

SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1 - MONDAY, 7 DECEMBER 2020

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 1 HELD IN REMOTELY VIA SKYPE FOR BUSINESS ON MONDAY, 7 DECEMBER 2020 AT 09:30

Present

Councillor T Giffard – Chairperson

JPD Blundell	RJ Collins	M Jones	B Sedgebeer
J Gebbie	AJ Williams	KJ Watts	TH Beedle
A Williams	KL Rowlands	SE Baldwin	

Registered Representatives

Lynsey Morris Secondary Schools Sector

Officers:

Tracy Watson	Scrutiny Officer
Lindsay Harvey	Corporate Director Education and Family Support
Rachel Pick	Scrutiny Officer

Invitees:

Councillor Charles Smith Cabinet Member for Education and Regeneration

13. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor J Gebbie declared a personal interest in agenda Item 4, as she was Chair of Mynydd Cynfig.

14. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of a meeting of Subject Overview and Scrutiny Committee 1 dated 19 October 2020 be approved as a true and accurate record.

15. VERBAL UPDATE FROM THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR - EDUCATION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support gave an update on the current situation before moving on to the main themes of childcare hubs and blended learning, schools as Covid-safe environments, and the main challenges still being faced. Following the ministerial announcement made on 18 March to close schools, there was a requirement for all local authorities to provide emergency childcare for children of key workers from 23 March. A frenetic period followed to open the childcare hubs in Bridgend. Over 4,000 staff (school based and central support) were mobilised within 72 hours to provide wide-ranging support to around 23,000 children and young people. This was very challenging because the situation was new. Several immediate key challenges included adherence to rapidly emerging Health and Safety requirements, remote provision of free school meals to around 5,000 children, the maintenance of childcare facilities for children of keyworkers, the recommencement of teaching and learning for all learners, and the continuation of vital safeguarding support to vulnerable children and young people.

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The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support was very proud of Bridgend's achievements in emergency childcare provision. From 23 March to 19 June, emergency childcare was provided on an 8am to 6pm, 7-day per week, basis that supported over 900 children in its eight school-based hubs and four Flying Start settings. Emergency childcare support was available to all vulnerable children and to children who had at least one parent/carer identified as a 'key worker'.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support explained that the new situation posed by Covid-19 was particularly difficult for staff, and Bridgend wanted to ensure that staff were benefiting from professional support. In April 2020, three professional groups were established (Staff Wellbeing, Supporting Vulnerable Learners and Remote Teaching and Learning) to support the work of schools and childcare hubs. These continued to meet to disseminate good practice to staff, and the Directorate had received several compliments on the services provided. All staff benefited from specialist HR, Health & Safety and strategic support. The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support was grateful to the Cabinet Member - Education and Regeneration for joining him at twice-weekly video conferences that continued to be held with Headteachers, the Central South Consortium improvement partners and Officers to ensure effective communication and consistency in approach. All groups benefited from expert school representation and multiagency support.

Stakeholder engagement involved twice-weekly meetings with all Headteachers (initially held on a daily basis), learner voice feedback via Bridgend Youth Council and school councils, an online survey for parents/carers, ongoing dialogue with external delivery partners (e.g. Welsh Government (WG), Estyn, Central South Consortium and Trade Unions), engagement with Elected Members, and a consistent Bridgend approach governed by senior leadership and Cabinet Member oversight.

The six key issues for the Directorate were social distancing, transport, catering, cleaning, hygiene and safety. Social distancing required the need to ensure that the childcare hubs and schools were safe environments. Risk assessments were organic and changed frequently. The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support was very proud of the clear policy and guidance for leaders. Not all schools had significant transport requirements, but those that had, posed significant challenges for the Department. Bridgend had a fantastic catering service and guidance had been put in place for staff, who had worked especially hard since March to ensure children were fed and fed well. Bridgend had also worked with a number of commercial suppliers to ensure appropriate food was provided. Cleaning was a pivotal issue within all schools and protocols had been adopted universally. Acquiring appropriate cleaning equipment and ensuring external suppliers met local authority policy was a significant challenge. The importance of hygiene was a consistent message to learners, especially young learners, and Bridgend was working with WG for additional funding for hand sanitiser. Acquiring PPE was challenging at the beginning and the policy had shifted since March. Face coverings had taken a significant amount of time to implement, and the Directorate continued to work with WG to ensure measures were in place. Reusable masks had been adopted but these would not last forever. The wearing of masks was a pedagogical issue for teachers and posed communication challenges.

