



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Education, Skills and Wellbeing Cabinet Board
Wednesday 25th January 2023

Report of Director of Education Leisure and Lifelong Learning
Andrew Thomas

Matter for Information

Wards Affected:

All Wards

Report Title. The impact of Covid on our schools and their recovery

Purpose of the Report: To provide Members with information and data in relation to Neath Port Talbot's schools and the impact of Covid and the plan for recovery

Executive Summary:

This report will provide Members with details of the impact of Covid on our schools and the support offered by ELLL Directorate, including reference to published documentation attached within appendices

Background:

All through the pandemic, the Senior Management Team of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning's strategic vision was based on providing strong wellbeing support and ensuring continuity in learning wherever possible for all partners.

A team of senior officers provided support and guidance that was beneficial to headteachers and staff in schools. This resulted in a coherent and unified approach across the local authority's service areas and helped officers to make timely decisions to support their learning communities.

Schools were supported by Local authority officers that had set up five work streams, namely;

- transport, cleaning and hygiene
- managing movement
- operational matters
- communication with parents and community,
- and emotional health and wellbeing.

Headteachers, governors, staff and officers collaborated with partners to plan the eight childcare hubs to meet the needs of pupils, families and staff.

During the pandemic the schools were supported by local authority cleaning staff who undertook additional cleaning, enhanced cleaning when an outbreak occurred and supported schools with training. Despite suffering acute staff shortages every school was cleaned daily throughout the pandemic, and every pupil who was entitled to a free school meal received one when the schools reopened.

Transport services were also affected during the height of the pandemic and staff worked hard to adjust routes to enable pupils to attend school despite driver and passenger assistant sickness. Unfortunately difficulties continued as a significant number of operators ceased to trade and the service continues to suffer from driver and passenger assistant shortages in some areas

The local authority and the schools adopted a range of innovative methods to communicate with pupils' families and communities, ranging from radio shows to a variety of social media platforms, in addition to the more usual website bulletins and letters. Officers surveyed school staff weekly with all headteachers being involved in planning through 12 working groups, alongside other key partners. These groups met regularly to ensure consistency in strong communication. The local authority's Education Support Officers and Inclusion Officers also kept in touch with individual headteachers on a weekly basis.

To see a diagrammatic overview of the key events please see page 7-12 of the attached document Covid-19 Post-incident Report March to July 2020 prepared by the Emergency Planning Team in November 2020. Further background information is also included in the Swansea Bay COVID-19 Prevention and Response Plan which has been added in the below appendices for reference and information

Current position

On the return to school in September 2022, with all restrictions lifted and the appearance that the worst was behind our schools, schools tried to move to a recovery stage from a reactionary stage. However, along with significant increases in the cost of petrol, energy, food and the outbreak of war in Ukraine, rise in flu cases, Scarlet fever, streptococcal disease and the threat of industrial action across different sectors, the recovery from Covid with other factors mentioned continues to have a significant impact on all our schools. The road of recovery will be long and will be felt for years to come. Not just at the academic front, but through the strain on mental health, increased anxiety and a lack of confidence in ability. Our schools have included a dedicated section on recovery within their School Development Plans (SDP).

Attendance

Members will be aware that since the Covid pandemic Welsh Government withdrew the statutory requirement for schools to set attendance targets and publicly report on attendance progress. Therefore, currently no national data is available to make any comparisons against. What is known though from discussions with colleagues in other local authorities is that attendance within both the primary and secondary sectors are currently several percentage points lower than pre-Covid periods in nearly all, if not all, local authorities across Wales. Some pupils have struggled to re-connect with school and return full-time since the pandemic, whilst others have detached from education altogether and are presenting as school refusers. (Please refer back to the Attendance Report Item ID- 50400 dated 8th December)

Primary

Year	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Total	To 31/12	Diff
2018/19	95.29%	94.81%	94.25%	92.91%	94.64%	94.18%	94.61%	94.08%	93.82%	92.59%	92.25%	94.00%	94.39%	-0.39%
2019/20	95.00%	94.62%	93.39%	90.14%	94.84%	94.41%	93.31%					93.80%	93.47%	0.33%
2020/21	89.01%	90.22%	92.62%	79.64%	99.56%	95.06%	92.89%	93.95%	91.96%	92.19%	90.19%	91.12%	89.20%	1.93%
2021/22	90.29%	89.05%	89.87%	87.29%	88.00%	90.30%	90.34%	89.76%	89.62%	89.59%	85.67%	89.17%	89.32%	-0.15%
2022/23	92.14%	90.38%	90.23%	81.81%								88.82%	88.82%	0.00%

