were closed for half-term during the first week of the firebreak. During the second week primary schools re-opened for face-to-face learning while many secondary-aged pupils reverted to distance learning from home.

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

During spring 2021, local authority officers in NPT continued to meet regularly with headteachers. This consistent communication, in addition to the information gathered from the Neath Port Talbot stakeholder survey, provided all partners with an opportunity to collaborate and act promptly to overcome challenges such as providing devices to an increased number of pupils.

Local authority officers used local funding of £303,000, in addition to the Welsh Government grant, to purchase more devices for pupils to engage in learning. Through revising the vulnerable learners register fortnightly and scrutinising the audit of devices across the local authority regularly to identify needs, officers purchased 9500 Chromebooks and 300 laptops to support pupils' learning. This resulted in all pupils in key stages 3 and 4 having individual access to a device and a shared access for younger pupils, in addition to newly purchased tablets and MiFi connectivity routers. As a result, pupils and their families had direct access to devices to facilitate wellbeing support and engagement in learning.

Officers also purchased 940 laptops for teachers to develop blended and distance practices further and supported them to provide pupils with live or recorded sessions.

This revised virtual pedagogy, alongside a range of resources and applications, for example through Hwb, resulted in stronger home-school collaboration and partnership.

Local authority officers focused support for school-based staff on developing their information, communication and technology (ICT) skills further. Overtime, officers promoted the importance of meaningful and quality distance learning sessions to develop pupils' skill development and progression in learning. For example, officers developed staff's ICT skills beneficially to provide pupils with more regular live or recorded sessions. This support, in addition to pupils having increased access to devices, proved to be beneficial as pupils engaged in more challenging activities.

Prompted by the local authority, school staff continued to develop their skills to be able to respond to pupils' work using varied techniques such as feedback apps. This contributed to both pupils and their families understanding more clearly the importance of engaging and making progress in developing their skills. Leaders held virtual assemblies to celebrate pupils' good work by presenting awards and certificates to further encourage a high level of engagement.

In addition, officers and school-based staff supported pupils in Nursery and Reception, Year 6 and examination pupils by providing targeted distance learning provision. Officers and specialist support agencies worked collaboratively to support pupils identified as having additional learning needs by providing specific guidance and beneficial ICT resources to best meet their individual needs.

Leaders specifically supported vulnerable pupils by providing a direct point of contact with specific school staff and regular phone calls or garden visits, adhering to risk assessments. They also provided opportunities for vulnerable pupils to engage in blended and face-to-face learning by attending school-based provision on selected sessions or days. The very few pupils who continued not to engage in learning were referred to the Education Welfare Officers (EWOs).

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 continued to support leaders and staff in the spring term to monitor, develop and refine distance and blended learning approaches in order to encourage pupil engagement in learning and support for families. Headteachers used the blended learning guidance and valued the regular meetings with officers to share strong practice and raise challenges in delivering learning remotely. For example, headteachers and staff benefited from guidance on the best use of platforms and apps to further enhance provision and facilitate learning. In addition, officers provided guidance on how best to keep both pupils and staff safe whilst engaging in synchronous and asynchronous approaches to learning.

Officers report that opportunities for staff to discuss and collaborate within schools and clusters were beneficial in developing different techniques and using new resources. These discussions also helped to set shared expectations of the quality and consistency of approaches for distance and blended learning. These formal and informal opportunities were beneficial in sharing expertise and ideas to best meet the needs of all pupils across the local authority. Officers shared local effective practice by regular communication with headteachers and staff. The effective practice was promoted further to schools across Wales by Welsh Government.

Collaboration and multi-agency working between officers and school-based staff has continued to be a strength to support pupils' wellbeing as a foundation for the continuation for learning. For example, Cynnydd staff facilitated learning with the support provided by the Wellbeing and Behaviour Service (WBS) for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in mainstream secondary schools. Pupils benefited from supportive and personalised provision due to increased staff collaboration.

Transport arrangements were amended to allow individual pupils to engage in a bespoke blended learning approach.

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

Local authority officers supported and scrutinised schools' individual Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards grant plans to ensure consistency in

provision to develop pupils' literacy and numeracy skills in addition to their wellbeing needs. Education Support Officers (ESO) consulted with headteachers to prioritise areas of learning and plan for pupils' next steps in learning. Officers provided leaders with guidance, resources and professional learning to develop a range of approaches. Officers provided training, relevant resources and consultation clinics for staff in priority areas such as literacy, numeracy and outdoor learning. This supported staff to adapt their teaching and learning practice, for example to develop pupils' numeracy skills in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics or to plan forest schools' activities in the outside area.

As sited in the report to Cabinet on 18 March 2021, officers continued to communicate additional guidance and support available for school-based staff from counsellors, EWOs, youth workers, WBS workers and Cynnydd staff. For example, this support provided staff in both special schools with shared behaviour management approaches to support individual pupils with their personal and social needs.

During our engagement with headteachers, they stated that many pupils' listening and speaking skills had regressed during the lockdown periods. Local authority officers guided schools to address this concern, such as by providing focused listening and speaking activities and relevant resources to support pupils' confidence in developing their oracy skills. In particular, officers suggested a range of approaches for pupils attending Welsh-medium schools who speak some or no Welsh at home. Speech and Language Therapy and Occupational Therapy training and resources were also provided to staff to develop and enhance pupils' language and literacy skills or their motor and co-ordination development.

Inclusion, Social and Children's Services, along with outside agencies such as NSPCC and Barnardo's, continued to revisit the vulnerable learners register on a fortnightly basis to identify those pupils most at risk. Key officers met weekly to discuss the actions required to support the most vulnerable families, for example pupils with autistic spectrum condition and those with profound and multiple learning difficulties. As a result, officers continued to develop a coherent approach to meet the needs of all learners in an inclusive and supportive schools' community.