The impact of Covid-19 on school population was significant and it remained a challenging situation. As at 4 December 2020, 24 schools had been affected by positive Covid-19 tests. In the week of 30 November 2020, 50 pupils and 28 staff across Bridgend schools tested positive. Currently, 2,181 pupils and 124 staff from Bridgend schools were currently self-isolating, amounting to 10%. Parents were sent a letter from the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support to confirm that schools would remain open until 18 December. While there was support from some parents to stay

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open, communication had been received from others stating they would not be sending their children to school in the last week of term.

There had been an increase in public demand for services. This included Early Help, particularly in relation to emotional wellbeing support, and support for mental health and wellbeing. There had been a 10% increase in pupils eligible for free school meals (5,396 eligible pupils) but only one-quarter of schools now served free breakfasts due to a decrease in demand, and a limited number of 'clubs' being open. There had been an increase in the number of in-year school transfer admission applications (typically for house moves) that were held up at the start of the pandemic. There was a greater demand from parents for schools to deliver live and synchronous online learning for their children, which was a school-based decision in line with WG.

The main challenges were the demand in support for the physical and emotional wellbeing of children, staff, parents and carers to include 1,500 LA staff (mostly school based) and psychologists; parental engagement and support and the varying opinions of parents; the availability of staff and decisions made on whether schools could operate effectively with Heads and teachers self-isolating; the provision of blended (online and physical) and hybrid (half a class in school, half self-isolating) learning support and associated technology; examination issues (e.g. centre-assessed grades and moderation); managing the requirements of some children with complex and additional learning needs; Business Support stretched and uncertainty as to how it will look in the future (e.g. catering and school transport); and ongoing cost pressures (e.g. Covid-19-related costs and 'normal' budgetary challenges).

The Committee thanked the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support and his team for all their hard work, especially over the last nine months, and asked that their thanks be passed to the team as a whole.

A Member questioned school policy to send children home only when they presented with the four main symptoms of Covid-19 (new, continuous cough, raised temperature, loss of taste and loss of smell) when children could present with other symptoms such as a sore throat and headache but still test positive. The Member also raised significant concerns about teacher wellbeing and asked what support was available. She also raised concerns about the management of non-contact time for Headteachers over the Christmas break given the requirement to rely upon senior personnel.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support responded that the signs and symptoms of Covid-19 was a difficult issue for schools. While a safety first procedure was in place and schools ensured that all precautions were taken, schools could only send learners home if they presented with the four symptoms. Some schools were sending children home who were presenting with other symptoms. This had been met with criticism from parents in some instances for being overly cautious. One issue was that children could be asymptomatic at the start but display symptoms later.

Regarding wellbeing, this was paramount and there had been a tremendous effort from school-based and local authority officer staff. The Teacher Wellbeing Group was well received and had recently invited in an external provider. Parents' evenings were reduced to the statutory minimum, and extra curricula activities were also reduced. A range of policies had been put in place to ensure schools were not unduly challenged during Christmas, and Challenge Advisors had now moved into a pastoral role.

In respect of support during the Christmas period, the Department was working through this currently. The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support had a meeting with all Headteachers last week, and a protocol had been agreed with Headteachers and TTP. Bridgend was one of three local authorities in Wales to adopt the policy that

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Headteachers would not be contacted directly by TTP over Christmas. Instead, a small officer team had been identified and TTP would go through the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support and his staff. Officers would conduct checks in the first instance, and Headteachers would only be contacted (by mobile phone) if absolutely necessary. The Head of Education and Family Support had undertaken a tremendous piece of work last week with TTP colleagues to limit contact after 18 December. This policy would limit contact with Headteachers over Christmas and make a considerable difference.

The Head of Education and Family Support firstly noted that she was happy to take to her weekly meeting with Public Health Wales and TTP the Member's question around children being sent home from school only when presenting with the four main symptoms. Throughout Covid-19, the Department had tried to work very much as a Cwm Taf Bro Morgannwg team and to have similar processes and protocols. There had been open dialogue with TTP, PHW and Shared Regulatory Services throughout Covid-19. Processes had been identified to make it as straightforward as possible for Heads, who were the only personnel who could identify groups for TTP. A very brief initial assessment was completed by someone at the school before a Health & Safety Officer from the Corporate Health & Safety Unit made contact to offer information, advice and support to the school on pupil cases. The local authority was running a contact rota with the Senior Management Team who offered support. Unique situations/queries were still arising, and Heads/Senior Leaders were finding discussions useful.

A Member was concerned that the information had not been presented to the Committee earlier, which would have been useful sooner, although this was not a criticism of the Department because they had done a commendable job and had provided regular updates to Members. The Member asked firstly what was being done about the attainment gap following the long period of time where schools had not been open and the consequent loss of ability/educational attainment. Secondly, what could be done post-Covid-19 e.g., should there be more emphasis on cleaning hands etc. to cut down on coughs and colds?

