



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Education, Skills and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee March 2023

Report from the Director of Education, Leisure and Lifelong Learning (ELLL) Andrew Thomas

Matter for Information

Wards Affected:

All Wards

Report Title. The cost of living crisis, support offered by schools

Purpose of the Report:

To provide members with information on support offered from schools to their pupils and communities to try and combat the effects of poverty in the current economic crisis.

Executive Summary:

This report will provide information on how the schools within Neath Port Talbot support their pupils and families, within the community and how additional support is offered by ELLL through our schools.

Background:

This report provides Members with information on the range of support offered to the pupils and families so far this academic year, a lot of this support has been in place for some time due to the levels of deprivation across all our wards. The 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 and financial impacts. Those who faced the greatest disadvantage prior to the pandemic have been hardest hit and as a consequence inequalities across Neath Port Talbot have widened. Addressing these inequalities will be a cross cutting theme across all of the recovery actions set out in the Corporate Plan 2022-2027 and the council's Strategic Equality Plan (which details how we address the socio economic duty) to ensure as NPT implement the priorities under each wellbeing objective to try to explicitly close the gap between those who have experienced socio-economic disadvantage and those who have not. Schools recognise that they play a key part in this support for our communities.

Current position

All schools in NPT have supported their families during the current cost of living crisis. The support is wide ranging and extensive. Many schools have a significant number of pupils and families who face challenges and barriers as a result of the cost of living crisis. School leaders have demonstrated a wholehearted commitment to supporting not only the children but their families and the wider community. They have offered a comprehensive provision for the wellbeing of the pupils in NPT schools. There are many examples of effective multi-agency working between the school and a range of external services within the local authority, charities and beyond. This meant that all agencies had a shared understanding of the needs of individuals, families and the community, and were pulling in the same direction to offer co-ordinated support.

During the Christmas period for example, many schools provided food and gifts for families who struggled to provide for their children. In nearly all schools, financial support is provided for families unable to buy new school uniform, including PE kit. This has included schools that organised uniform swaps and also cases where families were given uniform for free by the school. In a number of schools, free menstrual resources are provided free to girls/ families who need them. There are many examples of schools liaising and working with local food banks to provide food parcels as well as raising funds which are then donated to the local food bank. Whilst doing this, the children are often involved and teachers take the opportunity to teach them about food hygiene and the importance of making healthy choices. This support often extends beyond the immediate school community where the school links with local care homes and they donate much-needed food and gifts to the elderly and vulnerable.

A number of NPT schools have adopted a 'Pay as you feel shop' which is open 4 days a week and used very well indeed by parents and community members. It is re-stocked weekly and the schools continue to look for new ways to raise funds to purchase more. One large school has maintained the prices of food in the canteen this year rather than increase them in line with inflation, which is a great help to a large number of families in the community.

Many schools support families by subsidising school trips. The cost has risen in recent months and schools do all that they can to ensure that the cost is not prohibitive and that all pupils have the opportunity to go on the trips and visits. A number of schools have systems in place to ensure that pupils without 'snack' money do not miss out. One secondary school has been able to access free bus passes for their pupils making them more independent and reducing costs for families. Another particular example of where a school has responded to the crisis is by creating a Parents' cafe - a safe, warm place where parents can socialise, have food and drink and charge their phones. Clothes washing and drying facilities are also available. School staff are responsible for the scheme and organise visitors/speakers who attend and support parents, for example by giving advice on financial support and parenting.

Another example of a school responding to local need is a secondary school that provides toast each morning for all pupils irrespective of whether they are eligible for free school meals as pupils were arriving in school without having had any breakfast. These pupils are not ready to learn because they are often hungry. There are also examples of schools providing wellbeing boxes which include items such as toothbrushes, shower gel and soap.

One large NPT school has been selected as part of the Upstream Cymru Pilot Project, which will be carried out initially for Year 10 pupils in January 2023. Upstream Cymru is a project which aims to overall reduce youth homelessness across Wales. As part of this project, the Council are working collaboratively with Llamau – Wales's leading homelessness charity – to implement preventative support services to children and families in a school setting. As part of the project, children in Year 10 will be invited to complete a Wellbeing Assessment questionnaire. This aims to identify early indicators or factors that could affect their present or future risk of homelessness and other wellbeing indicators. Questions cover some aspects of home life, how they feel about life at school and other areas of interest. Should the assessment highlight any areas for further exploration, the Llamau Officer placed in the school will work and engage with children to assess if additional support should be offered to the young person(s) and/or their family. Where it has been identified that Llamau may be able to provide support services, the young person and/or family will be contacted by the School's Llamau Officer and offered relative support services. Access to support services through Llamau is voluntary.

There are examples of strong partnerships within NPT. A key source of information comes from the partnership with the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). Five schools who enrolled in the process and who received between three and four weeks of intensive support from Cost of the School Day practitioners as part of the audit. During this time project staff spoke to approximately 1250 pupils between nursery and year 11. Additionally, project staff conducted surveys, one to one interviews and/or focus groups with 195 parents and family members and 73 school staff to identify cost barriers, perceptions, unconscious bias, and uncover examples of good practice. Feedback gained from participating schools expressed the audit process was seen by most as non-judgemental and as a learning process; something of importance for schools to engage fully in the change process. Schools found the reports helpful in being able to use them to tell all staff about their values and about the positive action already being taken. Comments from parents were overwhelmingly positive. A further example is of a school where ten families identified and provided with a slow cooker. Ingredients supplied by local partner. Parents were initially walked through preparing a recipe on a budget. Families then work with their children to prepare the meal whilst focusing on encouraging their children to discuss how they are feeling about events in their lives. Parents were coached on how to tackle specific subjects and on how to listen effectively, allowing their children the opportunity to discuss potential barriers to them succeeding in school.