Secondary

Year	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Total	To May	To 31/12	Diff
2018/19	94.44%	94.11%	93.26%	90.33%	93.48%	92.82%	93.65%	92.51%	93.40%	92.48%	86.74%	92.70%	93.29%	93.19%	0.11%
2019/20	94.19%	93.65%	92.73%	86.24%	92.90%	92.19%	91.68%					92.17%	92.17%	92.03%	0.13%
2020/21	85.51%	87.74%	89.45%	69.23%	98.12%	98.77%	90.33%	90.55%	88.39%	89.83%	78.94%	87.17%	87.56%	85.81%	1.75%
2021/22	84.08%	84.72%	87.66%	80.30%	85.82%	86.63%	87.13%	85.87%	83.68%	79.58%	73.57%	83.99%	85.31%	84.67%	0.64%
2022/23	89.59%	88.59%	87.25%	75.20%								85.43%	85.43%	85.43%	0.00%

There is no single reason for an increase in pupil absence rather a range of reasons including complex and multiple causes, anxiety, mental health and wellbeing issues and allegations of bullying. Some learners established a pattern of not attending school during the pandemic that they and their families have found difficult to revert from. Many of these challenges existed before the pandemic, but some have deepened since, and as a result some families have become harder to reach and engage. A number of pupils were school refusers' pre-Covid and have continued with their poor attendance.

Exclusions

Sector	NPT Total					
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
No of Fixed Exclusions	1002	1189	1049	679	1169	662
No of Pupils given Fixed Exclusions	518	545	518	405	524	376
No of Days	2358.5	2499.5	1965.5	1385.5	2533.5	1472.5
No Permanent Exclusions	11	17	12	8	20	18

Please note the increase in fixed term exclusions and permanent exclusions for this academic year. The main reason/s are physical violence of pupils towards adults and other pupils. These problems are being experienced across wales and there is an ADEW Problem Solving Forum focussing on Pupil attendance / Permanent and fixed-term exclusions and will meet again on the 23rd January 2023 to discuss solutions and share best practice.

Discussions with Senior Leaders in Schools

Officers have been discussing the impact with school leaders through visits and training events.

- School leaders have discussed with us that the children have all being through different learning experiences. Some were well supported within the family unit, whilst others experienced great tensions due to family illness, money worries, job losses etc. This has led to an increase of pupils with anxiety issues. Currently schools are only seeing the “tip of the ice berg” and will be battling with this for the next few years.
- School leaders have identified that Covid has impacted negatively on nearly all pupil progress and the standards achieved due to the disruption in learning, most pupils did not sustain expected progress with their literacy or numeracy skills. In particular, leaders have identified significant gaps in pupils’ social communication skills. At secondary level, the uncertainty of examinations or centrally assessed grades put an enormous strain on pupils and staff, as absenteeism and a loss of learning has had a significant impact on readiness for any form of assessment.
- Priorities during lockdown and returning to school have focused on supporting pupils’ well-being, managing their anxieties and getting them back to school to ensure continuity in learning. Normal self-evaluation practices e.g. listening to learners, work scrutiny etc. have had to be reduced.
- Managing anxieties and staff expectations has been a challenge. Schools have worked hard to support staff well-being. Staff that schools assumed would be able to cope didn’t and displayed anxieties, whilst those we thought may struggle didn’t. Some staff who struggled during the first lockdown were fine during the second lockdown. The constant change and uncertainty has been draining on staff. Staff lost family members, staff’s partners circumstances changed, for example job loss and financial uncertainty.
- Professional development has moved from mainly focussing on equipping staff to deliver online learning, support pupils’ well-being, focus on managing trauma and challenging behaviour, with now a continued focus on supporting children’s well-being and the reform agenda of the new curriculum and ALN reform.

The reform agenda continues to move at a pace with the ALN reform and the Curriculum for Wales adding additional pressure to the education sector, both inside and outside of schools. Schools recognise the support they are getting from LA staff. School leaders tell us that Youth work and Cynnydd work has been invaluable as has the support offered to the schools by the School Based Counselling Service, Inclusion Service, Catering, Cleaning, Education Support Officers, Education Welfare Officers, Safeguarding Officers and many more departments.

The constant changes that have happened over the last two and a half years to policy, grants, restrictions, parental pressure, guidance and media coverage has made managing risk a tightrope of issues.

Additional Information

Support for schools from the Inclusion Service.

Support for schools from Covid recovery has been delivered across four discrete areas:

- Implementation of the ALNET Act and Code
- Support for Emotional Psychological Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Training for school based staff
- Support for transition

Please see attached report '**Inclusion Service Covid Recovery Support for Schools**' and also the '**School Based Counselling Service Update Report**' which was shared in Education, Skills and Wellbeing Cabinet Scrutiny Board on the 8th December 2022.