In response to the Member's first point, the Chairperson explained that he had requested the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support brief SOSC 1 Members upon the plans for the reopening of schools ahead of the schools reopening. While he advised that it would have been preferable to hold this in a more formal format, this was not possible as the ability to have a full Committee format was not in place at the time. Members of SOSC 1 had the opportunity to attend the Briefing and ask the Corporate Director questions ahead of the planned reopening of schools.

On the point of educational attainment, the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support had met with Estyn the week of 30 November 2020. There had been a clear shift from emotional wellbeing to a focus on teaching/learning/outcomes, in particular around exams in the summer of 2021. The local authority had recently received a £150k WG grant through the Regional Consortia School Improvement Grant to support better teaching. The focus was on the four areas identified in the post-inspection action plan, which included schools that were causing concern and literacy/numeracy. Blended learning had improved significantly since its inception at the beginning of the pandemic, with impressive activities that had been commended by parents. The Directorate had dealt with, and was continuing to deal with, difficult situations. Lessons had been learned, e.g. hand washing and blended learning, and the intention was to build on the positives. A report would be made available to Members on the Decision and Action Log, which the Directorate had implemented in order to disseminate good practice among schools. The Directorate was still learning, and challenging issues were still emerging.

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A Member asked whether there remained ongoing budgetary pressures on digital equipment, e.g. laptops and Wi-Fi, whether we were now more prepared for a future pandemic, and how learners' educational progress would be evaluated in the absence of exams next year.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support explained that of those requiring additional IT equipment, at the start of the pandemic WG had set up a digital exclusion fund to enable several hundred learners in Bridgend to assist with laptops and portable mifi devices. He was pleased to report that 600 units had been deployed. The Department visited schools in September to assess the appropriateness of IT equipment. As a result of the WG hub infrastructure grant and the digital exclusion grant, schools were in a much better position and there was no need for any significant additional funding currently. All schools were now much better prepared due to robust risk assessments in place from the start of the pandemic. Since September, Business Resilience Plans had been put in place in Bridgend, which had been shared with other local authorities. The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support, supported by the Cabinet Member – Education and Regeneration, had met with WJEC and Qualifications Wales to represent Bridgend and to understand the process early on in order to feedback to parents and schools. This had been challenging and he wished to eliminate the issues faced previously. Early feedback from WJEC and Qualifications Wales was positive, with the centre-assessed grade facility and the moderation capability of the system in a much better position to provide a more robust system going forward.

A Member welcomed the attendance of the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support at a future Cross-Party Recovery Panel to have the opportunity to outline to the Panel what had changed and what needed to change going forward. The Member asked what the local authority was doing to recognise Covid-19 as an ACE so that learners who had been impacted by Covid-19 were not overlooked.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support confirmed that he would be happy to attend the Cross-Party Recovery Panel. He explained that where Bridgend was very fortunate – and this was recognised by Estyn - was that Early Help and Family Support were part of the Education Directorate. Bridgend had great synergy between childhood providers/support and edge of care facilities that were so often pivotal in people's lives. Along with internal services, the Department had very good relationships with third party providers and Health and Social Care.

On the point of ACEs, the Head of Education and Family Support noted that because Early Help sat within the Education Directorate, this meant that children whose needs extended beyond universal but had never and would never reach ACE status could be identified at the earliest opportunity through educational contact. During Covid-19, there had been increased pressure on wellbeing, low-level mental health needs and anxiety. The local authority had been able to increase resources due to some additional funding, e.g. Wellbeing Support Workers attached to all primary schools in Bridgend in addition to those who were already attached to secondary schools, as well as additional funding around school-based counselling. Early Help had seen a significant increase in referrals but this was expected once children resumed attendance at school. The Directorate was looking at how it could now repurpose some of its services, change the focus slightly and monitor the impact of this, as well as develop its parental resources so that parents were fully equipped as a result of the unique issues caused by Covid-19. The Directorate had to adapt its services accordingly since March. The link with the ACE agenda was very well developed in Bridgend. ACEs could take many forms, e.g. mental health, ill health, experiencing bereavement within families, and Bridgend had worked

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very hard on the ACE agenda and were the pilot area. What Covid-19 had done was evidence the uniqueness and benefit of Early Help being based in schools in Bridgend.

The Member stated that he was glad that the impact of Covid-19 on ACEs was on the local authority's radar because of the societal impact on children. He hoped that the full impact of Covid-19 on generations would be understood in time.

A Member asked the following: What was the impact of device sharing and access to blended learning among children in the same household? What would be the impact of ALN reform and what was the impact of Covid-19 on the capacity of Educational Psychologists to undertake assessments? What were the school attendance figures? What was the capacity within schools up to and including the Christmas holidays?