Many schools provide a great deal of signposting for families to support services where they can receive advice on matters such as benefits, health as well as support with their finances and utility bills. One example would be a school that works closely with colleagues in 'Flying Start' in order to provide baby massage, parenting and nurturing programmes at the school. Others forge strong links with local food banks, community centres, Team Around the Family (TAF), Housing officers, local cafes, churches, places of worship, Youth clubs, shops and services which care for the most vulnerable in the community. In one school the pupils in Year 6 pupils open the doors of the 'Haven' (the school's café/community room) to provide drinks and sweets to the school's community. The aim is to create an atmosphere/situation where parents can chat together over a cup of tea/coffee. They raise awareness of the importance of mental health at school and have recognised that 'talking' is key to a healthy mind. In addition, it is an opportunity for year 6 pupils to learn about profit, money and to develop social skills. As part of support for the wellbeing in the community one school has set up a 'Cymraeg for adults.' This means they offer free Welsh lessons for parents. It was decided that the school would pay for this and this enhances community cohesion and strengthens links between the school and its community. Another strong example of partnership working is that NPT schools received the gift of toys from Save the Children this Christmas. Many parents have told

schools staff that they haven't been able to afford gifts as they are keeping money back for fuel bills.

One large primary school has supported over 20 families with free computers. The school sent out information to parents informing them that they can apply for a computer/lap top which their child can use for homework activities. In another school they have employed a Family Engagement Officer (FEO). This person is on the school yard every morning and home time to greet families. It is someone to talk to if they have any queries. The FEO has a quiet room where families can be taken to discuss any issues in a more private setting. Parents can contact the FEO directly throughout the day on her works phone. The FEO can provide families with information, and direct them to the appropriate people to offer support. The FEO will provide check-ins with any families she has been working with to ensure continued support. This has helped to build positive, trusting relationships with families. Parental engagement workshops have been delivered by the FEO which have been successful and has allowed children and parents/carers the time to bond without distraction. These workshops have been free to parents meaning no financial pressure.

As well as this there are examples of schools providing toilet training support. This is for a number of families whose children were still in nappies and required personal care throughout the school day. After the meeting, there is continued support and check-in from the school's family engagement officer and the health visitor, all children whose families attended the meeting are now out of nappies.

This support during the cost of living crisis demonstrates that all schools in Neath Port Talbot are at the heart of their community. It demonstrates that schools not only provide essential support for their pupils so that they can access learning and feel a valued member of school with support for uniform, trips and other learning resources; schools also go beyond what is required to access learning by providing essential support around food, warmth, clothing and companionship as well as sustaining strong links with partners in the community thus forging powerful relationships with vulnerable members of the community. Schools are acting as both the providers and the advisers/sign posters/advocates for many families in NPT. This results in stronger communities, healthier pupils, safer pupils and provides invaluable support for our most vulnerable families during this crisis.

School Meals

Welsh Government has recently introduced Universal Primary Free School meals with an undertaken to be extended to all Primary pupils by September 2024. Neath Port Talbot has already begun issuing these free meals to all pupils in reception, year 1 and year 2. Therefore, parents are not required to purchase a school meal whether they are or any form of benefits or not. Parents of pupils in other year groups that are in receipt of certain benefits are also eligible to receive free school meals. List of qualifying benefits are published on the NPT website (<https://www.npt.gov.uk/1317>).

Welsh Government has introduced free school meal holiday payments. In respect of Neath Port Talbot parents/carers of pupils in receipt of assessed benefit entitlement to free school meals receive £19.50 via Bacs payments during School Holidays. These payments are currently in place up-to and including February Half-term holidays 2023, but this decision is being reviewed.

Pupil Development Grant (PDG)

Welsh Government has introduced a PDG Access Grant available to pupils who are eligible for assessed free school meals. The purpose of which is to provide grant assistance to families on low incomes for the purchase of:

- School uniform including coats and shoes;
- School sports kit including footwear;
- Uniform for enrichment activities, including but not limited to, scouts; guides; cadets; martial arts; sports; performing arts or dance;
- 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.
- Laptops or tablets

Further and Higher Education Financial Assistance Grants

Neath Port Talbot administers two further education trust funds which provides financial assistance to students undertaking courses at University where assistance from other sources is not available. These Trust funds are The Glamorgan Further Education Trust Fund and The Harold and Joyce Charles Trust Fund, full details of how to apply are available on the Council's website (<https://www.npt.gov.uk/5062>).

Period Dignity

Secondary schools in Neath Port Talbot are funded to purchase and distribute to female pupils period products of their choice. Primary schools are issued with products of their choice free of charge upon request. Foodbanks 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 assist in taking away the stress of paying for these items so that families can try and deal with other financial pressures they might have.

Elective Home Educated Pupils

Welsh Government have provided local authorities with a specific grant to support EHE pupils/families. Neath Port Talbot makes this grant available in the form of providing Laptops, WHSmith 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.

Financial Impacts:

The Council has continued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to administer payments of £19.50 per week to children eligible for free school meals.

As part of the budget proposals which Cabinet and Council will consider at their 1st and 2nd March meetings respectively is a time limited intervention programme to support children adversely affected by the pandemic.

The Council has also established a hardship relief scheme, delivered by Warm Wales, which has provided support to families to help keep homes warm. This scheme was specifically designed to not be linked to means tested benefits ensuring that anybody in need to obtain support.

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 involved in this process and it effects all areas to a varying degree

Workforce Impacts:

No implications

Legal Impacts:

No implications

Consultation:

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

Recommendations:

Matter for information – no recommendations required.

Implementation of Decision:

Matter for monitoring – no recommendations required.

Appendices:

No Appendices are attached to this report

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