During school lockdowns and partial re-openings we have seen some benefits and areas where there has been significant development, one of which is the use of technology in "Remote Learning".

These are in two parts;

- A. Live lessons/sessions is a **synchronous** approach. Teachers and learners attend a session/lesson at the same time. Live learning can be carried out through Hwb using Google Meet or Microsoft Teams. Live lessons should be supported by the provision of purposeful tasks or challenges for the pupils to complete and feedback provided on the work completed.
- B. Recorded lessons/sessions is an **asynchronous** approach involving teachers providing learning materials (may include online videos, audio clips and presentations) which can be accessed by the learner in their own time. Recordings can be produced using a number of Hwb tools such as Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Flipgrid and screencastify. Various other Hwb tools can also be used to share recordings. Recorded lessons should be supported by the provision of purposeful tasks or challenges for the pupils to complete and feedback on the work completed.

Other positive consequences of managing a school during restrictions have been that in some schools they have maintained staggered lunchtimes, this has reduced the amount of pupils in dinner halls and canteens. Also the directional travel around school has been maintained, reducing pinch points and the staggered break times have resulted in pupils having more space and less year groups accessing the same space.

Some schools have noted better relationships with families, especially those of more vulnerable pupils where staff and officers built relationships through support during the

pandemic. There has been a renewed focus on what important, useful resources is and better internal and external communication with families. There is an increase in online professional development and meetings that can be cost effective and efficient and in some schools parental or governing body meetings are still as productive online.

As at 31st March 2022 School reserves totalled circa £12m across all sectors. Projected reserve balances as at 31st March 2023 are circa £4m, meaning schools are utilising approximately £8M of reserves to balance their budgets. Added to this school budgets were given a 4% uplift for 2022/23 financial year to reflect the increase in teacher and support staff pay, which is in line with the uplift in the settlement received from Welsh Government. Subsequently pay awards have been in excess of this assumption so schools are having to fund the shortfall from their reserves resulting in projected school reserves at the end of March 2024 being closer to £2M. The position described above is set against a backdrop of £4.5M of unfunded costs in school delegated budgets in respect of teacher assistant posts attached to pupils with additional learning needs.

In Summary

Most learners have welcomed the return to face-to-face provision and generally engage better than they did online, though many schools are retaining elements of remote learning where appropriate (e.g. revision sessions and homework class). Many of the 'issues' affected by the pandemic, such as the decline in learners' skills, have gradually improved since the return to more 'normal' education. Schools within NPT have placed a strong emphasis on supporting well-being, which has resulted in increased and more wide-ranging provision. Senior Leaders across all our schools have demonstrated agility and creative thinking in responding to the pandemic and have worked purposefully to re-establish experiences affected by restrictions, such as extra-curricular activities. Due to improved and more extensive communication over the pandemic, our schools in general have a better understanding of the families and communities they serve.

Many of our schools have gradually returned to self-evaluation and quality assurance activities as the year progresses, resulting in a better understanding of the impact of their work.

Despite all the efforts schools and LA officers make to aid recovery there are still some significant factors to consider. Cases of COVID-19 among learners and staff can still cause a disruption to teaching and learning. Overall, learners' skills have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. This is especially the case for numeracy and literacy skills, particularly oracy skills. The social and personal skills of learners have also been affected, especially the youngest children and those who have struggled to settle back in to more 'normal' educational routines.

Schools are still experiencing a variety of challenging behaviours from the children and young people which has resulted in more pupils disengaging in education and an increase in exclusions this academic year.

Restrictions have had a negative impact on learning involving practical elements, including work placements, practical assessments for vocational qualifications and subjects such as music, design and technology and physical education.

Officers within Education Leisure and Lifelong Learning continue to support schools and other partners as we recover together.

Financial Impacts:

No implications

Integrated Impact Assessment:

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

Valleys Communities Impacts:

All schools are included

Workforce Impacts:

No implications

Legal Impacts:

No implications

Consultation:

'There is no requirement for external consultation on this item'

Recommendations:

Matter for monitoring – no recommendations required.

Implementation of Decision:

Matter for monitoring – no recommendations required.

Appendices / Links for Information:

1. <https://www.wcpp.org.uk/publication/education-recovery-responding-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>
2. [Ten Principles for Effective and Equitable Educational Recovery from COVID
oecd.org](https://www.oecd.org/education/ten-principles-for-effective-and-equitable-educational-recovery-from-covid-19/)
3. [Covid-19 Post-incident Report March to July 2020](#)
4. [Swansea Bay COVID -19 Prevention and Response Plan – Presentation.](#)
5. Support for schools 2022/23 (Inclusion)
6. Support for schools 2022/23 (Education Development)

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