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support gave the following responses:

Sharing devices among learners – as well as parents sharing broadband from multiple devices in the same household – had caused connectivity issues. Schools had asked for and were issued with additional equipment in these cases. Schools had also donated legacy kits to schools in need. Learners had also been issued with mifi devices where poor internet connection was identified.

The ALN Reform Bill was taking time. The principles of the Bill were good but there would be more demand on local authorities to implement the principles. There had not been an adverse effect on the ability of Educational Psychologists to complete individual assessments but it had impacted on face-to-face contact and had delayed the deployment of other service professionals. The Directorate had undergone restructure pre-Covid-19, which focused on support mechanisms for ALN.

School attendance figures were not required by WG but were being collected. Significantly, 50 learners had become home schooled since September and the Directorate therefore had to ensure that appropriate guidance was in place. Moreover, 280 learners (10%) were away from school, thereby necessitating appropriate safeguarding guidance and educational support.

Significant discussions had taken place across Wales on the end-of-term arrangements. It was the WLGA's decision that schools would close on 18 December, although this could be earlier due to extenuating circumstances, e.g. insufficient levels of staff to maintain a healthy and safe environment. The Governing Body, local authority and schools themselves could take the decision to close early, and the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support would support this decision.

The Member stated that those learners not attending school (50 leavers being home schooled and the 10% not attending) would have a significant impact on school budgets.

The Corporate Director - Education and Family Support stated that the EHE report would be circulated to Members following the meeting.

A Member asked the following question after the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support had left the meeting: What could be done about the lack of communication among schools where siblings attending different schools had tested positive? How could the non-compliance of parents who held social activities in breach of Covid-19 guidance be addressed? Clear communication was needed in order to manage the transmission rate.

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The Chair and Scrutiny Officer agreed that the Member's questions would be forwarded to the Corporate Director - Education and Family Support for response following the meeting.

The Cabinet Member for Education spoke on the three themes of what would happen in the event of a further pandemic, blended learning and exams. He felt that for politicians to call Covid-19 a 100-year event was complacent given that the opportunities for travel increased the potential for transmission. Society had learned to cope through conflicting messages and many policy changes from national and regional government. Team Bridgend mobilised its staff very quickly and its strength had shone through. Decisions made had to be clear, consistent and sustainable on a daily basis, and this model could now be used in the future. Blended learning in Bridgend had been built into sixth-form proposals prior to the pandemic and would become the new normal across all schools and age groups. Blended learning was different to distant learning because there also had to be some face-to-face contact. IT devices including Wi-Fi was imperative to the blended learning model.

One of the most important areas for schools was the exam system, which required a rebalance away from final exams towards formative assessments, coursework and the use of teacher grades. Upon the cancellation of exams this year, the cross-party 22 Cabinet Members for Education across Wales met and lobbied the Minister for Education to use teacher grades and not algorithms. The algorithm system was used to moderate grades/marks of large student numbers, ensuring that exams as a whole reflected the previous results. What it could not do was provide fairness to individual students, and this could only be achieved through the use of evidence from teachers. The Cabinet Member commended the Minister for Education in her decision to cancel algorithms in favour of teacher grades. This would take effect from summer 2021. There was in place a methodology for teacher grades in order to avoid the failures that occurred in the summer of 2020. The Cabinet Member believed that trust in teacher grades would become the new normal.

16. FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report. She advised that Members would recall that the Council had been advised that the Local Government Financial Settlement from WG would be later than expected, and therefore the scrutiny of the Medium Term Financial Strategy would be considered by Scrutiny Committees after Cabinet considered the draft proposals on 19th January, instead of the December cycle of meetings, as originally planned.

As set out in the table in paragraph 4.1 of the report, and following approval at November Council the dates for Scrutiny meetings had been moved to:

20 Jan at 10am – Draft MTFs for Education & Family Support and Communities Directorate.

21st Jan at 10am – Draft MTFs for Social Services and Wellbeing and the Chief Executive's Directorate.

In paragraph 4.5, the Committee was reminded of the Criteria form, which Members could use to propose further items for the FWP, which the Committee could then consider for prioritisation at a future meeting. The Criteria Form emphasised the need to consider issues such as impact, risk, performance, budget and community perception when identifying topics for investigation and to ensure a strategic responsibility for Scrutiny and maximizes the opportunity for impact.

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Members identified the following items for consideration on the Forward Work Programme: Blended / hybrid / remote learning including safeguarding (welfare and wellbeing).

There were no further items identified for consideration on the Forward Work Programme for the remainder of the municipal calendar of meetings.

RESOLVED: That the Committee note the next item for the Committee's Forward Work Programme set out in Paragraph 4.1 of the report.

17. **URGENT ITEMS**

None.

The meeting closed at 10:57