Local authority officers and school-based staff identified pupils from specific groups that were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for

example pupils from the Gypsy, Roma and Travellers community. The Gypsy, Roma and Traveller liaison officers communicated with and supported these families consistently over time. This work promoted mutual trust and respect between families and school staff. Officers provided pupils with bespoke literacy and numeracy activities in paper-based packs and supported families with the use of digital platforms as part of the distance and blended learning provision.

During the lockdown in the spring term, officers and teachers also provided children from this community with the opportunity to attend face-to-face provision in school to encourage them to engage in learning and make progress in their literacy and numeracy skills.

Local authority officers state that the percentage of pupils who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is at its lowest ever at 2.1% due to effective partnership working. For example, officers continue to participate in quarterly meetings of the Engagement Progression Co-ordinators Group to discuss the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework and consider how to further develop the basic skills of this group of learners.

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

Local authority officers offered consistent support and guidance to school-based staff to respond to the increasing concerns about pupils' physical health, especially following the second lockdown in the spring term. For example, officers supported staff to plan and deliver learning activities such as problem-solving challenges in the outside area to facilitate frequent opportunities for exercise. In addition, officers supported the Physical Education and School Sports team to promote physical activities and encouraged pupils to participate in events delivered by the Ospreys project initiative and Swans Community Trust. Cynnydd staff also supported pupils with physical wellbeing through bike rides and socially distanced walks. Planning is underway to enhance provision to further promote pupils' physical activities through the School Holiday Enrichment Programme.

Since the beginning of the first lockdown, officers continued to actively support the growing concern around pupils' mental wellbeing, for example

through the newly established Primary Therapy Service. Officers in this team ensured that wellbeing provision was a priority to support pupils from Year 1 onwards through a holistic and accessible approach. Officers also facilitated collaboration between different departments and school-based staff as an integral part of the support. For example, officers from the WBS trained one member of staff from every secondary school in Youth Mental Health First Aid to support pupils' emotional wellbeing on their return to school.

Officers engaged with a variety of forums and agencies to gather information from pupils such as the Young People's Mental Health Forum and the School Based Counselling Service. In response to detailed analyses and feedback from pupils, officers planned and delivered support through specific programmes and interventions. For example, Cynnydd using the 'social and emotional capabilities assessment tool' monitored interventions regularly to evaluate the impact of the adapted provision on pupils' wellbeing. Officers also prioritised training in trauma-informed approaches for staff to support pupils identified as having adverse childhood experiences with their emotional wellbeing on their return to school.

In our engagement phone calls and informal visits to schools, headteachers reported that the wellbeing support provided by the inclusion officers had been invaluable for staff in order to enhance provision available for pupils. Staff acted on detailed local authority guidance and adapted provision to ensure consistent support for pupils across all age ranges. Following professional learning provided by officers across the service, school staff have a broader range of skills to best meet the diverse needs of pupils' wellbeing.

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

During our virtual meetings with officers, they reported that they have continued to listen and support school-based staff in frank conversations and share valuable information and ideas with all stakeholders. During our discussions, headteachers identified that they valued this collaboration. This support provided all partners with the on-going opportunity to reflect and evaluate practices and then refine and develop provision further in line with evolving health and safety circumstances. The relevant intelligence

gathered has informed the Corporate Recovery Plans as part of the local authority's strategy to move forward in all aspects of their work. Officers state that education is a fundamental element of the Corporate Recovery Plans and that it is at the core of providing effective support and guidance for pupils and their families, and school-based staff. The newly appointed Director for Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning, who took up his post in April 2021, has a clear vision to continue to work collaboratively with officers, outside agencies and schools to support pupils' wellbeing so they can engage confidently in learning.

Local authority officers continue to support school leaders and staff to develop their approaches to Curriculum for Wales. The local authority has created three additional posts within the Education Support Officers team to support this work and has seconded one practitioner in the primary sector and two in the secondary sector. As the local authority no longer formally accesses support from the regional consortium, although engagement around the delivery of the National Leadership programmes continues, the creation of these seconded posts is essential to provide ongoing professional learning and training for school leaders and staff. The partnership working between the local authority and schools aims to provide staff and governors with support to identify strengths and areas for improvement through half termly visits to schools. This is an integral part of the local authority's vision to develop schools as innovative and highly effective self-improving providers.

Many headteachers reported that the support offered by officers in the Inclusion and Education Psychology teams has been effective in supporting leaders and additional needs co-ordinators to familiarise themselves with forthcoming changes to additional learning needs provision in Wales. The comprehensive training menu supports staff to review and revise provision to respond coherently to best meet the additional learning needs of pupils. Additional online support for Governors has been delivered through a comprehensive training package.

Financial Impact

3. No implications.

Integrated Impact Assessment

4. There is no requirement to undertake an Integrated Impact Assessment as this report is for information purposes.

5. Valleys Communities Impact:

Valley schools have been considered as part of Neath Port Talbot County Borough whole response to Estyn.

Workforce Impacts

6. No implications.

Legal Impacts

7. No implications.

Risk Management

8. The Directorate of Education Leisure and Lifelong Learning and key officers meet with two designated Estyn inspectors each term through the Local Authority Lead Inspector meetings (LALI). All strengths, risks and areas for development are discussed.

Consultation

9. There is no requirement for external consultation on this item.

Recommendations

10. That the report is noted for information

Reasons for Proposed Decision

11. This is a matter for information therefore no decision is required.

Implementation of Decision

12. This is a matter for information therefore no decision is required.

Appendices

13. None

List of Background Papers

14. Local authority and regional consortia support for schools and PRUs in response to COVID-19. Update report from June to November 2020 - January 2021

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